



CADET CHRONICLES BOOK #2

ADVENTURES ON WESTERHAVEN SPACE

FORCE ACADEMY

# FLIGHT CAPTAIN

*fortune favors the bold*



DIANA VON OERTZEN

This is a work of fiction. Names, character, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

FLIGHT CAPTAIN

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Contact: [diana@himmelskratzer.de](mailto:diana@himmelskratzer.de)

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## **Abbreviations and other explanations**

AWOL - Absent without leave  
COBRA - surveillance and safety software used in all Academy owned buildings  
CTO - Chief Training Officer  
ELF - In-universe car manufacturer for high-end sports cars  
ETA - estimated time of arrival  
FSO - Flight Safety Officer  
HUD - Heads Up Display  
PE - Physical Exercise  
RIO - Radar Interception Officer  
USF - United Space Force  
WILP - Women in Leadership Program

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Thank you**

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Jenny & Sabrina - my hype women, you two rock my world.

Stephan - to the man who has to live with me when I write: I love you. You are a saint, and I don't know how you do it.

# **USF Academy of Westerhaven - Code of Conduct**

**Comply with all rules and regulations set forth by the Academy, United Space Force, and any other organisation affiliated with Westerhaven Academy. Respect the rules and regulations and take any disciplinary measures seriously.**

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**Follow all orders of superior officers promptly and without question.**

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**Report any infractions of the rules or regulations to superiors.**

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**Show due diligence and attention to detail in all areas of study and training related to the United Space Force.**

\*\*\*

**Carry out any assigned duties in a timely and accurate manner.**

\*\*\*

**Participate in all required seminars, lectures, and simulations.**

\*\*\*

**Attend all classes and training sessions on time, prepared, and with the necessary materials.**

\*\*\*

**Be an example of excellence and integrity. Maintain the highest ethical standards while representing the United Space Force.**

\*\*\*

**Establish a consistent exercise routine to maintain physical and mental health.**

\*\*\*

**Maintain a neat and professional appearance while on campus. Wear the appropriate attire designated for the purpose and occasion.**

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**Refrain from physical or verbal altercations with other students.**

\*\*\*

**Cooperate with other members of the Academy at all times.**

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**Refrain from use of any illegal substances, alcohol, or tobacco products on campus.**

\*\*\*

**Adhere to all safety protocols while on duty. Refrain from any malicious behaviour or activities that could put the safety of others at risk. Keep all academy property secure.**

\*\*\*

**Respect diversity and maintain an open mind at the Academy and during mission-related tasks. Demonstrate respect for all fellow students, instructors, and staff members. Establish a zero-tolerance policy for any form of discrimination or harassment.**

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**Follow all regulations regarding the use of any and all Academy equipment, including proper maintenance and storage.**

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**Use any and all Academy information only in a manner consistent with the mission of the United Space Force.**

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**Follow all United Space Force regulations regarding the use of technology, communications, and media.**

\*\*\*

**Show initiative and commitment to achieving the goals of the United Space Force.**

\*\*\*

**Be an ambassador of the United Space Force and its academies and promote its values in all aspects of life.**



**ALBATROSS**

**SQUADRON**

AUDACES FORTUNA ADIUVAT





# SATURDAY

## CADET LIFE

The Echo Mountain range on the planet Westerhaven is an impressive geological structure spanning the main continent near the western coast. A wide variety of evergreen flora fill the area and shelter a diverse array of fauna, while balanced climatic conditions (cool temperatures and moderate rainfall) create an ideal environment for habitation. Economic activity in the region is enhanced by the presence of natural resources such as silver and iron, which are extracted from mines throughout the mountain range. Of special note is Maiden Head, rising to 1,300m and providing a majestic outlook of the surrounding landscape.

(USF Archives entry)

The silver Stingray jet arrowed through the colourless sky of a crisp and cold spring dawn. The highest peaks of Echo Range glowed in the sun's earliest orange fire, and wispy fog blushed in pink only to explode into nothingness as the fighter cut through. Adelie wished she had more than just a passing glance for the spectacle around her, but the computer wailed a low-altitude warning at her as she kept close to the rocky sides of Maiden Head, as instructed. In her HUD, a merciless countdown added more pressure to high-speed flying through a mountain range in the half-light of the early morning. One wrong move, and she would shatter against the rocks in a blaze of fire. Eventually, she emerged over the foothills leading down from the range, widening into the gently rolling hills of the plains around Meadow Junction. There were the silos, her destination. She had to reach them at a particular time, with only a 3 seconds margin of error. And there were only 30 seconds left on the countdown. She did what her flight system told her, fighting every urge to accelerate to be faster. Being right on time instead of setting a new personal record was a challenge going against everything she used to be. She passed the silos precisely when the countdown switched to 00:00:00. *Phew.* "Destination reached on time. Please await evaluation after landing." The affirmation of the flight computer allowed her to relax.

Five minutes later, she entered the airspace over Westerhaven Academy and announced herself to air traffic control. It was a busy morning over Meadow Junction, and a huge class 3 Sandhawk drop ship was taking its sweet time to land. They were unwieldy flying bricks; Adelie didn't envy the pilots who had to bring it down. They usually dropped their cargo from mid-air, so there must be a good reason they would land. At least Westerhaven Airbase was large enough to accommodate a Sandhawk of that size. Forced to fly circles over the airbase, she used the time to observe her current home from high above. Meadow Junction was a cute little town, perpetually threatened to be swallowed by the neighbouring airbase and the Academy Campus. The old and newer parts of the settlement were clearly distinguishable from her vantage point. The former by their lush gardens and tree-lined streets, the latter by the amount of glass,

which mirrored the sunrise. The airfield was a vast grey expanse illuminated by dots of orange lights. Clusters of hangars, a tiny terminal and several buildings that belonged to the Academy sat on the side facing the town. She could even make out the shuttle bus terminal that connected the airbase with the campus in town.

Eventually, Adelie cleared to land. She parked her plane in its designated spot and waited for the green light on the dash to okay the engine shut down. A blue “Passed” flashed on her screen, and then the evaluation came. She flipped through a lot of green checkmarks and a few yellow markers. No reds; that was good. She hadn’t done too poorly; that should earn her enough points in the leadership ranks to get ahead of Nate. After three minutes, the green engine light on the dash fired, and she pushed the button. The mighty growl faded to a purr and then to nothing. Deafening silence filled her ears. She unplugged the sensor cables from their sockets on her left thigh, which connected her flight suit with the life support system of the plane, and opened the chin strap of her helmet. Her Viwis stuck to her sweaty back as she climbed out of the cockpit and down the metal ladder. The ground crew had already rushed in for maintenance on the jet. She waved them a Good Morning and walked towards the Albatross Alpha and Omega squad room. A gust of the ever-present wind on the airfield forced its way through the material of the sweaty flight suit and chilled her to the bone. While she hurried to get out of the wind, she noticed the massive Sandhawk in the distance. From its gaping cargo bay spilled a string of tanks. It dawned on her that the guests for this semester’s final exercise, scheduled for the coming week, had arrived. The rattle of their tracks was audible as they rolled onto the loading beds of waiting flat-bed trucks. She tied it to the challenging flight and her lack of sleep, but the sight filled her with sudden dread, and she was glad to reach the building that housed the squad rooms.

The room was deserted, which was no wonder, given the time and the fact that she had been the last examinee this night. As expected, her name led the board, but the point difference between her and Nate was still smaller than she would have liked - the one who led the

board at the end of the school year would become Flight Captain, and time was running out. The End of Semester ceremony would be exactly a week from now. In the last weeks, it had become a running gag across both sister squadrons which would be granted the honour because the competition was so tight between them. For now, she was in the lead, and there was still the big exercise to come. She walked past the rows of desks to reach the small changing room in the back. There, she stored her gear and helmet in her locker and switched the flight suit for her fatigues, which welcomed her dry and warm. With every movement, her body told her its dissatisfaction with the night. Stingrays were cramped and hot rides. The squadron flag dominated the wall facing her as she walked back through the squad room. On its Westerhaven blue fabric, a stylised white albatross soared in front of a triangle; its wings spread wide. Underneath the majestic bird stood AUDACES FORTUNA ADIUVAT - Fortune favours the bold - the motto of the Albatross squadrons.

Westerhaven was a small academy due to its remote location and its stringent selection process. They cherry-picked the best from the best, and in consequence, many Westerhaven alums populated the USF Hall of Fame. On this backwater planet, incredible careers had started. Adelie stared at the bird, feeling conflicted once more. It was a feeling that had crept up on her in the last weeks and solidly manifested in her chest every time she became aware of the flag. It symbolised pride and honour for every squadron member - or at least it should be. For her, the flag had turned into the embodiment of a question. The question if she was at the right place doing the right thing. She answered the teases of her flight mates with a good-natured smile and the fact that, except for Nate, nobody could beat her, but if she was honest, after two years, it was beginning to wear her down. Even her thick skin forged in a successful racing career had its limits. She was tired of having to prove herself worthy again. And again. Would making the rank of Flight Captain silence the teases? She shook herself out of her ruminations. The clock said 4:30 - it was high time for her to go home and get some shut-eye.

The door of the small studio in the Star City Complex closed behind her with a dull thud. Finally home. As she slipped out of her boots, she noticed a well-worn, black leather jacket on her coat rack and an equally loved pair of motorcycle boots underneath. Her place wasn't as empty as expected, and the welcomed sight of her boyfriend's clothes filled her with happiness. Quickly, she undressed in her bathroom and changed into exquisite pyjamas made from supple and smooth Eden silk, one of the few luxuries she had allowed to carry over from her former life. Soft snoring guided her towards her bed. She could barely make out the dark form of Nathan Havisham, so she felt her way under the sheets, trying hard not to wake him up. His warmth was irresistible, though, so she snuggled against his broad chest. Cocooned into soft blankets with her man to cosy up to, tiredness pulled her under like a tidal wave, and she fell asleep almost the second her head touched the pillow.

She wasn't sure what woke her up, but she was alone in bed as she opened her eyes. Before she could question if her tired brain had made up Nate's presence as she came home, she heard sounds in the kitchen. Snuggling up to her boyfriend hadn't been a figment of her imagination. She was more awake than she wanted to be, and she also needed to pee. Grumbling, she rolled out of bed and paid the bathroom another visit. Considerably lighter, she then ventured into the kitchen to find her boyfriend and food.

"The heck? Why are you vertical already? It's not even 8 AM?" Nate stood at the stove, bright blue eyes widened in surprise. His wild mop of black hair had not seen a comb or styling cream, nor his fuzzy chin a razor blade. No shirt concealed his mighty torso, easily giving away the soldier and the rugby player. A pair of faded, grey sweatpants rode precariously low on his narrow hips. For a brief second, her sleep-deprived brain stalled at the sight of pubes merging with the dark strip of hair on his belly. She stepped closer and kissed his bristly cheek.

"Morning, handsome."

"Morning, babe." His deep and gravelly voice wasn't helping her sleepy brain. She stepped into his embrace, eager to touch him. His

hand moved into her hair, and there was his usual glance to check if he wasn't going too far. Willingly, she angled her head as lips touched lips. Nate was a great kisser, and getting lost in his kisses was too easy. She wanted nothing more than to get lost, to get swept away. But to her surprise, he pulled back and didn't deepen their connection.

"Damn."

Disappointment yanked her out of her dreamy state. "What's wrong?"

A sweet and rumble chuckle. "I wish I had the time to take you back to bed and make love to a very cute you. But no, I have a highly inconvenient rugby camp to attend." He rubbed his neck, displaying not just the manly jungle of his armpit but also perfect muscle bulges. Adelie tried to reign in her desire.

"Oh. You're here because my place is closer to the training grounds. You mentioned it, and I forgot about it."

Another chuckle. "That's alright, but you had your examination to focus on. How did it go?"

"I passed with 250 of 300 possible points. Nearly got lost in the Shallows, that cost me some."

He squeezed her. "That's an above-average score. What does the board say?"

She ran her hands through his hair, still not quite over the disappointment that he had to leave her soon. "Just 50 points difference. You're still in the race."

"You're still in the lead. Not sure I'll be able to catch up with you with just one week left." There was a slight twitch of frustration in his jaw, but his glorious smile overrode it so quickly she wasn't sure if she had only imagined it.

"The sortie would've been far more fun with you riding along as RIO, that's for sure. But I was delighted to find you here when I got home. You're the best pillow."

Nate breathed another loving kiss on her temple. "Nights alone in your bed feel twice as long, though. I had trouble falling asleep."

She opened the fridge and studied the selection of sports drinks it offered. Only two bottles were left - a green NaturalPlus and a pink

Vitapunch. “Dang, I was sure I still had at least one Orange Oasis left.”

“I really don’t understand why you like this so much; it’s horribly sweet.” Nate was firmly in Camp NaturalPlus, but she had no stomach for liquid algae before breakfast.

Gulping down the Vitapunch to refill all the minerals and electrolytes she had sweat out during her flight, she sat on a kitchen chair and watched him cook breakfast. The scents of scrambled eggs, fried bacon and juicy tomatoes swirled into her nostrils and made her realise how hungry she was. Sun rays slanted through the tall windows, dancing on the floor and Nate’s tanned skin as he handled the pan. She remembered the drop ship with the tanks. “I’ve seen the 56th Battalion this morning. They’ve already arrived, probably to adjust to the climate and time change.”

“Ah, right; I completely forgot we have an upcoming major exercise.”

She laughed. “Oh, come on, Tiger. It’s only the most important exercise of the semester. How is it possible that you forgot that?”

He piled the eggs, bacon and tomatoes on a slice of crisply toasted, homemade bread, placed it on her plate and sat it down in front of her with the practised ease of a waiter. “I didn’t say I forgot it all week; it had just escaped my mind. What do our foes look like? Do we stand a chance?”

“The tanks look mean. I haven’t seen any of their drivers.” She glanced at the clock. “Don’t you have to get ready?”

With a sigh, he nodded. “Yes, and pronto.”

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After Nate left, the tiny studio apartment was suddenly too quiet and empty. She distracted herself from the momentary absence of a scantily clad boyfriend and associated noise with straightening the pillows on her small sofa and making the bed. She had chosen to furnish the room in all white - after years of living in small motorhomes in race camps, she was opposed to visual clutter. The sofa and two armchairs stood before floor-length windows that filled the room with natural daylight. Opposite them was her bed, and the

other corner housed her desk. She picked up the flight suit she had thrown over an armrest as she came home and looked around, unsure what to do next. She was awake; it was bright outside, and returning to bed seemed like a waste of precious free time. She stretched, and her muscles reminded her of long hours in a tiny seat. She checked the time - if she hurried, she could still make it to yoga class at the Star City Gym. It would be an excellent antidote against the stiffness in her bones and muscles.

The Star City Complex was a small town in itself, built for USF personnel and civilians working at the base and its hospital. It offered a variety of apartment sizes, from small studios like Adelie's to four-bedroom apartments for families. There was a child care facility, various playgrounds, a tiny store for groceries and everyday articles, as well as a pool and gym, to which she was now heading. Large trees shaded the paths between the white buildings, the leaves still bright green on their branches. Even though a substantially bigger and better-equipped gym was available on campus, Adelie preferred to work out in the Star City Gym. It was close to home, and its crowd wasn't solely comprised of young, cocky men. She would never openly acknowledge it, but she only visited the campus gym with Nate, whose presence alone kept the perimeter around her clear.

The gym was just moderately busy for a Saturday morning, Adelie thought. Only five other humans were present in class, and one of them happened to be one of her best friends, Leslie. She greeted her with her particular brand of sunny enthusiasm. "Morning, sweetie!"

Leslie was blessed with generous curves Adelie was a bit envious of. The immense amount of physical training had slimmed down her own assets more than she was happy with. She smiled at the blonde girl as she placed her mat beside hers.

"Leslie, hi! What are you doing here so early in the day? Isn't it your day off?"

"It is, and I thought it would be great to start it with some yoga."

"Les, you're a medic-level Nurse; you're allowed to be lazy once in a while in your quest to save people from dying." Adelie didn't know anybody else who worked so hard. She had made it a habit to drop by



the hospital if her schedule allowed it, to check on her friend and bring her a cup of coffee. Leslie was chronically ignorant of taking breaks when her body needed them and thus welcomed Adelle's appearance because it forced her to slow down at least a little.

Her friend and neighbour shrugged. "I like yoga. It takes my head off things. And I need that today; the week was gruesome. I think we had a medical convoy every day of the week. That we're closest to the conflict in the Lumynaria system is making my life difficult currently."

The teacher entered the room, and they had to stop talking. Adelle enjoyed the class thoroughly. Leslie was right; yoga did take your head off things. After an hour of downward dogs, pigeons, warriors and other distortions Adelle didn't know the name of, she was dripping with sweat, but she also was a lot more open in her lower back and hips. Exactly the right thing she needed after a night of flying a fighter jet.

On their way back from the shower, Leslie asked: "It's really none of my business, and I am happy to see you, but you're usually at Nate's place over the weekend. Why aren't you at Wild Sage Acres?"

"Easy. I had a solo night flight exercise and just returned at four hundred hours. And he's busy this morning anyway with a special end-of-semester rugby training camp."

Leslie looked at her, horrified. "What in the world are you doing here, then? Why aren't you in bed sleeping?"

Adelle laughed. "I woke up as Nate made breakfast, I needed the bathroom, and frankly, it's a sunny Saturday morning; why should I spend it in bed?" She had finished getting dry and dropped the towel to put on fresh underwear. Leslie gasped. "What? Do I have a bruise somewhere? I had melee training on Friday and could barely move afterwards."

"No, no - but I can see why Nate is so into you. I'm currently questioning my sexuality and my workout routine."

"What the heck are you talking about?" With arms akimbo, she faced her friend.

"Look at you! Snow White has joined the army."

"I look nothing like Snow White: My hair is chestnut, not ebony,

and my eyes are brown, not blue. Only the skin as white as snow part might fit, although I wish I would tan - I could save a fortune on sunscreen."

Leslie winked. "I guess Snow White would also not be as trained and fit as you are. I would kill for your abs."

The horror of basic training after a year of living a lazy life of parties and sumptuous food with her cousin on Eden was still vivid in Adelie's memory. The extensive fitness program every cadet had to work through in their first three months had easily melted off any excess weight she had accumulated back home after the sudden end of her racing career. "Working on them nearly killed me, for sure."

"PE is no joke, eh?"

Adelie shook her head. "No, it's deadly serious. They push you until you want to puke. Until you puke. I thought I knew my limit, but joining the Academy certainly has expanded my horizon of what the human body is capable of. And when you think you're finally forged like iron, they introduce you to High-G training."

"The awful human centrifuge that sits in the basement of the Physics Department?"

Adelie nodded and slipped into her clothes. "Eyeballs-in is okay, but eyeballs-out is as painful as it sounds."

Leslie made a disgusted face. "I'm a Nurse, I'm not squeamish, but I don't want to know what this means."

"Just if they spin you forwards or backwards. But don't you have to train with the centrifuge, too?"

Her friend shook her head and picked up her towel. "Only if we want to qualify for field service, which I haven't decided on so far. I'm unsure if I ever want to travel in something without artificial gravity like the big hospital ships or go faster than a standard plane as your Stingrays do. I already feel sick just watching you fly, if I'm honest."

Adelie paused. "Do you want to be stuck inside a hospital forever?"

"No, not really. But being in the field, saving lives outside the comfort of a clean hospital? I don't know. My supervisors say I have the smarts for surgeon level; I want to earn this qualification before deciding which way to go."

“Wow, surgeon level. Go for it, girl. You could reign over your own Medbay someday.”

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As Adelle stepped outside the gym, her Instacom rang with an unknown but local number.

“Adelle Klaiber speaking?”

“Good morning Miss Klaiber. This is Marco from Warehouse No. 14 - we just received your delivery, and I understand that you’ve been waiting an outrageously long time for it to arrive, so I wanted to call you immediately.”

She furrowed her brow. “Are you telling me my car has finally reached Meadow Junction?”

“Yes!” Came the enthusiastic answer. “You can pick it up today if you want.”

Of course, she wanted to. What had been promised only to take three months had turned into an almost twelve months long game of waiting, phone calls, and a pile of paperwork as long as her arm. If she had known what kind of ordeal it would turn into, she probably would have ditched the idea then and there and bought a new car already on the planet, but once started, it also didn’t make sense to abandon the transfer and risk losing it altogether.

The freight yard and warehouses behind Meadow Junction’s train station were a scary maze of stacked shipping containers, crates and barrels in every shape and size. Adelle’s taxi driver peered through the windshield and pointed at a large yellow 14 on the front of one of the corrugated sheet iron warehouses. “Are you sure this is the right place, miss?”

She checked the delivery confirmation Marco had sent her. “This seems to be the right place, but I will be grateful if you would wait until I pick up my delivery. It’s a car, and I am not sure it will start. You can leave the meter running while you wait. If I don’t return, please call the police.”

“I sure will do, miss.” He looked at her gravely. “This is not a place for a pretty thing like you.”

Neither of them had to worry because Marco was already waiting

for Adelie and showed her the car. Adelie took a deep breath as she caught sight of the ELF, sitting in the half-darkness of the warehouse like a crouching black cat. Hello, baby. Her heart pounded more than it should as she opened the door and sat in the driver's seat. It still smelled like the last time she drove it, a lovely melange of leather, wood and car. She ran her hands over the steering wheel, wrapped in bright red leather, making herself familiar again with its soft buttery texture. As black as the exterior was, so exquisite was the interior. Due to her long affiliation with the manufacturer, they approved all of her specifications. The red accents and leather of the seats and steering wheel played well with the dark mahogany of the dashboard. Every switch had just the right amount of resistance. Thick black carpet covered the floor and muffled any sound. With the doors closed, the car became a harbour of silence and comfort as long as the motor wasn't running. She turned the ignition key. Immediately, the engine sprang to life with its signature low growl. It was still alive. A sigh of relief escaped her.

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White puffy clouds sailed with an easy breeze across the afternoon sky. The gravel underneath Nate's motorcycle crunched as he pulled into the old farmyard. A large wooden gate at the driveway's entry announced in brilliant red writing, "Wild Sage Acres". Underneath the main sign, a smaller one read "Edward O'Flannigan - Car and Motorcycle Repairs". He killed the engine in front of the workshop barn and pulled off his helmet. On the other side of the yard stood a weathered, quaint farmhouse with a wrap-around porch and brownish-red roof. Behind the barn, the blooming branches of apple trees beckoned for a stroll in the orchard. Scattered around the perimeter stood old farming equipment in various states of overgrowth and rust. The farm appeared to have fallen out of time, a welcome change of scenery after a busy week of academy work in a high-tech environment. He hung his helmet over the handlebars and ran his hand through his hair. Spring was moving into summer, and helmets were already sweaty affairs. His friend and landlord, Eddie, emerged from the shadow of the porch, cigarette in one hand, coffee

mug in the other, clad in his blue, oil-stained coveralls, as usual. Eddie was always tinkering with something, weekend or not. His longish brown hair was tied into a scraggly ponytail at his nape.

"He lives!" Eddie teased. "I expected to see you last night. Where have you been?"

Nate grinned and got off the bike. "I decided at the last minute to sleep at Adelie's place again because she lives closer to the rugby field, even though she had her first solo night flight and wasn't even there. She came home at the ass-crack of dawn, but she passed."

"Good news, good news. Where is she, by the way? You're rarely separated on the weekend."

"No worries, she will be here momentarily. She has her own ride now; she finally pried it out of custom's greedy claws."

Before Eddie could answer, a distinct low rumble became audible in the distance. The car mechanic cocked his head. "Sounds like a rally car."

"You're good." Nate leaned his back against the porch railing and crossed his arms in front of his chest, awaiting the spectacle about to unfold. Eddie gave him a quizzical look.

"Are you telling me she imported her old race car to Westerhaven?"

"Wait and see, my friend. Wait and see." The low rumble had become a distinct growl and grew louder with every corner Adelie took on the twisting country road that passed the old farm on its way to the coast. Eventually, the black ELF Hurricane rolled into the workshop yard with an unholy thunder. The roar of the mighty engine vibrated in his stomach, and the porch quivered. As Adelie turned it off, he heard the blood rush in his ears. Eddie had visibly paled, and the coffee mug trembled treacherously. With a satisfying swish, the driver's door swung up and forward, and Adelie exited with her trademark grace, carrying a brown paper bag. She wore a loose red blouse, slim black pants and matching red ballet flats, her eyes hidden behind large black shades - a style Nate secretly called "expensive casual". With a smile, she pushed the shades up into her hair.

"Good afternoon, boys. Thank you for the welcome committee - I brought doughnuts." She was a beauty, but her voice was her most

distinctive feature. It had a rich, deep timbre, like warm honey. A simple ‘Hello, Tiger.’ had the power to send tingles all over his body if she dropped it into velvety depths - which she often did when they were alone.

“This is not... this is *not* the ELF?” Eddie’s voice sputtered, but he eventually overcame his shock. “This is not *the* car you won the Planet 500 with, is it?”

*Wait, what?* Adelie had won the prestigious rally tour, deemed the most demanding race in the galaxy? Nate pushed back from the porch railing and joined Eddie’s side. Unlike him, his friend was an ardent racing fan who instantly knew who Nate was dating when he learned her name. Maybe there were more tidbits to learn about Adelie’s past, which she had omitted. She never made a big fuss about herself. He doubted that most of their fellow squadron members knew that she was a Baroness from the planet Eden and, on top of that, the daughter of one of the most influential families. That she used to be a professional rally driver was something he had only learned by chance in the first place. The past is in the past, she always said and deflected the conversation somewhere else. Now she laughed a hearty laugh. “I’m sorry, Eddie, but no. The winning Hurricane is imprisoned in a museum. This is its street-legal twin, still allowed to prowl the open roads - we switched the cage and other safety precautions for interior trims and a bit more comfort, but otherwise, it’s the same car. That is if you can ignore that it’s not covered in ugly sponsoring stickers.”

Eddie made a strangled sound and carefully walked around the black menace that had appeared in his yard. Adelie smiled and joined Nate’s side. “Hello, Stranger. Long time no see.”

“I understand now why you gave me a 5-minute head start. You’re fast.”

She shrugged. “You can take the girl out of the rally, but you can’t take the rally out of the girl. I had so much fun racing around the corners. And I have to admit; I missed driving this car.”

“Speaking of your car, I think you broke him,” he replied, pointing his chin toward Eddie. “He wasn’t expecting that you dropped his dream on him today.”

She laughed again. "If I'm not mistaken, all of this was your idea. But I think I know how to make amends." She turned towards the mechanic, who still circled the car slowly. "Hey, Eds. I think it sat in customs for too long; it needs a bit of a tune-up. They didn't take good care of it, you know? I was amazed it even started."

"You trust me to work on it?" Eddie was stunned.

"Naturally. I wouldn't let anybody else around here touch it. You have cars in your blood."

If there was a knighthood in the trade of car mechanics, Adelie just had bestowed it to Eddie. Nate had never seen him so touched. As she handed him the keys and patted his shoulder, the biggest, broadest grin his face was capable of appeared. Gingerly, he sat down in the driver's seat.

"Almighty aunt. I must be dreaming. I'm not sitting in the car of Adelie Klaiber."

Adelie giggled. "You're by far the most adorable of my fanboys. Now go and have fun with it." She turned towards Nate and winked. "How about tea, Tiger?"

He took her by the waist and pulled her against him, and with a sweet smile, she wrapped her arms around his neck, angling her head for an expected kiss he only too willingly applied to her glossy red lips. He didn't care who she used to be or what car she owned; all he cared about was that she was his girl, in his arms, right now. And it was clear from her eagerness that kissing him was her top priority, too.

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The other top priority Nate had, far less exciting than kisses, was working on this semester's honour project, a mandatory requirement of his scholarship program. He stared at his notes scattered across the huge farmhouse table in the kitchen. Adelie placed a teapot into the last free corner and made herself comfortable on the oven bench on the other side of the table, burying her nose in a history book. She wasn't on a scholarship, and he wondered how it felt to be so wealthy that one could pay for tuition and housing and not be broke for the rest of one's life. On the other hand, Adelie was well aware of the financial limits of her friends. It was a mystery to him how she could

be so grounded in reality with her background of unfathomable riches and privilege. Still, she was, resulting in a quiet generosity towards all those in need, including himself. She had paid more than one expensive part for his motorcycle restoration project and refused to be paid back. He continued to thank the gods for the day he met his guardian angel and fairy godmother, all wrapped into one pretty girl.

“How much do you still have to do?” Her question interrupted his pondering, refocusing him on the task at hand.

“Thanks to your shining example of diligence, I am ahead of my initial plan - I only have to write up the conclusion, do some proofreading, and then I can hand it in.”

A smile spread over Adelie’s face and crinkled her eyes. Gold-speckled amber shone with pride. “Well done.”

For a while, the ticking of the large kitchen clock on the wall and the birds outside were the only things that could be heard. Every now and then, Adelie refilled their tea or got up to brew a new pot so that he could focus on his work. It had taken him a long time to get used to this routine because his brain and body would love to do other, more pleasant and arousing things with Adelie than sitting at a desk, studying. But work came before play in her world, and nothing would ever change that. Only the fact that she was all his as soon as they were done with the books had helped him to accept that she always put work first and playtime later.

“Now, would you believe this?” Adelie’s surprise nearly startled him.

“Would I believe what?”

“That Meadow Junction, the very picture of virtue and ambition, has a shady past?”

The most fitting word to describe the small town next to the ever-sprawling airbase and growing Academy would probably be ‘dull’, but somehow this had an unfair ring to his ears. “A shady past? Meadow Junction? That is hard to believe.”

“Exactly.” Adelie pointed at the paragraph she was reading. “But this text states that some two hundred years ago, Westerhaven used to be infested by smugglers and mercenaries, and our Meadow



Junction was one of the busiest nests on the planet. Meadow Junction! Of all things, this is the last I would've thought to pop up about this quiet place. I expected nothing but cows and farmers in its history. Not smugglers and shady merchants."

That, on the other hand, wasn't boring at all. "Interesting. But if you think about it, there are some buildings in town that point towards a flamboyant past. They are far too ornate, and some too expansive. Just take the library. Or the stately homes along Oak Avenue. These were not built by farmers, not even wealthy ones."

"Yeah, you're probably right. And... oooh! It gets better!" Adelie's excitement was infectious and unbelievably cute.

"What's better than smugglers? Hidden treasure?"

"Almost. There's an underground network of tunnels crisscrossing the town, connecting many of the houses you just mentioned and the old part of the airbase. But it's unclear what their purpose was."

"That's cool. What happened to the scum?"

"The usual. They became too powerful, so the Union swept in and cleared all the rats out. They turned Meadow Junction into one of their academies and installed the hospital, and Lewiston became the major spaceport. Law and order have reigned supreme since then. No more smuggling, raids or debauchery."

He grinned. "Raids and debauchery - honestly, from what I hear of other branches in Westerhaven Academy, especially Engineering, they weren't very successful in ridding the planet of debauchery and indecency completely."

Adelie leaned back in her seat and laughed. "Oh, are you trying to tell me that pilots are the poster boys of decency? I doubt that; I doubt that by a lot." She wagged her eyebrow at him, and heat crept into his cheeks. Before he could defend himself, she got up, walked around the table and straddled his lap. The kitchen chair groaned under the combined weight of two cadets in peak fitness. "After all, there are rumours that you were the most successful womaniser in the history of the Aviation branch. Until I put an end to your shenanigans and tamed the mighty Tiger." She leaned in and kissed him. Books, tunnels and smugglers faded from his mind. The chair groaned again

as Adelie pulled back and smirked. Then she rubbed both palms over his jaws. "The Tiger is growing whiskers."

He grumbled and stopped her caress by catching her hands. "At least one of us seems delighted that I could shave twice a day."

She bopped his nose. "You haven't shaved since Friday morning, sir."

"Neither you nor rugby requires smooth cheeks. Shaving is so darn tedious."

"I appreciate your efforts to look the part during the week. Makes Weekend Nate all the more appealing."

"Do you prefer shaved or scruffy?"

She contemplated him with a cocked head, her smile soft and dreamy. "You certainly look more dashing when you're rough around the edges."

He put his hands on her round bottom. "Funny because you always look impeccable. Even when you're just in pyjamas."

She sighed. "I know, I know. That's the subconsciously reigning baroness in me. No matter how hard I try, the urge to be presentable at any given moment is too deeply ingrained. It's the one thing where I can't relax my standards."

He wrapped his arms around her, and she snuggled into his embrace. "It's okay, babe. It makes undressing you all the more fun."

The old chair had enough of their conversation and collapsed with a loud crack. From one second to the next, they both found themselves in a heap on the worn hardwood floor. Adelie was on her back, giggling.

"Are you hurt?" He asked, just to be sure.

"No, you?" She sat up and brushed her hair out of her face.

"Can't tell; I'm still sore from this morning's training camp."

"Ouch. Do you need a massage?"

He scrambled to his knees. "I wouldn't mind getting a massage, but you look tired. I should make you an early dinner after we have cleaned up this mess here."

She sighed. "Yeah, the lost sleep is catching up with me."



# SUNDAY

## A FRIEND IN NEED

Baroness Adelle von Klaiber, the stunningly beautiful 20-year-old race car driver, has done the impossible. She's just won the Planet 500, the most challenging and dangerous rally race tour in the galaxy, and she did it in style, driving her ELF Hurricane car with extreme precision and speed. Her racing team, Celeritas Racing, is cheering on the Baroness, who has been a pro racer since the age of 15. "Adelle is a true champion," exclaimed team manager, Marcus Pike. "She's been working hard for this moment, and she's finally achieved her dream." Baroness Klaiber's victory is all the more impressive given the obstacles she faced during the rally tour. The Planet 500 is notorious for its unforgiving terrain, with drivers encountering everything from treacherous mountain passes to barren deserts and icy tundras. Even though she has always been called an exceptional talent, she impressed with the level of expertise she displayed during the Planet 500. (The Galactic Post reporting on Adelle's championship win)

The sun was already high over the horizon as Adelie blinked awake. Again, she was alone in bed. Nate obviously had thought that she should sleep in. She stretched and then curled up under the bedsheets again. Nate's room had dark blue walls with a hint of petrol green, which matched the dark hardwood floors beautifully. There wasn't much furniture in it: a bed, a dresser and his desk, and all of it had been lovingly refurbished by his own hands. Adelie loved his talents in the workshop. Just like Eddie, he was always building or restoring something. His latest and longest project had been his motorcycle, now a cherry red beauty but once a rusty pile of parts. His love for motorcycles extended into his room: On the dresser was his small but treasured collection of vintage toy motorcycles. On the wall above the dresser hung a framed watercolour painting she had painted last year, it showed the farmhouse and the barn, and Nate had claimed it instantly before Eddie even had the chance.

Eventually, she decided to get up and start her search for the owner of the room. She found him outside, unloading a firewood delivery from a trailer beside the barn. Concealed by the shadow of the porch, she watched him work for a moment. In true Nate fashion, he had ditched the shirt again. His skin glistened from lifting the pieces and carrying them over to a neatly stacked pile.

"Morning!" She called across the yard, and his smile as he turned around rivalled the sun's brightness.

"Look who has risen from the dead," he said as he pulled off his work gloves and tossed them aside.

Adelie walked towards him. "Why did you let me sleep so long? I feel like half the morning is already gone."

He lifted her and sat her down on the trailer. "First of all, you're adorable when you're asleep. Secondly, you didn't even move when I got up. I couldn't bring myself to wake you."

"Hmph."

"Hey." He leaned in and kissed her. "What's up?"

She flung her arms around his damp neck and rested her forehead against his. "I wanted to have breakfast with you."

"I could use a second breakfast." He hitched his thumb towards the

pile of firewood. "This stuff is heavy. And it won't run away."

Eddie had unearthed a replacement for the collapsed chair, equally old but less fragile. Adelie eyed it suspiciously and then sat on the bench that wound around the tiled oven. The tiles welcomed her with warmth from last night's fire. It was late spring, but some nights were still rather chilly, so Nate had fired it up. Now he stood at the stove and fried eggs and bacon. While those sizzled in the pans, he sliced up a few tomatoes and plucked salad leaves. All of his movements looked as harmonious as a dance, and it was one of the things she loved most about him.

"When did you get up?" She asked as he placed an expertly built sandwich in front of her.

"Two hours ago? I slept longer than usual, too - Eddie was perplexed."

"It was a long week, and the next will be just as demanding."

The kettle whistled, and he poured the boiling water into the teapot before he started another round of bacon and eggs, this time for himself. Adelie munched silently. Outside the kitchen window, she could see Eddie watering beds in the vegetable garden. He wore his usual blue coveralls, spruced up by green wellies and a wide-brimmed straw hat, looking like a picture book gardener. Except that the garden was usually the domain of his partner Bob, a sought-after guitarist and hence often away from the farm. In all the months she had been a frequent visitor to the farm, and even after upgrading to overnight guest, Adelie hadn't seen Bob more than 5 five times. Nate quickly learned to take refuge at her place when Bob was home, which didn't make getting to know the elusive man any easier.

After breakfast, Adelie was about to take an extensive shower when her InstaCom rang. It was her friend Ophelia.

"Smarts, what's up?"

"Shit hit the fan. That's what's up."

Nate gestured that he would be outside in case she needed him, and she blew him a kiss before she answered: "Wow, I don't think I ever heard you using crass language. What happened?"

"A major component of my semester project just fell apart, and I

have a problem.” Ophelia sounded close to tears, which was also uncharacteristic of her.

Adelie sat down on Nate’s bed and pulled up her legs. “I don’t think you ever told me about your project.”

“You might like it: I decided on improving the inner workings of the flight suits because you always complained about how sweaty and uncomfortable they are. I developed a more efficient wicking layer, repositioned the life support sensors and found fabric for the outer shell with better ventilation capabilities than the current one.” Ophelia studied engineering.

“This would be such an improvement; you have no idea. I hope it goes into production.”

Ophelia’s voice crumbled. “That’s where my problem comes in.”

“What’s wrong? Can I help you?”

“You can indeed help me. That’s why I am calling you. I have a working prototype, and in the lab, it does what I hoped it would do. But the lab is the lab, and a real plane is a real plane. I still need to test it with an actual pilot. But the one I got assigned just cancelled. He has to finish his own project. I really, really hate asking that of you because I know your schedule is as packed as mine with this blasted exercise coming up, but you’re my last resort. Would you consider testing the suit for me?”

Adelie cleared her throat. “Of course, I’ll help you out. That’s what friends are there for. And I don’t have any scholarship duties. My schedule isn’t as full as yours or Nate’s.”

For a heartbeat, only silence was her answer. Then came a deeply thankful: “You’re willing to test it and sacrifice your time for me? Thanks, girl, I appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome. I have always wanted to participate in science. I’d love to be your guinea pig.”

The engineer laughed. “Well, in that case... I do hope my research makes your future flights drier and cooler.”

“Do you have a plane, or do you need mine?” She would readily sacrifice not only her time but also her plane.

“No, no, no - I won’t put you in a plane right away. Heaven knows

what will happen. I can't risk you fainting while piloting a plane. I need a trained pilot to sit in the centrifuge. Any other test person wouldn't be able to handle it. Maybe we could use a real plane in a second or third run."

Riding the centrifuge was neither what she had expected nor her favourite thing to do. But a promise was a promise, and she would never let her friend down. "You're right, of course - but if I had known that the torture device would feature heavily in this, I probably wouldn't have been so eager to participate."

"You can relax. Before I put you into the merry-go-round from Hell, I need to fit the suit on you. Are you free tomorrow?"

Adelie greatly valued a friend who respected that weekends were sacred time with Nate. She mentally flipped through her schedule. "Looks like I have an hour and a half in the morning not already filled with classes, duty, or something else. Would eight hundred hours work for you?"

"That would work fine. I still have it in the flight labs just next to the Arcade. Girl, you have no idea how happy you just made me."

"You're welcome. I look forward to seeing your design in person - and testing it, of course."

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After he was done with stacking the firewood delivery, Nate went looking for Eddie, as Adelie hadn't reappeared yet. He found him in his workshop in the barn, working on a dismantled lawnmower. "Hey, what's up?"

"Ah, the blasted thing decided to call it quits yesterday right when I was halfway done with the lower part of the garden. Not sure what's exactly wrong, though. Maybe a loose wire somewhere."

The barn always had a cavernous feel to it. Old oak beams rose high into a perpetual half-darkness. A second floor in the back could be accessed if one was willing to brave a flimsy ladder. Eddie kept a collection of more obscure spare parts up there, stuffed into crates and boxes. Otherwise, the roof and the darkness were the undisturbed realms of bats, spiders and dust. On the ground level, the space was used for Eddie's workshop on one side and as a garage for his cars and

motorcycles on the other. It smelled of wood, rubber and motor oil. Sun rays slanted like knives through the slats between the wooden boards that made up the walls, illuminating dancing dust particles. Eddie uttered a curse and put down his screwdriver. "You know what, I think I need a break."

They stepped outside into the morning, the baby blue sky seemingly brighter than before. The gravel crunched under their feet as they walked to an old wooden bench next to wide-open barn gates. Two scraggly pots of red geraniums sat on either side of it. There was also a formerly blue, now mainly rusty, iron garden table. A green plastic watering can sat on top of it. Eddie took it to water the geraniums. "They always look so sad when they come out of the winter quarters."

"Maybe we should tackle the greenhouse renovation this summer - I am sure the geraniums and Bob would greatly appreciate a sunnier spot for overwintering and starting early seedlings."

"Ah yeah, maybe we should finally do this. I have postponed it long enough now." Eddie pushed back his cap and wiped his forehead. He pointed his chin at Adelie's car, sitting black and proud in the yard. "Y'know, while I worked on it, I remembered they did a documentary about Adelie's career shortly after winning the Planet 500. I wonder if I still have it somewhere. It might be worth watching again, now that I know her in person and not just from afar."

Nate chuckled. "I feared you would faint when she said you could work on the ELF."

"Well, it was a tad bit unfair to drop it on me without notice. I had no idea she was bringing it to Westerhaven."

"I had no idea either. She's sometimes maddeningly secretive. I believe it took almost a year to get it here, though. She did relate that importing a car like this is a lot of paperwork. The call came yesterday morning that she could finally pick it up at the train station warehouses. At that point, she had almost given up hope ever to see it again."

"Ah, the joy of interstellar logistics and customs." Eddie sighed and sat down on the bench. A crumpled pack of cigarettes was produced



from the breast pocket of his oily coveralls. "A song many of my customers sing." He lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke into the sky. "Sometimes it costs more than the car is worth. It's ridiculous, I tell you. But for now, Westerhaven lacks a car manufacturer of its own. The population is still too small."

"Yeah. The planet is still half-empty. Adelie and I plan to go exploring the Echos during the break. A bit of camping, just us two. I'm looking forward to it." Nate sat down next to him and stretched out his legs. He valued time with his landlord-come-friend greatly. Eddie was in his early thirties, and he appreciated his advice and insights.

"Oh, that sounds like a sweet plan. The Echos are great for a little camping adventure and alone time. But speaking of her, is she still sleeping?" Eddie asked.

"Nah, she's awake. A friend called her after breakfast; from what I gathered, it sounded like quite the crisis. And Adelie wanted to take a long shower. Said something about girly maintenance time and that it might take a while. She's probably still busy with exfoliating, hydrating, and whatever else women do."

Eddie chuckled. "Good to know she's still a woman underneath all the military attire. Shall we look for the documentary and see if it stays true to Adelie?"

"Sure. She never relates much from this time of her life. Until yesterday I didn't even know she had won the Planet 500."

Eddie crushed the cigarette butt in the ashtray and stood up: "I noticed that she doesn't particularly enjoy being reminded of her racing past. It might be worth finding out why."

Nate had never been upstairs in the old farmhouse. Eddie had remodelled it to fit a second bathroom, his and Bob's bedroom, and the workshop office. Eddie kept all the racing-related stuff in a crawlspace in the office, including a big box about Adelie. Quickly, the floor was littered with posters, articles and fan merchandise. What had been abstract knowledge about his girlfriend suddenly turned into tangible pieces. He looked at pictures of a smiling girl in front of cars that were actually covered in ugly sponsoring stickers; she hadn't

been joking. To his surprise, Adelie knew how to work the camera. At least two calendars with portrait shots of her showed that incredible talent in spades. Seeing her draped over car hoods dressed in evening gowns was weird, though. She looked like Adelie, but in a way, it didn't align with the pragmatic Adelie he knew and loved. Eventually, Eddie found the case with the documentary. "I knew it must be in here."

"A loving fan never discards anything."

His landlord laughed. "Are you mocking me?"

"Never. How long have you been following her career?"

Eddie scratched his chin while he tried to remember. "Pretty much since she made the first waves in the Star 300 series, I think. She must have been 14 or 15 back then. She rose to fame quickly, but it looks like it didn't get to her head."

Nate fumbled with an autograph card that showed Adelie's beautiful three-quarter profile in black and white. Years ago, she must have had the card in her hands, swirling her signature with a black pen into the bottom right corner. "No, for someone rich and famous, she is surprisingly down to earth."

The video was a documentary about how Adelie had won the prestigious tour. Picturesque montages of the ELF racing across dirt roads, dust pluming up behind it, were set apart with interview clips of her manager, fellow racers and Adelie herself, recounting her way to the top. In some of these clips, she still was very young, talking highly professionally about her strategies, the car or her team. In others, she was older, and he recognised the same calm levelheadedness he had come to admire in their teamwork. The video ended with Adelie crossing a finish line, the original commentary going bonkers as it became clear that she won the fifth consecutive race for the fifth time, meaning that she won the Planet 500 Championship, a feat only a few competing on this rally tour ever accomplished. A cut to her lifting the trophy into the sky, in a crowd of celebrating people. As the screen faded to black and then to the credits, he heard a sigh behind him. Adelie stood in the living room doorway, still staring at the screen, and then she turned around and left without a word.

Nate scrambled to his feet. "Shit. Adelie, wait. Wait. I'm sorry..."

She wasn't in his room, and also not in the kitchen. There he only found Eddie, who was feeding his dog Snoot.

"Have you seen Adelie? She caught me watching your video."

"I'm sorry, but no. Maybe she's outside. She hasn't left. We would have heard the engine. Her car certainly has no stealth mode."

Nate stepped onto the front porch to find the sports car still parked in the yard. Adelie sat on the lowest bar of the old wooden fence in front of it, one foot propped up against the bumper. She seemed to stare at the hood, but her fixed gaze told him she wasn't seeing the clouds mirrored by it. Before he could move, Eddie grabbed his shoulder.

"Give her space."

"But ..."

"No buts. She used to run on gasoline. She loved it. Kerosine has yet to give her the same fix."

Snoot didn't care what Eddie thought about giving people space. She'd followed her owner outside, and as she saw Adelie, she went over to check on her before Nate or Eddie could stop her.

Adelie looked up and smiled a watery smile. "Hello, girl." Snoot yipped, and wagged her tail, putting one paw on Adelie's propped-up foot. "Yes, you're so right. It doesn't help, does it?" She scratched the dog's head. "Good girl."

Nate stepped down from the porch and passed the car. Adelie smiled at him but still looked emotional.

"Babe? Everything okay?"

A sigh. "Uh, yeah. Bout of nostalgia. It will pass. It always passes."

Gingerly, he sat down next to her, hoping that the fence wouldn't follow the example of the late kitchen chair. It was as awkward as at the beginning of their relationship. Was there a line he should not cross? Had he already crossed it? Then Adelie lifted her head, and pain stood in her eyes, a pain that called for support. He pulled her towards him, and with relief, he noticed how she leaned into him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to upset you. Eddie said that working on your car reminded him of the documentary, and we went looking to

see if he still had it, and then I wanted to watch it. I know I should have asked before snooping ...”

A hand on his thigh stopped his rambling. “Hey, it’s okay. I’ve never seen it, and it was quite good. I miss some of those people. They were good people.”

They just sat in silence for a while, his arm around her, her head heavy against his shoulder. Eventually, she spoke again. “The memory hurts more than it should. This was the proudest moment of my life, and I want to cry whenever I am reminded of it.”

He squeezed her as if physical support would make the pain go away. “You didn’t stop racing because you wanted to. It was taken away from you. Maybe how you feel has more to do with what happened afterwards than with the event itself.”

Adelie rubbed her hands over her face and mumbled: “Oh, yeah. That shit show. Worst year of my life.” She stood up and walked to the bench at the barn. He followed her. “Not even two weeks after I won the Planet 500, I got the call that my brother had been in a car accident. If that idiot had worn his seatbelt as he should have, he wouldn’t have been thrown out of the car and been as badly injured as he was.” Her fist met the seat with a punch. “Of course, I returned to Eden as quickly as I could. I planned to stay there until he improved, but my mother had other plans.”

“In a way, I can understand her reasoning. You had a few horrible crashes, the documentary said. With one child in the hospital, more dead than alive, you don’t want the other regularly tempting fate over and over.”

Adelie huffed. “True. But it still wasn’t fair. Without racing, I had nothing to do. I didn’t even know who I was anymore. My cousin somewhat adopted me. We went to many parties, I met Christopher, and things went downhill. I guess, in retrospect, my mother regrets not letting me return to racing. That would have saved her the embarrassment of a cancelled wedding. And me, the backlash of a society that expects women to behave.”

Nate looked at the ELF. It wasn’t the kind of car any mother would like to see her child drive, especially not at neck-breaking speeds over

dirt roads. Its low crouching silhouette and sharp angles spoke of speed and power. He had seen it creeping up in the rear mirror of his bike and remembered the feeling of visual aggression. He couldn't blame Adelle's mother for not wanting her daughter to drive it. "Why did she let you race in the first place? From the bits and pieces you did tell me, racing doesn't seem to befit a Baron's daughter."

"She never did. My father did. He loves fast cars, and I got that from him. He was never allowed to race when he was young and wanted me to live his dream, so he opposed her and supported my career. But with my brother almost dead, he stood no chance. Nobody did."

Snoot had busied herself sniffing every reachable inch of Adelle's car but now was obviously of the opinion that they should stop talking and start playing with her. She dug out a crummy red rubber ball from underneath the porch and dropped it in front of Nate, then sat down and cocked her head, one ear perked up. Her tail wagged against the ground. Adelle laughed and picked up the ball. Snoot barked a single excited bark and then ran towards the old orchard. Adelle turned to Nate. "Let's play fetch?"

He followed her slowly, enjoying the picture of her tall figure walking through the gnarly apple trees in full bloom. Snoot loved to play fetch with him because he could throw the ball almost to the other end of the orchard, thanks to rugby training. But today, his arms were tired from the training camp and the additional strain of stacking the firewood, so he let Adelle do most of the throwing. Snoot didn't care. She zoomed across the unkempt grass happily, finding and returning the ball. It was her favourite game. While they watched the dog getting distracted by a mouse hole, he asked: "Why didn't you return to racing after you left Eden? You could have, right?"

Adelle laughed. "Oh, sure, some still try to convince me to return. It would be the more obvious choice, wouldn't it? But while stuck on Eden, I realised I wanted to do something more purposeful. My cousin does a lot of charity work, and it inspired me. I want to make more of a difference. That's why I didn't return."

Snoot had given up on the mouse and remembered the ball. She

brought it back, expecting it to be thrown again. Nate picked it up. "Do you regret your choice?"

The ball flew far, then came down and bounced twice before vanishing in tall grass. Snoot ran circles around it until she found it.

Adelie picked up a dry stick and twirled it between her fingers. "Absolutely no regrets. Let's be real - nostalgia makes you forget all the sacrifices you have to offer at the altar of success." She snipped the twig away.

"Sad but true."

Adelie smiled as she turned and put her arms around his neck to kiss him. Happily, he wrapped her in his arms. "I was worried you were angry because I watched the documentary behind your back."

A giggle, and then Adelie tilted her head back and grinned. "Why should I? I always thought you'd already checked the Archive. Most of my public life is recorded there in great detail. It's no secret?"

Heat crept over his face. "I think I never quite realised I'm dating a celebrity."

Another giggle. "You are so cute." She brushed her fingers through his hair, gazing lovingly at him. "I like that about you. You care less for who I was and more for who I am."



# MONDAY

## EXERCISE WEEK

The sky of Westerhaven Academy will soon be lit with a dazzling display of aerial showmanship, as students gear up for the highly-anticipated Exercise Week. It's a week that marks the culmination of months' worth of laborious training. The buzz around campus has been steadily building to fever pitch—everyone knows that this is an opportunity to impress and showcase their proficiency in the art of aerial warfare. This year, the focus is on honing aerial combat skills and infrastructural missions simulations. On the ground, students will dive into challenging tasks such as constructing bridges and roads in hostile conditions within a limited timeframe, while our squadrons will take to the skies to tackle several combat missions. Pushed to their limits, they'll need all the grit and determination they can muster to conquer these missions with finesse. It's sure to be a week full of intense learning experiences and adventure! Good luck to all!

(Westerhaven Academy Press)

Adelie parked in front of the tall chain link fence, which protected the airbase from unauthorised trespassing. Her headlights pierced through a layer of morning mist hanging over the airfield. The control tower on the other end rose above it like a giant needle, its beacon bright in dawn's early light. Next to her, Nate pulled up on his cherry-red motorcycle. They still had to figure out driving and sleeping logistics now that Eddie's old, baby blue truck wasn't their only mode of transportation anymore. Adelie sighed as memories of their time spent in the rusty vehicle flooded back to her; it had been integral to building their blossoming relationship. As she stepped out of her significantly swifter and louder metal steed, the chilly morning wind forced her to quickly zip her jacket for warmth. Nate was always perceptive of her level of cold and pulled her into a warm embrace. She craned her neck to look up into his face. Without the fuzz present on his cheeks during off-duty time, the angles of his jaw and cheekbones were much more prominent. In his eyes stood the same reluctance she felt. He bowed his head and kissed her softly but thoroughly.

"What was that for?" She asked as he released her.

He chuckled and squeezed her tightly. "As soon as we walk through the gate and onto the base, we will be soldiers and nothing but soldiers. I respect that you put duty before everything, but I needed a kiss to tide me over 'til lunch. Somehow the weekend was too short, and I feel like I didn't get enough time with you."

"Awww, Tiger." She leaned in and kissed him again. "Better?"

"No. It's never enough." He laughed and took her hand, and together they walked towards the gate, duty, and a day packed with work.

The squadron room was the polar opposite of what it had been on Saturday morning: It was filled with the excited chatter of young men telling each other about their weekend adventures. Adelie didn't know all of them well enough to consider them friends, but she was on friendly terms with most. Naturally, there had to be some who couldn't stand her or who she disliked, and sometimes the feeling was mutual. Leslie envied her for being surrounded by 23 incredibly fit



young men all day, every day, although she had tried to explain several times that the presence of a sixpack didn't make a man boyfriend material. They were nice to look at, though; if you turned a deaf ear to the inevitable fart jokes and belching contests.

Jacob Barker bounded up to them, his face alight with joy. "Ah, the dream team has arrived! How are English and the Princess?" he asked, playfully punching Nate in the arm. The familiarity of this gesture said volumes about their friendship; they had been wingmen – and best friends – since they had suffered through basic training together.

"Yo, Gunners!" Nate gave him a high five. "How's my man? Have you recovered from Saturday's ordeal?"

Jake, or Gunners per his call sign, was a vital part of the varsity rugby team's forwards and a brick of a man. A neat buzz cut faded almost seamlessly into dark skin, and Adelie was convinced that his back was even wider than Nate's. She genuinely liked him, not just because he was Nate's brother in arms, but also because every ounce of muscle was matched with an equal part of humour - Jake always had a tease or joke ready, no matter the situation. Adelie left them to trade stories and slipped into her seat in the front row. It was marked by a red One and her name on a front display, indicating her position in the squadron ranking. Sometimes, Nate managed to switch places with her, but mostly, it was hers unchallenged.

"Good Morning, Adelie. How was your weekend? I heard you aced your solo night flight." Gerald "Haystack" MacLaren sat on the edge of her desk and smiled at her. He and Jake were embroiled in a fierce battle for the third position and switched places almost every other day. Adelie liked Gerald immensely. He was a quiet one but incredibly reliable. Thorough in everything he did, she would easily trust him with her life.

"Hello, Gerald. I wouldn't say I aced it, but I was good enough to pass. Which is the only thing that matters."

Her wingman laughed. "You're humble to a fault."

Their banter was interrupted by the entry of the Chief Training Officer, Major Payne. They all stood instantly to attention.

“Good morning, everybody.”

“Good morning, sir,” the chorus answered.

Payne stopped in front of the imposing blue flag at the head of the squadron room and looked at his charges with steel grey eyes. His salt and pepper hair was clipped into a tidy buzz cut, and there was no doubt that he maintained his fitness rigorously. Adelle respected him deeply; he was unrelentingly demanding but also fair. She imagined that transforming a bunch of twenty-somethings with various backgrounds into worthy officers and pilots was also a more complex task.

“Welcome to Exercise Week - your very first as fully trained pilots. You worked hard, you passed the required courses, and now you can show what you’re capable of. I am delighted that we are joined by the 56th Battalion, which arrived early on Saturday. They have settled in fine and will give us the rare chance to practice with ground forces.” He explained how both groups - planes and tanks - would be split up to form two opposing forces. One would pose as the attackers and the other had to defend a big red cross on the ground somewhere in the foothills of the Echo range.

“This exercise aims to give you valuable combat experience. And yet, you will also be rated on how you carry out your missions and how true you are to your orders. We will challenge you - as a squadron but also individually. You will receive your orders tomorrow morning, in this room, at six hundred hours sharp.” Payne paused his monologue, and his eyes wandered along the front row, where his top scorers sat in a neat line-up. Adelle suddenly got the impression that this was not just merely combat training. It was also an exercise to sort the wheat from the chaff, a process Westerhaven was known for - the selection process was never over until you reached the end of the four years. As if he wanted to underline her feelings, Payne spoke again, addressing Nate. “Havisham, I suggest you get your act together to keep your chances at making Flight Captain. The courage, integrity and discipline I am asking for are currently all in favour of Klaiber.”

Adelie couldn't believe her ears. Was he pushing Nate to do better or preventing her from becoming Flight Captain? Nate only replied with a crisp "Yes, sir." And that was it. They were dismissed.

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The morning had turned bright and gorgeous as they left the squadron room to go about their respective days. Nate wished there were more opportunities to spend time with Adelie during the day. Her trajectory was Interstellar Conflict Management and Tactical Aeronautics, while he had chosen to study Economics and Planetary Development. That left only the classes mandatory for all students, and this semester it had been just one: History of the Union.

"Well, fuck me sideways. If this wasn't a call to battle, I don't know what it was." Jake interrupted his pondering about the lack of classes to enjoy 90 minutes of Adelie's presence. His friend dropped his backpack and squinted into the bright morning sun. "I guess your honeymoon is officially over."

Adelie, who had checked something on her InstaCom, closed the device with a snap and stuffed it into her breast pocket. "Thank you for the reminder, Jake."

He lifted his hands at her snappish tone. "Hey, it wasn't my idea that you two start fucking each other."

"Mate, watch your words." Nate stepped between them. Adelie could verbally incinerate any opponent, and he wasn't sure if Jake would survive her wits. "Besides, this is something between Adelie and me. Mind your own business and shut up."

For a heartbeat, they stared at each other. Jake's eyes widened in momentarily surprise, but he stayed quiet. He knew, as well as everybody else, that Nate was willing and ready to protect Adelie with violence. Eventually, Jake shrugged and took a step back. "Sorry."

Nate heard Adelie taking a deep breath behind him, then a soft squeeze of his arm. "I am supposed to be at the Arcade in 5 minutes." She quickly brushed the hint of a kiss against his cheek, waved Jake goodbye and walked towards the row of hangars sitting on the short side of the airfield. Nate watched her retreating figure until she vanished behind inconveniently parked 'rays.

“Fuck, what was that about? Bros before hoes, remember?” Jake asked.

Nate laughed. “Buddy, I gladly catch a bullet for you, but if you upset her, we aren’t bros. You should know better.”

Jake rolled his eyes theatrically. “Tell me - what is it? Am I not as pretty as her? Oh no, I know. It’s the money. I’m not rich enough for you.”

They both laughed, and Nate slapped his shoulder. “Stop it. Just stop it. I just saved your damn ass from being annihilated by her wrath, and all I get is ridicule.”

“Thanks, man.” Jake picked up his backpack and threw it over his shoulder. “Anyway, she would be the best Flight Captain we could wish for. She is not hampered by manly rivalry and the need to prove herself.”

Nate followed his friend towards the gate and duty. “On the contrary. I believe she has much to prove to herself. Otherwise, I can’t quite explain her discipline and her will to go the extra mile.”

“Why is she even here? Of all the things she could do, why did she decide to join the armed forces? She could chill out on a beach somewhere.”

Nate scratched his neck and tried to decide how much of his recent learnings he wanted to share. “She wants to have a purpose. She wants to make a difference.”

Jake shrugged. “There are plenty of ways to do that without learning to kill people professionally. I don’t get it.”

“I guess you have to ask her herself. I don’t know.”

“Women. But in all seriousness - do you think your relationship will survive this week?” Jake gave him a careful glance. “You two are the definition of competitiveness.”

“Good question. I wouldn’t mind being the boyfriend of the Flight Captain, but I’m not sure how she would like being the second winner.”

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Hangar 205 was also known as “the Arcade”. Under its metal dome stood six huge simulator planes - torpedo-shaped constructions that could bank, dive, tilt or rotate while the pilot inside the mock cockpit “flew” a mission. To everyone’s dismay, the simulators were as loud and hot as the real deal, rendering the simulation even more realistic. Sweat formed between Adelie’s breasts and slowly dripped towards her belly. The cooling system of the flight suit never kept up with the heat or wicked away the accumulating moisture fast enough. She felt like a steamed vegetable as she finally ended the precision and speed program and “landed” the plane. A satisfying 88% flashed on the console. It had been a good run. This would gain her another 50 points on the leaderboard and more breathing room. Payne had messed with the wrong girl. She wouldn’t give up so easily. She rolled her shoulders and popped open the bubble canopy, which was in fact a giant screen. Instantly, the noise of the five other simulators engulfed her like a roaring ocean. As she reached the ladder’s last rung, she was welcomed by a familiar figure dressed in the Engineer Corp’s sage green coveralls with orange piping. The functional attire didn’t do Ophelia LeBlanc’s vibrant personality any justice, but her hair did. It was twisted into a multitude of short, silver braids with pink accents woven in here and there. They fell into her face in an asymmetric, slightly punkish fauxhawk, contrasting beautifully with her ebony skin colour.

“I knew that freakishly high score must be you,” she yelled over the noise.

Adelie laughed and greeted the engineer with a high-five. It was too loud for a comfortable conversation, so they took refuge outside. “Hey, Smarts, good to see you, too.” With a sigh, she pulled off her helmet and opened the zipper of her suit to get air in and steam out. “Awesome hair, by the way; how long did that take?”

“Just six hours,” her friend answered. “Alissa is a worker of hair magic.”

Adelie nodded, admiring the meticulously parted strands. “Definitely.”

She had met Ophelia almost two years ago in the small art supplies store on Graham Boulevard. They both shared a passion for watercolours and became instant friends over discussing which combination made the best grey: Burnt Sienna and Ultramarine or Van Dyck Brown and Indigo. The engineer was a creative powerhouse filled to the brim with ideas, and it had taken Adelie a while to get used to her pulling out her PocketBook mid-talk and sketching something into this larger version of the InstaCom because a light bulb moment happened. A small trade-off compared to the vast amounts of technical understanding she had gained thanks to their friendship.

“Any exciting shenanigans in the World of Ophelia since we last spoke?”

Ophelia shook her head. “Nah, on the contrary. Everyone’s going wild over the upcoming exercise. I only want to finish my semester project to get the honour points. An all-hands-on-deck exercise is the most inconvenient thing right now, believe me. I seriously miscalculated how much time I would need for completion. Ah well, it is what it is; I can always burn the midnight oil.”

They walked past a neatly parked row of Stingrays. The flight labs were in a long, one-story building that stretched out on the unkempt field behind the hangars. Its white coat of paint contrasted harshly with the dull grey of the hangars’ corrugated iron shells in the bright morning light. Adelie had paid Ophelia a few visits before, though she always felt the gazes of her colleagues whenever she ventured into their workspace. The longstanding rivalry between the Engineering and the Aviation branches was a staple in Academy traditions, and the friendship between her and Ophelia a rare outlier. They stopped in the open door of the engineer’s workshop, and Adelie observed the display in front of her gobsmacked. The workshop would have been spacious if it hadn’t been crammed to the brim with shelves full of neatly labelled, grey and orange plastic boxes. Cables and other parts spilled out. In the middle of the room stood a massive workbench with an industrial-grade sewing machine sitting proudly on it. A desk with three enormous monitors was wedged into a corner, its surface littered with sewing utensils, piles of papers, sketches and fabric

samples. Rolls of fabric piled high upon every available surface; even the dressmaker's dummy standing next to the workbench was pinned with patterns and cloth. The chaos was perfected: engineering and fashion had collided in the most unfortunate manner. Ophelia, on the other hand, seemed to have vanished.

"Smarts, where did you go?" Adelie called.

"Coming!" Sounded her voice from further down the linoleum-floored hallway. Adelie followed it and found her friend in a small tea kitchen.

"Ah, there you are."

Ophelia finished pouring water into a blue thermos with yellow flowers printed on it and screwed on the lid. "Sorry, I had to refill," she said, picking up the thermos. "Come on. I'll show you the suit."

"What happened to your lab? The last time I saw it, it was all neat and tidy."

"Research happened, oh, and a quickly approaching deadline."

"I understand."

Ophelia put her thermos into the only available spot on her desk, which suspiciously had the exact same dimensions as the flask. Then she turned and walked to the workbench, where a blue bundle sat beside the sewing machine. "Here it is."

Adelie stepped closer. "It looks like my current suit."

"Of course it does; it has to. You know how much the military loves regulations. But inside is what counts. Look!" She opened the zipper, and indeed, the lining looked different. It was white instead of orange and softer to the touch.

"It has a roughened surface to absorb more sweat. I put this here between the lining and the outer layer," Ophelia said, lifting a scrap of white material from the workbench. Adelie took it and examined it. It was thick and exceptionally soft. "It's the wicking layer. I developed it from bamboo fibres. It has fine capillaries that funnel the moisture to the absorbent core layer, which then transports it through the breathable shell. You should always feel dry on the inside."

"That's a great promise. My Viwis are always soaked."

"I beg your pardon? Your what?"

"Oh, sorry, that's what we call the Vital Wear. Underwear that

supports your body. I don't know exactly how it works, but there's a specific weave, and it's made from some high-tech fibres. That apparently ensures your muscles don't get tired as quickly."

"Ah, thank you. I'm not familiar with all your pilot lingo or pilot underwear. I have yet to undress one, and you know how rare girls in planes are."

Adelie grinned and patted the suit. "Can I put it on?" she asked, brushing over the lining, which was so much cosier than the original.

"Yes, please. I must fit it to you; otherwise, all my hard work would've been for nought." She took the prototype from the workbench and gave it to Adelie. "Bathrooms are the third door on the left."

"Thanks."

As Adelie slipped into the suit, she immediately noticed the difference. Even though it was a little too large, it sat better on her body. She ventured back into the workshop, and Ophelia smiled.

"This already looks excellent. I only have to shorten the legs and arms and take in the waist." She fitted the suit as suggested and made Adelie walk around the workshop. "Sit down. Does it feel tight anywhere?"

Adelie sat down in Ophelia's office chair. "No, it's a lot stretchier than the old one. Really comfy. I like it a lot."

"Thank you. I'm glad to hear it. Researching the materials has taken a lot of time and consideration. And there aren't many options in the non-flammable fabrics category. Would you believe it? I had to dye the outer layer to the exact shade of blue. Military regulations put a serious damper on artistic expression."

"Knowing your preference for vivid patterns in pink and orange, I'm glad there's a mandatory shade of blue." She winked at her friend, who in turn stuck out her tongue. Both giggled.

Adelie changed back into her fatigues and returned to the workshop a second time. "I'm excited to test this."

Ophelia followed Adelie outside into the sunshine. "I can't tell you how grateful I am that you're willing to help me."

"Hey, Smarts, that's what friends are there for. And it doesn't look



like a prototype at all. You can be proud of your hard work. I expected something looking a lot less polished.”

The engineer awkwardly ran a hand through her hair and laughed. “Well, this is prototype number 4.5c. Many versions have never made it past the conceptual stage, too. And don’t ask me how many old suits I took apart to make the pattern and improve the fit.”

“Their sacrifice was for a good cause.”

A commotion near the Arcade interrupted their conversation.

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It was as if two belligerent seals were competing to be heard over each other’s roaring shouts.

Adelie rolled her eyes. “Never a dull moment with boys around. I wonder, what is it now?”

Ophelia shrugged. “I bet my best screwdriver that it is another round of Engineers versus Pilots, but I might be wrong.”

“We’d better check before somebody gets hurt. “Resolutely, Adelie marched across the apron towards the hangar gate. Ophelia hurried behind her. To their surprise, it wasn’t Engineers versus Pilots, but the two against an unknown faction of soldiers dressed in olive green. The unlikely allies formed a wall of broad chests and crossed arms while the green-cladded aggressors hurled provocations at them. Adelie found Nate and Jake in the group, and judging from their clenched jaws and curled fists, it was just a matter of time before patience ran out.

She pulled Ophelia behind some crates. “Hurry, go and get security. I try and stall them long enough.”

“Right. Be careful.” The engineer got up and jogged out of the hangar.

Adelie grabbed the largest spanner available from a toolbox nearby and yelled at the top of her lungs: “We have a Code Orange. An undeclared ship is approaching Westerhaven! Ready Albatross Alpha for interception, ETA in 10!”

Pilots and engineers snapped to attention and went to business, no questions asked. They hurried towards the planes Adelie had indicated to be prepped for intercepting the unknown threat, and in

mere seconds, the hangar was empty besides the wide-eyed infantry soldiers. She scrutinised them with her best death glare. “And what do you think you’re doing here? Competing for who gets torched first by engine exhaust?”

A blond soldier with a chubby face and squinting eyes laughed a dirty laugh. “Oh look, our tour guide has finally arrived.”

Adelie had to play for time, so she picked up his cue and recalled the info poster displayed at Info Kiosk on campus. “Tours start at the gate at 10 AM sharp on Wednesdays and Fridays and are open to friends and family of the students attending Westerhaven Academy. Participants are required to stay together for safety reasons. Today is Monday, and you’re clearly in a place you have no business being in. Explain.”

The soldier looked at her, irritated. One of his friends shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. “Hans, she looks like trouble.”

“Shut up. She’s just another lily-livered pilot. And a girl. She is one, and we are five.”

“She had enough authority to clear out the hangar,” another pointed out. “And she looks like she can pack a punch, too.”

“What I can and can’t do should not be of your concern. You should ask yourself in how much trouble you want to be in,” Adelie said, smiling sweetly. “And if you can afford standing here, waiting for trouble to arrive. Idling around in places you shouldn’t be in is never a good idea.”

The soldiers looked at her befuddled. The one who had questioned their leader first whispered: “Wait, what ... if she is not trouble, who is the trouble?”

Adelie caressed the side of the metal spanner like the sharp edge of a sword. “I’m not trouble. I’m just a pilot. And what’s a pilot without her plane, huh? Nothing. I’m just a distraction. I’m just stalling you.”

Outside the hangar, she heard shouts and the sound of synchronised boots on the tarmac, hurrying towards them. Ophelia had reached airbase security.

Realising who was approaching, the ringleader took a step towards Adelie. “You, you ... You stupid bitch!”

Despite her beating heart, she raised her eyebrow and looked him straight in the eye. “If I were you, I’d be careful who I call stupid. Or do you address everyone by your first name?”

Someone snickered, and Hans clenched his fist. Before he could attack her, the guards entered the hangar, surrounding them.

“Is this person harassing you, Miss Klaiber?”

“Let’s say they tried unsuccessfully. I was just trying to keep them from getting torched or run over. They’re all yours now.”

Releasing a deep breath, she turned and left while the guards rounded up the trespassers. Outside, she was awaited by Squadron Alpha, who eventually realised they had been sent on a wild goose chase, as the FSO didn’t know anything about a Code Orange and refused to let them take off. Major Payne was waiting, too, as he had been alerted by the FSO about the incident.

“Klaiber.” The Major’s voice was calm but stern.

“Major Payne.” She stood to attention and saluted.

“Would you please explain what the ever-loving blazes is going on here? I was told Alpha had gotten a Code Orange. They said that it was you who alerted them.”

“I did. I had to devise something fast, as they were on the brink of a fight with infantry soldiers. It was the next best thing I could think of to clear the place quickly.”

The Major was silent for a heartbeat. Then he said: “You cleared out a hangar full of pilots and engineers, and engineers followed your orders? Do you expect me to believe this?”

As if on cue, the guards walked out with their charges, and Adelie said: “Since when are soldiers asked to question orders, sir?”

Payne rubbed his eyebrows and mumbled something vaguely resembling loss and competence. Then he looked at Adelie again and said loudly: “Thank you, Klaiber, for your report. Dismissed.”

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As Adelie finally killed the engine in front of her building, dusk was already tinting the skies ink blue. The condominium rose in front of her like a white ocean liner, with balconies rippling across its facade like waves. With relief, she saw that Leslie was already home. She was

in dire need of some girl talk. After changing into something more comfortable to wear, she knocked three times fast and then three times slow on her friend's door - their secret code. Leslie opened the door in a pink terry cloth leisure suit and a white kitchen apron, hair tied up in a messy top knot. "Evening, lovely. What's up?"

"Hi, Les. Can I come in? I had a shitty day and could use one-on-one time with you." Adelie asked.

"Sure. I'm making a batch of spaghetti; you want some?"

"Oh, that would be grand. Nate has to work at the Lemon Tree tonight, and you know my lack of cooking skills."

Leslie smiled a warm smile. "Come in, then. I still need a few minutes before the noodles are fully cooked."

Adelie sat down at Leslie's kitchen table. Her friend put a second plate in front of her before she turned towards the stove again.

"You look tired, honey. Is everything okay?" Leslie stirred the tomato sauce, which smelled heavenly. On the other burner bubbled the pot with the boiling spaghetti.

"No, the day was long, and I encountered some one-of-a-kind idiots." She told her of the briefing, the prospects of becoming Flight Captain, and the run-in with infantry soldiers.

Leslie put a scoop of al-dente spaghetti on her plate and poured a generous amount of tomato sauce over them. "Forgive my ignorance, but what's a Flight Captain?" She then asked while pushing a small bowl with freshly grated parmesan cheese in Adelie's direction.

Adelie sprinkled the white cheese over the red sauce. "The Flight Captain is chosen at the end of the Second Year and serves for the following two years until Graduation. It's a great honour. Of course, you have to have perfect grades, a flawless record, and you need to be an ace pilot."

"Naturally. If you'd make rank, what would be your duties? I assume it's not just an honorific rank."

Adelie swallowed a forkful of Leslie's delicious spaghetti before she answered. She hadn't realised how hungry she was before her friend had placed the plate in front of her. "My duties would be ensuring everyone follows the Code of Conduct and other regulations, dealing

with minor disciplinary issues and reporting anything major to the CTO. I would also serve on the student council as a spokesperson for Alpha and Omega. But above everything, the Flight Captain has to be a role model in integrity, discipline and honour for the others to follow.”

Leslie nodded. “That explains why they wouldn’t want an average person in this inspiring position. It also sounds like a lot of pressure, especially the role model part.”

“It is. This rank is coveted, though, because UFC officers who had been Flight Captain almost always have a stellar career; many retire as Admirals.”

Her Nurse friend laughed. “Well, that’s no wonder, if they’re placed in the pressure cooker right at the beginning, they’re already experienced leaders when the others are only starting to try figuring out how leadership works.”

They ate in companionable silence until Leslie continued: “I’m as amazed as Payne, though, that you managed to clear out a hangar full of pilots and engineers. That’s no small feat. Remarkable.”

Adelie poked her fork into the noodles and twirled. “You think?”

“Of course.” Leslie smiled encouragingly. “Both have the reputation of being obnoxious dick heads. I had specimens of either group questioning my skills when I had to patch them up. You’re a fast thinker, and you definitely have leading skills.”

“After this episode, I doubt anybody will ever follow my orders without asking if they are valid.”

Leslie snorted into her spoon full of spaghetti. “Really? Are you pulling my leg?”

“No?” Defensiveness settled suddenly in Adelie.

“Oh, sweetheart. I hate to pop your bubble, but you embody authority. Must be your upbringing, but you simply radiate command.”

She put down her fork and looked at Leslie. “I do what? Are *you* pulling my leg?”

Leslie giggled. “Ah, I wish. I also wish I had your natural ability to make people do what they are supposed to do. It would help my current class of fresh basic-level Nurses.”

“Oh, baby nurses!”

“Haha, babies they are indeed.”

Adelie pushed back her empty plate. “Tell me more about your baby nurses. What’s the trouble?”

Leslie sighed. “I don’t know what the problem is. I usually don’t have difficulties teaching people the principles of first aid. It’s all fine until they are supposed to practice on each other. Then it all turns to mayhem and giggles. I feel I need to give them real patients so that they understand the gravity of the situation. Dummies and fake wounds definitely don’t do the trick.”

Adelie nodded. “Like those tank guys, some people just don’t understand their situation. At least your baby nurses aren’t in danger of being run over by a starting jet.”

Her friend giggled. “No, thank heavens, the only danger they are in is accidentally strangling themselves with bandages.”

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Nate dangled the access chip in front of the reader next to Adelie’s door. With a soft hiss, the door slid into the wall, allowing him to enter. It was late, but the studio was still lit in a soft, warm light. As silently as possible, he got out of his motorcycle boots and jacket and ventured into the studio, expecting to find Adelie asleep at her desk - again. Instead, his girlfriend was wide awake and sat pensively on her small two-seater before the floor-length window, cradling a mug of tea in her hands. But she was already dressed in one of her many pairs of luxurious silk pyjamas, which Nate expected to cost as much as a Lieutenant’s monthly salary. They were incredible, though - he had never touched fabric so smooth and supple, and getting her out of them was a joy in itself.

“Hey, babe - what’s up?” He walked over and kissed her hello. She welcomed him with a smile and an angled head. He slid next to her into the loveseat, and she immediately sought his proximity. Something was up, and he hoped she only required cuddles as he was dead on his feet.

“Hi, Tiger. Welcome home. How was your shift?” Lovingly, she ran her hand through his hair. He carefully relaxed into the cushions and

stretched out his legs. Sitting down after hours of waiting tables felt insanely good.

"It was awful tonight. Lydia was AWOL, so I sometimes had to pitch in in the kitchen. Trudy was cranky because of her niece's no-show, and on top of that, the joint was full to the last table. It was a madhouse, not a diner."

Adelie looked crushed. "Ugh, sounds insane. Poor you. Hard-earned money tonight, huh?" She brushed the back of her fingers over his brow. Her light touch wiped away the hardships of the evening, and her gold-speckled eyes made him forget the rest.

He turned towards her and caressed her upper arm. "So, what's up with you? Why are you still awake? It's past your usual bedtime?" He put his arm around her shoulder, relishing how she quickly snuggled up. Coming home to Adelie after a long Lemon Tree shift was the best thing.

"I couldn't sleep, so I made some chamomile tea and decided to wait for you."

"What's bothering you? You're not the ruminating kind."

She sighed and put her empty mug on the white coffee table in front of them. "Everything."

"Everything?" He squeezed her.

"Yes. Payne, Jake, those idiots in the Arcade ... Leslie said I'm a natural leader and radiate command. Which sounds like I'm horribly bossy. Am I horribly bossy?" She looked at him, large brown eyes filled with new insecurity. He wondered what rattled her so much that her usual confidence had vanished.

"Oh, babe." He pulled her into a tight embrace. "No, you're not 'horribly' bossy. But I agree with Leslie. You have no-nonsense, focused energy about you and know what you want. And I think, to a certain degree, you're used to people doing what you want, so you simply expect it. This is a potent state of mind, and people pick that up. Pair that with your confidence, and boom - a natural leader."

Adelie let go of him and rubbed her face with both hands. A deep sigh expanded her chest. "Right now, I am not even sure I want to be Flight Captain. Keeping a bunch of cocky playboys in line doesn't sound like a dream job."

He stroked her back. "It comes attached with responsibility, that's true."

She shrugged. "I don't mind having the responsibility. But I wonder if I would even be taken for real. Anybody, actually. You turn from being one of the boys to the one with a tiny bit of power. And you can't clown around like them anymore because you're measured against higher standards. You win something, but you also lose something. Friends in the worst case."

He had never thought about it that way, and she was right. They sat next to each other, lost in thought for a while. Then he remembered the conversation with Jake in the morning.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, fire away."

"Jake and I wanted to know why you chose the military, of all things. You have everything you could possibly need: Money, fame - you could make an impact anywhere."

A deep sigh escaped her lips. "Lately, I've been asking myself the same question. At the time, though, I was in a rush - too much of a rush to look into other avenues. I just had the urge to get away, far away. What I needed was not just purpose but also a surge of adrenaline to accompany it."

"You mean a charity job wasn't enough to fill your excitement quota?"

"More or less, yeah," she fidgeted in her seat. "Adrenaline is my drug, chasing off my inner demons."

Wow, it all made sense now. Nate gulped back his amazement. "So Eddie was wrong for once; he said you'd switched from running on gasoline to kerosene. But that's not why you were nostalgic. You've always been a thrill-seeker; it doesn't matter what gives you the kick."

"I beg to differ. It needs to be loud and fast. But these are my only requirements."

"Fair enough."

She sighed again. "And about that bout of nostalgia - I miss certain aspects of that part of my life. My friends. The teamwork and a shared goal. Being part of a flight team is not quite the same. I guess I feel a bit lonely sometimes."



He leaned back into his seat. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged and twisted a strand of her hair around her finger. "Just take the rivalry between Aviation and Engineering. We need the engineers to keep our planes in tip-top shape. And without us, they wouldn't have any planes to keep in shape. Missions rely as much on their tech work as our skill to hit targets. We aren't singular factions; we should see ourselves as a team. And yet, all you ever do is hackle with each other. I always wondered why they had that part about cooperation in the Code of Conduct - now I understand."

Nate remembered all too well the instances he and Jake had dissed a poor nerd from Engineering who had the misfortune to meet them. Adelie was right; it made no sense except for one reason. "You underestimate the allure of a pretty nurse."

She gave him an arched look. "Excuse me?"

"Ah, Lily, you're always so damn focused on your duty. I sometimes wonder how I even managed to catch your attention at all." He leaned in and kissed her cheekbone. To his delight, she didn't withdraw; instead, she turned her face so their lips could meet.

"You required rescuing from a speeding van if I remember correctly." Her voice had the husky rasp he loved so much.

Heat flushed his neck. "Yeah, but you can safely assume that, unlike you, no man around here is inspired by the need for rescue. A nice ass or perky tits work better."

To his relief, Adelie laughed aloud and then suggested: "So if no pretty Nurses were stationed right next to the Academy, there would be less trouble between horny pilots and engineers."

He cleared his throat. "Exactly."

His girlfriend shook her pretty head. "Men."



# TUESDAY

## COLLATERAL DAMAGE

The Stingray plane is a former state-of-the-art fighter jet that has served the skies for many years. Developed for its speed, nimbleness, and agility, it was ideal in dog fights, where pilots needed to outmanoeuvre their opponents. Today, many of our USF Academies use the old, but reliable Stingray to train their students. The Stingray's design comprises four missile slots and two machine guns, and it makes use of the ENFORCE 3.1 shielding system. This shielding system was considered revolutionary because it absorbed almost all forms of electromagnetic radiation. The aircraft feature an array of motion-tracking sensors on the ground and in the sky, enabling stealth missions. The navigation systems come pre-set with AI-enhanced targeting, and can be upgraded with mapping computers that relay intel directly to a holographic map table. All this technology ensures reconnaissance objectives are achieved swiftly and accurately. While the Stingray was a marvel in its heyday, it had a significant drawback: it tended to overheat quickly. This flaw made the life of the pilot miserable, as they had to rely on the plane's cooling system to avoid overheating. Despite this drawback, the Stingray remains a favourite among pilots due to its handling and is widely regarded as a classic fighter jet.

(USF Archives entry)

As Tuesday morning rolled around, Adelie was excited. The dawn sky was still an inky blue with the barest hint of pink at the horizon as she and Nate joined the others waiting in the squadron room. A hushed silence settled between them as the cadets took their places. A huge screen sat in the corner of the room, still black, but soon it would show the progress of the exercise. Payne stood in front of it and watched the cadets trickling in. At 6 AM sharp, everybody was there, which seemed to fill him with contentment. He pulled a stack of papers from his pocket and let his eye wander the room as if to ensure that no tardiness had slipped him.

“Good Morning.”

“Good Morning, sir.” They answered. Adelie shifted uneasily in her chair. She knew this feeling of anticipation. It reminded her of the many times she and other drivers had assembled to await the announcement of who would make the team, who would represent the club or even the colony at a major competition. The only difference now was that she knew she would fly, but she had no idea what her mission would be. Or what kind of challenges Payne had conjured up. Suddenly, she missed the easy days of racing when the only opponent was the clock, and she knew that when she beat the time, she’d be in. Payne’s voice interrupted her reminiscence of days long gone. He started to call names and gave out orders, and one by one, each of her fellow cadets got up, received their particular mission and left for their plane until only Jake, Gerald, Nate and herself were left. Payne put his hands behind his back and looked at them with a barely hidden smile. A distinct chill ran down Adelie’s spine. Payne never smiled, at least not in an official moment like this.

“So. You four.” He was still smirking. “Exercise Command has decided to expand the scope a little because the 56th Battalion suggested an idea. They found a particularly promising bend in the river, which offers the opportunity to practice a special manoeuvre for them and us. They plan to build an amphibian bridge for an extra division of tanks, and your job will be to collect information and use it to thwart their efforts. At one point in the day, two of you will receive the recon mission to snoop out enemy movements, and the

other two will then form the attack squad. You need to be careful, though. The enemy might have air support. We chose you for this special assignment because all of you have shown high dedication and reliable results in your work.”

Anticipation got replaced with excitement. It was a mission tailor-made for them, and Adelie couldn’t wait to get in her plane and fly. The setup sounded ten times more exciting than being entangled in dog fights all day.

Payne continued: “For now, all you can do is stay alert and await orders. The tank division has to get in position first, and I have no specific information about how long this will take.” He chuckled. “This is highly realistic, though. War means waiting and sitting around. You better get used to it early.”

Payne wasn’t joking. They sat around for hours, watching the proceedings of their squadron members on the big screen. Around noon, the order finally came.

“Gunnery, Haystack, get ready to scramble. Enemy movements in sector 7D, activity unclear. Find out what’s going on there, and report.”

Nate looked at Adelie and winked. That meant they would be the attack squad, and boy, they were good at it. Giddiness rose in Adelie. So far, no sign of the ominous individual challenges Payne had hinted at. The Major turned towards them.

“Your job will be to use the information that Gunnery and Haystack gather to plan an attack. The tank ferries have two receptive sensors for the training munition. You must hit them precisely to deactivate them. Havisham, you’ll lead the attack. Please report to the mission room together with Klaiber. Good luck, and don’t get yourself killed.”

Adelie felt as if someone had punched her in the gut without warning. She fought hard to keep a neutral face, but Nate’s surprise was visible. It looked like they both had somehow expected that she would lead and he would be support - like it usually was. He got up and nodded at her, and without a word, they left the room to report to mission control at the end of the hallway. But as soon as they were out

of earshot, he whispered: "Shit, man, I did not expect this at all. Is he bonkers?"

She choked but swallowed her pride. This was not the time to be unreasonable. "I don't know what's happening, but we will rock this sortie. I'll check your six."

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Nate wished he had time to sort his thoughts, but that was a luxury he couldn't afford right now. He opened the door to Mission Control. The darkened room was buzzing. A handful of tech students sat in front of a wall of screens, monitoring the exercise and ensuring no fatalities happened. The air was alive with com chatter and barked commands. They wove their way through the tables and screens towards a door in the back. A large, hollowed table stood in the adjoining room, which reminded Nate of a pool table. But it wasn't; it was the latest and greatest in recon tech: a holo map. Adelie followed him to the device, her face impassive except for one tiny crease between her brows. He knew that crease; it was a sure sign something was brewing. She powered up the map and connected to Jake and Gerald's Explorer. Nate was glad it wasn't him who had to fly the modified Stingray. He rather sat on ordnance than fiddle with high-tech equipment.

"Connection established." Adelie's calm voice brought him back to the task at hand.

"Thank you. Explorer One, do you copy?"

"Striker One, we do copy. Approaching sector, starting to send data now," came Jake's voice through the speaker. The map flickered alive with a green holographic rendering of the pine forest of the Echo's foothills. There was the river, twisting and turning through the tall pines. And there was the enemy at work on the only somewhat straight stretch of the river. Its stony banks provided an excellent base to dock the ferries, and relatively few boulders sat in the bed. It was indeed the only place where this could happen.

"That looks interesting," Adelie said. "This here must be the amphibian ferry vehicles. They are longer and flatter than I thought

they would be. And here are the tanks. Not quite there yet, but close. What do you want us to do?"

Nate observed the map picture. The terrain wasn't open and obstacle free due to the bending river and the forest. There were also the rising flanks of the Echo range to consider. And the enemy. "They have heavy artillery positioned on both sides of the banks. I prefer to come from this angle, but high trees obstruct clear aim." He motioned in a northeast-to-southwest direction.

"Yeah, that would be ideal if not for the trees. But there's also this narrow corridor here." His partner pointed at a nearly imperceptible gap in the tall forest, where an avalanche or storm must have flattened tall trees a few decades ago, and the resulting new growth hadn't reached the height of the surrounding forest yet. It was just a little north of his original line of attack. "We could swoop in from here, open fire from here and retreat in this direction."

"Excellent idea, thank you. And they wouldn't be able to shoot at us until the last minute because the trees give us cover. I suggest this course," he used the planning feature of the map to point it out, "we start to the east, circle around Maiden Head and come in from the Echos, then retreat along the river towards the coast."

"I'm on board. Let's go." She grinned at him. "Let's blast them to pieces." With the push of a button, the planned flight course data got transferred to their plane computers.

The flat midday light blinded him after the darkness inside Mission Control as they walked towards their planes. Adelie still had a somewhat forced, impassive mood, and the crease between her brows hadn't vanished. They had switched leadership positions countless times before, so the only thing she could be miffed about was Payne's decision not to give it to her in relation to the upcoming Flight Captain appointment. It looked like she was professional enough to push the distraction aside. After all, she was Adelie, the Empress of Focus. Their planes were the last two 'rays remaining on the apron, the ground crew already at work. It was the usual preflight business, which transferred to him as welcome anticipation. They had to take out a tank bridge.

Adelie stopped in front of her plane and turned towards him. "Ready to rock?"

He grinned, took her hands into his and pulled her a smidgen closer. "Always. We are a great team, Lily, and we will kick some asses today."

She giggled. "Sure we will." They fist-bumped each other. "Don't get yourself killed, leader. I won't be able to clear your six all the time."

With a wink, she let go of him and climbed into her cockpit. A warm feeling flooded him. She would do everything she could to keep his back clear and bring the mission to success. With this assuring knowledge in his heart, he also strapped into his 'ray, and they taxied to the runway.

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Nate's tailpipe was a flaring red dot on her Eleven o'clock. The Stingray's powerful engines vibrated in Adelie's back, their humming out all her conflicting emotions. In front of her, the runway stretched out until the horizon, even though she knew it was just three kilometres. On her dashboard, red numbers flashed a countdown to ensure a synchronous start. They had done this countless times, this race to the sky. It was more exhilarating than any other race she'd ever done. Three ... two ... one ... zero! She followed Nate's lead closely, matching her acceleration to his until they lost touch to the ground and took off just a second apart. After reaching travel height, she tucked herself closely behind him to conceal the number of planes from any RADAR detection. Underneath her, the gentle hills around Meadow Junction changed into the steeper, more forested hills of the Echo Range. The tallest peaks of the Echos capped at a little over a thousand meters, and if their flanks weren't too steep, a thick pine forest covered them. Mines tunnelled into the rocky ground, searching for silver and iron. Adelie could see the supply roads cutting through the dark green of the trees as bright grey lines. The course she and Nate had planned took them away from the mines, to the east, circled the Maiden's Head peak and then came back in a straight line of attack from the north. That was the plan, but shortly before they

could put it into action, she saw two dots approaching behind Maiden's Head.

"English, we've got company."

"Princess, I saw them. Let's swing around and dance with them. I suggest a 'Swish and Swoop'."

"Alright."

They pulled their adversaries into a deathly dance of rolls and banks across the sky, switching the leader role as it fit them, and had benefitted them in countless similar situations. After a few moments of playing hide and seek in the cloud layer, Nate managed to lure his attacker in front of Adelie. She engaged her targeting system and pulled the trigger before he could get away again. The affirmative bleep of a deadly hit sounded in the cockpit, and the second pilot decided to get away instead of suffering the same fate.

"Bye-bye," Adelie said to herself as the 'dead' and the still 'alive' plane vanished into the distance.

"Nice shot," she heard Nate in her com. "Let's get back on track and take those ferries out."

"Roger that."

For a second time, they circled the white peak of Maiden's Head and took course towards the river. At last, the tank ferries appeared in her HUD.

"Target located and on screen," Nate said, assuming his leadership role again.

"Affirmative, target located and on screen," she replied.

Both ferries docked on either side of the river, which was fairly wide at this point, and full of the rushing water of the spring melt in the Echos. Due to the minerals in the water, it was a bright turquoise-green colour.

"I'll take the south bank; you take the north bank, Princess."

"Acknowledged. You south, me north." She pressed the buttons on her dashboard to program her weapons system accordingly. She found the two sensors at the front and back of the amphibian vehicle, which sat on the bank like a fat alligator while a tank was loading onto its bed.



“Prepare Butterfly attack run, 45 degrees Eastern, at 500 feet,” Nate ordered.

“Affirmative, Butterfly attack run, 45 degrees Eastern, 500 feet.”

“Lock target.”

“Target locked.” She clicked the top button on her stick, and the rocket launchers locked onto the two sensors.

“Engage weapons and fire at will.”

“Weapons engaged; see you on the other side.”

The two Stingrays thundered low over the pines and split up shortly before they arrived at their destination. The barrage fire from the two machine guns positioned at either bank was uncoordinated, to Adelie’s surprise, so not a real threat to the fortified shell of her plane. The computer beeped a steady signal, which became a sustained sound as she reached shooting range. With a menacing swoop, she came over the pines, fired her two rockets at the locked sensors, and then retreated in a broad curve, crossing paths with Nate slightly below her, the agreed Butterfly flight pattern. Her system registered two hits. If she had fired actual rockets at the ferry, it would now be a burning pile of scrap metal. Adelie followed the river towards the coast until she spotted Nate coming up behind her.

“That was almost too easy,” he said, pulling up beside her, his voice cheerful in her headphones. She was relieved to see his sliver wingtip at arm’s length from hers. Dummy ordnance or not, there was always the possibility that something went wrong.

“Let’s return home before someone has the bright idea to test the tanks on planes. I doubt we’d get away as easily then,” she replied.

They let the river fall away to the right and turned the noses of their planes towards the base.

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The two planes touched down quickly after each other and taxied to their parking spots. Nate felt like a bottle of champagne, with bubbles of euphoria rising and threatening to blow his head off if he wouldn’t get out the ‘ray quickly. But the engine shut down took as long as it ever took. Finally, the green light fired, and he could exit the

plane. Right next to him, Adelie also climbed down her ladder, and they met on the ground, pulling off helmets and gloves.

“We did it!” She flung herself at him, and the champagne bubbled over as their lips touched in a hard and fast kiss, as he shamelessly took advantage of her excitement.

“Damn right, we did,” he said, giving her free. “We were a great team, as always.”

“Yeah, even in reverse roles, they can’t beat us,” she said, then giggled. “You were awesome.”

“You too, babe, you too.”

They walked towards the squadron room to see how the overall efforts were going. Besides Jake and Gerald, there were a few other cadets there who had lost their battles and ‘died’. Nate couldn’t remember who had been in which faction for the air battle, but everybody seemed to be in good spirits and welcomed them with cheers and hoorays.

“Natey-boy, look what you did!” Jake slapped him on the shoulder. “You’re head to head in the race for Flight Captain fame.”

The excitement on Adelie’s face got snuffed out like a candle flame, and Nate also couldn’t quite believe his eyes as he looked at the leaderboard. Jake wasn’t joking; there were the same amount of points for both of them, and the cut-off line was tonight. There was a draw. The board would need to decide who would become Flight Captain.

“Sheesh, you two. How do you manage to fly so close to each other? I nearly got a heart attack as I saw you as one dot on the map. Have you secretly practised with the aerobatics team?” Jake had already moved on, blissfully unaware of the mood change.

“Come on, Jake. They are used to being on top of each other one way or the other. I bet this transfers easily to flying,” Gerald teased.

Next to him, Adelie forced herself to be a good sport with a brief smile. “Countless hours of practising, nothing more and nothing less.” Then, she ventured to the back of the room to stow her gear in her locker. Nate wistfully thought about the kiss they had shared between their planes. It already seemed like ages ago, so he treasured the

adrenaline-fuelled moment of victory even more. They had to stick around until command dismissed them, but he wished he could get her home right now and celebrate precisely the way Gerald had hinted at. As she returned, she joined them, watching the happenings on the big screen, sitting down next to him but not seeking any body contact, being her usual professional self.

“I was surprised that Payne didn’t nominate you as mission lead. I didn’t expect him to choose Nate,” Jake said. “Why change up a tried and tested recipe in a situation like this?”

Adelie shrugged, but Nate noticed an imperceptible tinge of frustration in her voice: “We’ve flown missions with him as the leader. It’s not like Nate has never done this before.”

Jake realised he must have hit a sore spot and shut up, but his question reminded Nate of the brief flicker of shock on Adelie’s face at the briefing. He couldn’t blame her. He had been as surprised about the fact as she had been.

“I guess that was the challenge he spoke of on Monday,” Adelie said into the silence. “We can never rely on ‘tried and tested recipes’. We all must be able to function in all positions at a moment’s notice.”

“Well said, Klaiber, well said. And excellent work, Havisham.” Payne had appeared behind them and now nodded at Nate. “You’ve eliminated the tank bridge flawlessly. I’m proud of you.”

Nate wasn’t quite sure if he was speaking to him or them both, but then, why should he snub Adelie? Was he upset about the inconsequential confusion she had caused on Monday to prevent a brawl? He should give his best student and the one who never was entangled in misbehaviour a bit more leeway. Adelie’s face remained impassive, but she was also relatively quiet for the rest of the afternoon. Nate tried to settle down and follow what was happening on the screen, but his thoughts were racing. The regulations said that in the unlikely occasion that two people had the same amount of points, the Academy Board would decide who would make rank. It was only slightly better than flipping a coin. His friends weren’t bothered by that prospect, and his girlfriend had turned into an unreadable blank canvas. The tiny crease between her brows was the

only indication that something was brewing inside her. They followed the happenings on the big screen, and in the end, Faction B successfully defended the spot in the forest. After the final briefing, where Payne expressed his overall satisfaction, besides some minor errors, the day ended. The four of them left the room to a pink and purple sky.

“How about a few drinks in the Officer’s Club to celebrate?” Jake suggested. “I think we all earned at least one. It’s been a long day.”

Before anybody else could say anything, Adelie said: “Sorry guys, I have to pass. I’d love to, but I’m tired, and I feel a headache coming. I think I’ll go home and put myself to bed.”

Gerald looked at her sympathetically. “I can relate, but an ice-cold beer is still worth enduring the rowdy crowds at the club. So, Nate, Jake, let’s go before the best seats are taken.”

“You go ahead, and I will bring Adelie to her car.” Nate waved them along and turned to follow her. It was a pleasant evening with a lavender sky and crickets chirping in the tall grass along the chain-link fence. As he tried to put his arm around Adelie’s waist, she gently put it away. “Please, don’t. I’m not in the mood right now.”

“Do you really have a headache? Or is this just an excuse not to go to the OC? Are you okay?”

“I do have a headache and don’t feel like celebrating right now.” Her voice was cold and hard, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest as they reached the car.

“Why are you so upset? We flew a successful sortie; Payne is happy with our work. What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? You, of all people, ask me what’s wrong? Have you seen the leaderboard? Oh, sure you have; you were congratulated on catching up with me at the last possible moment.”

“It’s not my fault that the others always pitch us against each other. I don’t like it either.”

Adelie huffed and tossed her braid over her shoulder. “Then don’t ask me why I’m upset. Because right now, I feel like I put in a lot of effort and energy for nothing. I feel betrayed and robbed.”

“Robbed?” He was confused. “Right now, there’s still a fifty-fifty

chance that you make rank. You haven't lost yet, and I doubt you will. You have a better grade point average."

"This whole thing tastes of being rigged. I had a strange feeling about this exercise since the Monday morning briefing, and today's events just fit the picture."

Not this again. "You're seeing ghosts, babe. Seriously, calm down. Get home, sleep over it, and don't worry so much about a coincidence."

He could have poured oil into a fire just as well. Adelie's eyes lit up like a bonfire, and she came close enough for him to feel her breath on his skin. Her voice had become a hiss. "You have no idea what it means to constantly put in more effort like everyone around you to get the same results just because you're female. I had to work so much more to get to the top, and I will not shrug this off as a mere coincidence."

Sudden anger rose out of nowhere. "Or maybe you just can't accept that someone is as good as you? Perhaps your sense of entitlement can't deal with the fact that I am as worthy as you are. I don't want to pop your bubble, but I had to work harder than you even to be here."

Adelie pulled back and blinked, then lifted her chin defiantly and said with a strangled voice: "Maybe I am a sore loser. But I think I deserve a fair fight."

He had gone too far, but before he could apologise, she opened the car door and got inside. It closed with a sumptuous thud, but to his ears, it was a thunderclap. The ELF's grill snarled at him, and its driver didn't even acknowledge his presence or wave goodbye as she drove away. He watched the retreating red lights vanishing into the night.



# WEDNESDAY

## DEFEAT

As a diplomat, one must always exercise mental fortitude when presented with conflict. Although it is understandable to become passionate and emotionally invested in such matters, especially when personal beliefs or values are involved, ultimately, the greater good must be served by any decision taken. Therefore, one must strive to critically assess the situation at hand prior to making any determinations. It is paramount that a diplomatic approach is taken over any aggressive solutions.

(From the Concordantes Handbook, 2nd revised edition)

Adelie woke up to a persistent beep on her InstaCom. A weather alert told her that heavy rainstorms were expected and that air traffic would likely be interrupted around noon. She sighed and put the device on the empty pillow next to her, which in turn reminded her of the unpleasant evening she had had. The feeling of utter and thorough defeat had ceased during the night, and all that was left was bitterness. She stretched but couldn't quite enjoy having the whole bed for herself. The last time she slept alone must have been two months ago when Nate had been away in Shanghai Five for the Academy Rugby Championships. All the space in bed was nice, but she also missed his warm body to snuggle close to. Thinking of him triggered a different hurt. His remark that she couldn't accept that he was as worthy as she was to make rank still burned bright in her heart. *If only*. Most of her current distress stemmed from the fact that a part of her wanted nothing more than seeing him getting the honour, and another part wanted it for herself. She would be so proud of him. Her fists clenched around the bedsheet. The InstaCom on his deserted pillow tempted her to text him, but she was still hurting and would only hurt him as well, which would do nothing to improve the situation. With a sigh, she sat up and rubbed her face. The skin around her eyes was tight and puffy from last night's tears. It would need a lot of tricks from her Baroness' past to ready her face for the day. Later. Right now, she wasn't willing to deal with anything except maybe making herself some tea. Barefoot, she walked into her tiny kitchen to set up the kettle. Outside, dawn painted pink clouds into a cyan sky. It was beautiful, and there was no sign of severe weather. While waiting for the water to boil, she returned to the room to find a cosy shrug and some socks. It was too chilly to go without, and no boyfriend provided warm hugs or breakfast. Sitting on her sofa, she stared into the rosy morning and slowly stirred her tea, hoping it would help her order the thoughts racing through her brain. Maybe she was seeing ghosts, as Nate had suggested last night.

Nate. Everywhere she looked, she was reminded of him. A container of protein shake powder in the kitchen, a pair of muddy running shoes next to the door, or even just his toothbrush in the

bathroom, there was no escape from the fact that he wasn't there and that she missed him sorely. *You've grown dependent on his company.* Then she remembered that he might become Flight Captain instead of her, likely because she had kept a bunch of hot-blooded idiots from making a mess out of the Arcade. The thought that Payne was maybe looking for an easy excuse to keep her out of the boys' club crossed her mind. Or maybe somebody else didn't want her to make rank; who knows what kind of politics was going on behind the scenes.

Her thoughts circled back to the painful moment at her car. She kicked herself - the whole evening would have gone a lot differently if she had shaken off the disappointment and not let it escalate to the point that they were fighting about something yet to happen. She had to give Nate credit there; she had yet to lose and overreacted. The decision was still in the making, and he was still convinced she would make rank. Why couldn't she? Was it because the USF Hall of Fame contained so few women? Was it because she had not a single female instructor?

She ventured into the bathroom and looked at her pale face. Her eyes were still red-rimmed, her skin blotchy, her hair a mess. "Where's your competitive spirit?" she asked her sad mirror self. She remembered the countless times she didn't make team, lost a qualification, or worse, an important race. "Did that stop you? No. You stood up, dusted yourself off and then you did better." She straightened up and looked herself in the eyes. "Remember the creed. You were not raised to forfeit. Pull yourself together and fight - be the trailblazer."

With that bit of pep talk to herself, she felt better. Ready to start the efforts to also look the part, she opened the cupboard under the sink and pulled out a small pink plastic container. It contained a treasured stash of cosmetics, the tools that helped reach the impossibly high standard of perfection every Baroness on Eden was measured against. Academy regulations didn't contain a rule demanding flawless and glowy skin, so she didn't need it often, but Adelie also wouldn't be caught dead looking like someone had pulled her backwards through



a hedge. And right now, she looked worse. She took out two tiny vials of MiracleJuice - a clear serum smelling of roses and orchids. It was a potent weapon against swollen eyes, blotchy skin and a sallow complexion, and back in the days of partying with her cousin, she had relied more than once on its magic to save her face. After a hot shower and the generous application of serum, her morale returned. Just as she finished putting on a light make-up to eliminate the last traces of tears, her InstaCom beeped with another message. She leapt, hoping to find an apology from Nate, but instead, it was Ophelia: "I have altered the suit and booked a ride for you on the centrifuge at 9. See you at the entrance?"

Now that would certainly distract her from the conundrum she was in.

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The Physics Department was behind the Library and right next to the Faculty of Tactical Aeronautics in what was commonly called the Old Quarter. In this part of town, the Academy had repurposed old buildings from Meadow Junction's hey-days. Narrow streets connected them, lined with gnarly old trees and lush bushes, some always in bloom. Green lawns provided space for groups of students sitting on blankets or benches, studying, chatting, or simply enjoying the weather. Adelie parked the ELF in the large parking lot near the Academy gym and walked over. Even though it was only 9 AM, it was already incredibly humid. The forecast appeared correct - it was thunderstorm weather, although the sky was still a harmless, clear blue. While walking along a brick path shaded by generous tree canopies, a leaflet on the ground caught her eye, and she picked it up. It portrayed three highly stylised female officers in front of a background composed of military scenery, and the artist had done an excellent job capturing an air of authority and a commitment to duty. A blaring headline arching over the three heads announced the United Space Force's Women in Leadership Program. *'WILP is here to empower and propel women into high-level positions within the USF! Our program provides practical experiences to help you succeed in an environment dominated by men. Reach for the stars*

*today - join WILP now!*" she read. She folded the leaflet in half and pushed it into her breast pocket. It sounded enticing, and right about now, she'd love to have the support of a women-oriented program.

Ophelia waited for her in the shade of a large oak tree. The building housing the Physics Department quite obviously hadn't been built for science - it was a proper mansion with an impressive portico, just like the Library next door, and a general vibe of greatness.

"Hey, Smarts, I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she greeted the engineer.

"Nah," Ophelia said. "It's short-skirt weather; I was plenty entertained." She gave Adelie an approving once over, who was dressed in her flight suit.

"Oh, come on, this ol' thing is nothing to drool over," she teased her friend.

"That's what she said. I think it's an incredibly powerful attire for a woman. Besides, you have the figure for it to make it look sexy. I'm sure Nate agrees."

Adelie shrugged, avoiding meeting her friend's eyes. "Yeah, he probably does."

Ophelia paused. "What's up? You're usually more enthusiastic when it comes to this handsome daredevil."

Unlike Leslie, Ophelia had never been against Adelie dating charming womaniser Nate, so she probably wouldn't hear a prompt "I told you so," and yet she was reluctant to tell her friend what had happened.

"Nate and I got to fly a special mission and had to destroy two tank ferries somewhere in the woods. Heaps better than flying dog fights."

"You don't look too thrilled, though. What's wrong?"

Adelie kicked a pebble into the grass. "Nate was assigned mission lead. We now have the same amount of points on the leaderboard. I didn't take it as well as I should have because it feels like a set-up to limit my chances of becoming Flight Captain."

Ophelia gave her a long look and then said: "So why do you think they don't want you to make rank? You have all the As; you're a literal Ace behind the stick and far too well-behaved not to have a spotless

record. You never got an official warning, ever. Who could even compete with you?"

"Nate."

"Ouch." Ophelia pulled a face. "But naturally, you wouldn't date a clown. You have high standards."

Adelie found another pebble to kick into the grass. "Actually, the girlfriend in me would be incredibly proud of him if he would make Flight Captain. He deserves it as much as me. Honest."

"I believe you. But your competitive side doesn't agree with the girlfriend."

"No, it doesn't. I was upset and couldn't let it go. I'm ashamed to say it, but I completely overreacted. We fought. Which I know had to happen sooner or later, but I wish it would've been about something else."

Ophelia hugged her. "You're human, after all. We all have our less-than-stellar moments."

Adelie sighed. "My standards don't allow for anything except excellence in myself."

Her friend took her hand. "I know. But you also know this is unhealthy - we've discussed it before. You need to give yourself and others a little breathing room. You need to relax your standards once in a while, cherie. The world will not end if you do."

Adelie took a deep breath. "You're right. It's just not easy to do if you've known nothing else your whole life."

"Have you thought about that, in case you and Nate stay together beyond the Academy, this will not be the last instance where you find yourself in a competitive situation? There are more ranks, medals and commendations one of you will receive and the other won't. How will you handle this?"

Adelie groaned. Ophelia was right, and she hadn't considered it at all. But before she could think more about this new conundrum, the engineer shoved her towards the entrance.

"Meanwhile, can I distract you from your predicament with a few rounds in the merry-go-round from Hell?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not looking forward to it, but it will definitely distract me. What have you planned?"

“Come on. I’ll show you.”

They walked through the oak double doors that shielded the inside from the rising heat outside. A generous lobby with pillars rising to the second floor welcomed them with the unique cool air that only buildings with incredibly thick stone walls could provide. Differently coloured marble tiles formed a red and black star pattern in the centre of the large room. The two women took a side staircase into the basement. Every time Adelie walked down the grey stone steps, she wondered if this once had been the servant’s stairs to take or if the former masters and mistresses of the house had used this. It sat behind a modest, unobtrusive door, but the steps were wide and not narrow; she and Ophelia had ample space to walk next to each other. The stair rail was made from wrought iron, dripping in floral ornaments. Not a single stately home she knew back on Eden would have a servant’s staircase with such splendour. It would be narrow and bare, wedged into corners, and perfect for little kids to sneak around the house, being in the way of busy maids. But who knew who the former owners were and their wishes as they designed the house?

The basement was even cooler than the ground floor and brightly lit with fluorescent lights. Several doors led from the corridor to the labs. Behind the last one sat the device, which all cadets who were pilots in training loathed with all their hearts: the centrifuge. Ophelia, who was not required to ride in it, cheerfully opened the door leading to the control room for the stomach-churning carnival ride. The centrifuge itself was visible through a large glass panel that ran along the whole length of the room. It consisted of a long arm with an attached cabin on its outer end, which rotated around a middle axis at high-speed. So far, so harmless looking, but Adelie knew from experience what G-forces did to the human body. Both rooms were dressed in drab, utilitarian grey and metal, decorated with the occasional bright orange warning signs and yellow stripes on the floor, cautioning of high-velocity appliances in operation.

“Yo, habibi! How are you?” Ophelia was enthusiastically greeted by the dark-haired operator in charge, dressed in the same sage-green coveralls as her engineer friend.

“Hello, Ched. I’m fine and found someone willing to test my improved flight suit.”

Ched looked at Adelie, who still stood in the doorway. “Oh, I see. You recruited the best of the best.”

“She’s my closest friend,” Ophelia replied. “And I count myself lucky that she agreed to help me out after Liam left me hanging.”

Ched nodded and motioned them both closer to his operation booth. “We do the usual program, yes? Miss Klaiber is a pro, after all.”

Ophelia nodded. “Yes, the regular flight and fight simulation program. We don’t need anything fancy. I just have to connect all the extra sensors to her after she’s strapped in.”

“Extra sensors?” Adelie stepped closer. “What extra sensors?”

The engineer grinned. “Hey, you agreed to be a guinea pig. I’m not going to poke you with needles, don’t worry. But I need to take your vitals plus perspiration to see how the new suit holds up against the old one. Which means: You get to ride twice today.”

Adelie laughed at Ophelia’s chipper tone. “I guess I should be grateful for the opportunity, shouldn’t I?”

She climbed into the cabin, which looked exactly like the mock planes in the Arcade. Ophelia leaned in and connected small adhesive patches to her temples and neck, from which cables ran to the console of the mock cockpit. “Can you put this one over your heart, please?” The engineer handed her a third one.

“Sure.” She opened the zipper and wrestled the patch past the neckline of her Viwis and underneath her tightly fitting sports bra.

“Great, I get a signal. Awesome.” Ophelia pulled back, gave her a thumbs up and closed the door. Adelie connected the usual sensors to the ports on her thigh.

“Miss Klaiber, are you ready to roll?” Ched’s voice poured in through the loudspeaker. He had her on the screen to stop the centrifuge should she faint.

“Yes, I’m ready; hit me.”

The training program started on the screen before her, and she ‘flew’ it like usual. Ched had been right; as a fully trained pilot with actual flight experience, the whole thing wasn’t as bad as she

remembered from her early training days. She didn't even feel especially sick, as she ended the software after an hour, and the centrifuge slowed down. On her first ride, she didn't last a minute as the G-forces drained the blood from her brain. Now, she knew which muscles to contract to prevent this from happening, and countless hours in actual Stingrays had expanded her tolerance, too.

"Awesome, Miss Klaiber. How are you feeling?" Ched's voice again.

"Better than I used to in this thing."

The door opened, and Ophelia's face appeared. "Hey, trooper, you survived!"

"I did!" Her friend carefully peeled the adhesive sensors from her face and neck, and Adelie pulled off the one hiding on her chest. "So, what do they say?"

"I'm amazed that the adhesive actually stuck to your skin, as sweaty as you are. Time to put on the other suit and see how your vitals are then. Fingers crossed, the stats are better this time."

Adelie climbed out of the narrow cabin and took the new suit to the bathrooms to change. She already liked how soft it was against her skin. Softer, cooler and smoother. This alone would improve the old suit, she thought while she closed the zipper. Upon her return to the centrifuge room, something was wrong. Ophelia looked crushed and Ched frustrated, hammering on his keyboard and pressing buttons on a large steering panel.

"What's up?" Adelie asked.

Ophelia sighed. "The computer just crashed as Ched wanted to reload the program, and now something with the controls isn't working as it should. I hope he can fix it."

The operator grumbled. "They installed a firmware upgrade last week, and since then, the whole thing seems to have a mind of its own. I haven't had a day without a crash; whether it works afterwards is a lottery. If I have to reboot the whole system, it will take me two hours." Right on cue, a piercing alarm started beeping, and Ched uttered a curse. He managed to shut it off but then turned to Ophelia. "Sorry, but it looks like we need extended maintenance. This is

unacceptable and not safe. No rides today, and probably not tomorrow.”

Ophelia bit her lips but nodded. “You’re the guy in charge, and I don’t want anything to happen to Adelie. Give me a call when it’s up and running again. I’m working with a tight deadline.”

“I know, habibi, I know.” His shoulders slumped.

Adelie changed into the fatigues she had brought with her, and together, she and Ophelia climbed up the stairs again. Outside, the conditions had drastically changed also. The formerly blue sky was now a disconcerting slate grey, and the humidity was overbearing.

“Looks like the weather alert from this morning wasn’t joking.” Adelie squinted at the sky and flipped open her InstaCom to check the airbase status. “Just as I thought, it’s a class four, and all planes are grounded until ... what, until tomorrow morning? By all accounts, it looks like we should hunker down and batten all the hatches.”

“Looks like an afternoon of cancelled plans, huh?” Ophelia was understandably as out of spirits as Adelie had been about not being mission lead.

“Come on, Smarts. Not everything is lost. I’m sure they’ll fix it quickly, and we will make the deadline. And if they don’t make it in time, we’ll use one of the dummies in the Arcade; then you’ll have at least the heat and moisture statistics to compare.”

The engineer smiled, grateful. “That’s a great idea. If all else fails, we can do that. Thank you for your quick thinking.”

It had gotten considerably darker while they spoke, and now thunder interrupted them.

“You know what, I better hurry. I’ve parked further away than I’m currently happy about, and if I want to reach my car not drenched, I should get going.” Adelie hugged her friend and picked up the duffel bag with the flight suit. “We’ll speak tomorrow, okay?”

Ophelia hugged her back tightly. “Yes, I hope I have an update by then from Ched. Hurry!”

The air was charged with electricity as she rushed through campus. It had gotten dark enough to trigger the street lamps. Lightning ominously illuminated the dark skies. The first drops exploded like

tiny grenades in the dust of the parking lot. As she closed the car door, they had already turned into a torrent. Thunder rolled continuously. It was nearly impossible to see through the curtains of water driven by the wind across the street. All pedestrians had taken refuge somewhere, and there was no traffic. The flag pole standing proudly in the parade plaza caught her attention as she passed at a snail's speed. The rain storm nearly took out her wipers, and she first thought her eyes and the water were playing tricks on her, but a second, closer look forced her to park the car at the side of the street and jump out into the storm: There was a person tied to the flag pole! The rain hit her sideways, and she was drenched after two strides away from the car. She didn't even notice. Instead, she climbed over the knee-high wall that circled the plaza and ran towards the unfortunate soul as quickly as the conditions allowed. As she reached them, sudden recognition punched her heart.

"Nathan! Nate, what ... why ... please tell me this is a prank." It was no prank, there was blood on his face, and an eye was swollen shut. His arms were tied behind his back with nasty zip ties, and his fatigues were dirty and torn. He was soaked with rain, and she thought she detected a slight shiver in his limbs. Nate lifted his head as he heard her voice and a small smile tugged at his beaten-up lips.

"My guardian angel. How did you know?"

"I didn't. Dumb luck that I saw you moving in a way that convinced me that somebody didn't just tie up a dummy." She shrugged and tugged at his bonds. Scissors would've been handy, but all she had was her knife sitting in its sheath in her right boot. The wind drove the rain in rivulets into her eyes; her fingers were wet, and the knife slippery on the plastic. It took her considerable effort to get him free; and to her horror, he sank to the ground as soon as the ties gave. Hurriedly, she kneeled beside him. "Nate, baby, are you okay?" She checked his bruised face with trembling fingers. "We need to get back to the car quickly."

He groaned and fumbled for her hands. "I don't know, everything hurts. But you're right. We need to get out of this weather."

With another groan, he managed to get to his knees, and she



helped him up. Together, they staggered back to the car. With a relieved sigh, he sank into the seat.

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The car door shut with a heavy, thick sound next to him. Nate's heart still raced, and he was breathless and chilled to the bones. Everything hurt, but mostly the side of his face which had been shoved into a wall. Or had it been the ground? He couldn't remember the particular events, only the feeling of suddenly being in a stand-off with five guys. He heard the door on the driver's side open and close, and then Adelie muttered something under her breath. With a roar, the engine started, and buttons clicked. Soon enough, a stream of warm air hit him, and with it, relief spread slowly through his body.

"Thanks, babe," he murmured. She shifted in her seat, and then her soft palm brushed over his face and hair. He leaned into her touch, suddenly hungry for human connection.

"What happened to you?" She asked, her voice reluctant and strangely pressed.

"56th Battalion. Sore losers. Some idiot named Hans took our destruction of the ferries personally."

"Oh, that guy." Adelie's voice dripped with hatred, and that caused him to open his good eye. The other remained stubbornly shut.

"You know him?"

"Briefly. Had the pleasure in the Arcade on Monday. He seemed to be a prime asshole."

"Observation correct."

She chuckled, then asked: "Should I get you to the ER?"

Nate groaned. Thanks to rugby, he was fairly used to pain and discomfort and reasonably sure he had not suffered any severe injuries. Still, he carefully probed every limb, and they all responded with protest. "No, I think nothing's broken, just bruised. Badly bruised. Ouch. I think I'm good with a clean-up from you."

"If you say so."

While they had been busy collecting their senses, the rain had changed from downpour to calm and steady, and lightning wasn't splitting the sky in half any longer. Adelie manoeuvred the car out of

its parking spot. As they reached the campus gates, the car's com system picked up a call from her InstaCom. It was Gerald.

"Hey, Princess - where are you? Are you alright?" Gerald's voice sounded uncharacteristically nervous and urgent, Nate thought. Adelie had also picked that up, and her brows furrowed as she answered.

"I'm about to leave campus and drive home. Got caught in the rain, you know? I'm alright, why are you asking? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, thank god."

"Gerald MacLaren, what is the matter? Why are you calling me?" Adelie asked again, with more edge in her voice.

"I ... erm. Can you ... can you come to the squad room? It's a bit hard to explain, but we've been raided by the tin can drivers and, ugh. .. frankly, it's a mess. Your calm presence would help greatly."

"We've been what? I'm on my way. I'll be there in three minutes."

The airbase was on the other side of town, so Adelie swung the car around and headed back, but considerably faster than she had come. Nate would have been more comfortable with the speed if the twisting lanes of the Old Quarter were wider. The car took countless corners sliding, spraying water fountains from its rear tires. The engine howled at every acceleration. Seeing them almost crashing into an obstacle more than once, he gripped the door handle for additional security.

"Woah, easy there, babe - you're not a professional stunt driver!"

"Ha, what do you think racing looks like?"

He had never seen her like this. It seemed like she had become one with the car and the road, effortlessly weaving through the narrow streets, switching gears, slowing down and speeding up. She was in her element. Rally still was in her blood.

"Don't you think you should obey the speed limit? This is the campus, after all."

"No. This is an emergency."

The tires screeched as Adelie took the last corner towards the base on what felt like two wheels. As soon as they were horizontal again, she accelerated so fast that the long stretch of road along the landing

strip blurred. Nate began to feel queasy. She sure knew what she was doing, but spinning in a perfect pirouette wasn't his preferred way of parking. He climbed out of the car with shaking knees and had to take a deep breath before he could follow her onto the base, the guard at the gate giving him an arched look due to his state.

The squad room was a disaster: upturned tables, tipped chairs and even a broken window. But Adelie did not care for the upheaval; she walked straight towards the cadets huddled in the back.

"Gerald, report."

He straightened to attention, and Nate noticed that he aborted a move to salute her. The face of Adelie's wingman brightened with relief as he saw her, but his eyes widened with horror as he became aware of Nate's state. He wondered if he looked as bad as he felt.

"I've never been so glad to see you. But what the blazes happened to Mr Eye-Candy here?"

"I found him tied to the flag pole in the middle of the parade plaza. I guess this is linked to the incident here. So - what happened?"

Gerald's eyes darkened. "Seriously? Fuck. Them."

Adelie cleared her throat. "Manners, Gerald."

"Sorry." He rubbed his face. "Erm, alright. We were cleaning up after yesterday when a handful of these assholes suddenly stormed in and declared war on us. We were not prepared, and they had the advantage of surprise on their side. They beat us up quite thoroughly and then got away with the flag. Payne won't be happy to hear it." He pointed to the floor where Jake sat, holding a blood-soaked rag to his forehead. "Jake here is the one who suffered the most; the others only have a few cuts and bruises. What happened to you, bro?" He turned to Nate.

"Ambushed behind the Library. I was alone, and they were five. Had no chance." He tried to shrug it off as no big deal, but sudden pain made him wince. Damn it.

Gerald made a compassionate face and shook his head in dismay. "I'm just glad they did not get to Adelie. Where have you been hiding?"

“I was helping out a friend from Engineering. Didn’t expect that riding the centrifuge would save my day.” She glanced around the room, taking in the injured cadets and the amount of destruction. “Right. I’m calling Leslie for backup. I think she just got the practice material for her current batch of baby nurses she asked for.” She pulled out her InstaCom.

Nate eased himself into the nearest not-tipped-over chair as tiredness overwhelmed him. Everything hurt or burned now that the effects of adrenaline were lessening. With half-closed eyes, he watched Adelie talking to her Nurse friend. Then she stuffed the device into her breast pocket and began to organise the clean-up with those who weren’t too badly injured. She still dripped water but had pulled her wet hair into a makeshift bun, changing the bedraggled look to a state of moist power. Her calm and firm orders lulled him into almost sleep. Sirens interrupted his observations, and moments later, Leslie marched into the room, and in her wake, several flustered young nurses.

“Goodness gracious, Adelie. You weren’t kidding with the ample practice material. Boys, what have you gotten yourself into? You look like a fine mess.”

Jake, still holding the rag to his head wound, grumbled: “Thank you, we haven’t noticed.”

This garnered him the undivided attention of Adelie’s friend. Adelie herself recruited one of the other nurses to treat his wounds. The girl looked at him with wide eyes but carefully ran the scanner over his limbs. As he suspected, nothing was broken. With severe injuries ruled out, she then cleaned up his face. Whatever she dabbed onto his cheek caused a pleasant and dull feeling, and it didn’t hurt as much anymore.

“Careful, you butcher!”

“Oh, don’t be such a sissy.”

He lifted his head to see Jake hissing at Leslie, who didn’t take any of his bullshit. Instead, she pored over his head wound and tried to stop the bleeding.

“Ouch.” Jake flinched, and Leslie looked at him, slightly frustrated.

Then her stance shifted to something Nate could only describe as motherly. She cupped Jake's chin gently and smiled at him.

"Look, the more you wiggle around, the longer it takes. I'd be done quickly, and it won't bleed anymore if you can hold still for a moment. Can you do that? I need to put wound dressing on."

Nate could see how Jake practically melted in Leslie's caring caress. "I, uh... I can do that, I think."

Leslie was a beautiful woman; he couldn't blame Jake at all. Unlike Adelie, who was more of a tomboy, Leslie was steel and sugar wrapped into a lovely bombshell package. With her pair of violet-blue eyes and a disarmingly sweet smile, she knew how to work with wounded men. Jake pulled himself together and straightened his back. He nodded at the Nurse, who gripped his chin and carefully treated the wound. Jake pressed his lips together but held perfectly still.

"Jake is a trooper." Adelie appeared next to his seat. Nate wished she would touch him again, but she didn't. "I think the biggest mess is cleared, and everyone is patched up. I can risk going home and change into something dry."

No offer to join her. He reached for her hand, relieved that her cold fingers immediately intertwined with his. "Can I come with you?"

She glanced at him with her trademark unreadable face but quickly looked away. Instead, she spoke to the ground. "If you want to?"

"Would you want me to join you, or do you want to be alone?"

After a sigh and a nod, she said: "It's probably better if I take you with me. After all, it seems that I can't leave you alone for five minutes without you getting into trouble."

The weather had momentarily paused the apocalypse as they walked to the car. Adelie drove considerably slower and obeyed all traffic regulations, allowing him actually to enjoy riding in the ELF. She also avoided looking at him, and he couldn't understand why. At first, he thought that she had to focus on driving, but she continued not to look at him as they reached her studio. Instead, she tore off the wet and clammy fatigues the second the door closed.

“Angel.” He intercepted her route to the bathroom, and she almost ran into him. Still, her eyes remained fixed on the hollow of his throat. “What’s wrong? You’re not looking at me at all.”

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“Look at me,” he implored, gripping her chin firmly. Adelle raised her eyes to meet the sight of his battered face bravely. His hand moved into her hair as she instinctively stepped closer, pain squeezing her heart to the point breathing became difficult. She put her arms around his waist and pushed her face into his neck, where he smelled of himself and rain, and his beard shadow was rough against her skin. His embrace tightened around her, and his chest expanded in a relieved sigh. Breath caught warm in her damp hair. They stood in the dull light of the rainy afternoon until their heartbeats were synchronised again, and her soul no longer hurt. Nate’s nose brushed along her cheek as he drew back slowly. This tender touch pushed her composure over the edge, which she had kept in check since the moment she found him tied to the pole and which had only come under more stress as she took care of the mess in the squad room. Tears spilled over. They streamed over her cheeks, pooled in the corners of her mouth and dripped from her chin. Nate gathered her against his chest again as he soothingly mumbled: “Shhh, shhh, Angel. It’s okay. Everything’s okay.”

“I’m so angry,” she sobbed into the folds of his damp fatigue shirt.

“I understand. You’re allowed to feel angry. Let it all out. It’s okay.”

She emerged from his chest and looked into his hurt face, the sight triggering another wave of red, hot anger. “How dare they! How dare they barge in and beat you up? What kind of self-righteous wimp do you have to be to get so riled up over losing a practice exercise?”

He chuckled and tightened his hold of her. The touch of his body against hers was calming and reassuring. She settled against his shoulder. It was impossible to be upset for long if held in his tender embrace. Anger ebbed away. They were home; they were safe. Nate stroked over the tightly fitting shirt of her Viwis. He travelled up her spine, then down again, groping her bottom cheek. The thin, smooth material of the garment invited that, she guessed. It wasn’t exactly

shape-wear, but it still made an excellent bum. She slipped her hand under his fatigue shirt, where she encountered the same thin material, smoothing over his pecs and stomach. She enjoyed the experience of a warm body and hard muscles underneath slippery fabric until Nate winced under her touch.

She looked up. "Are you okay?"

"That hurt," he replied through clenched teeth.

Swiftly, she unbuttoned the damp shirt and helped him get out of it.

"Wait, wait, wait," he said, stopping her efforts to get the undergarment off, too, and proceeded to peel himself out of it extremely carefully. A bruise the size of a dessert plate spread over his ribs into the rippling muscles of his stomach, coloured in a gruesome rainbow of reds and purples.

"Yikes," she whispered.

"This is going to be a riot of colours for a while."

"How can you be so indifferent about this?"

He pulled her back into an embrace and mumbled into her neck: "Playing rugby makes you a little indifferent to injuries."

"Don't play the tough guy. This is more severe than anything I've seen on you after a game. It must be incredibly painful." She pushed him away. "Leslie gave me some supplies for you. Said that we might discover some nasties, and boy, was she right. I'm sure there's something to treat bruises." She reached for a small ziplock bag that she had tossed onto the table on arrival. Among the various contents was a generous vat of Bruise Balm. Leslie got her back. Nate still examined the bruise and its smaller siblings, spreading over the side of his torso. He probed it at a few places, wincing in the process.

"Do you want to apply it yourself?"

He looked up and grinned as much as his hurt face allowed. "All I want is to collapse onto the bed and never move again. I wouldn't mind at all if you'd patch me up."

She giggled and took the bag of supplies while he got out of his boots and trousers. "Yeah, this seems to become a regular thing. Off to bed with you, trooper."

"Yes, ma'am."

To his aching body, Adelie's bed was a revelation in comfort. The smooth and soft sheets of Eden silk welcomed him like heavenly clouds. Nate closed his eyes and allowed the sensation to wrap around him. For the first time, he was grateful that his girlfriend splurged on all things related to sleep. The bed moved as Adelie climbed on, and he heard her unscrewing the lid of Bruise Balm. She tried to be as delicate as possible as she rubbed the thick cream into his skin, but it still hurt. Every time he winced or grunted, she stopped and checked back with him, but he knew he had to suffer through it if he wanted to feel better. The balm was cool and smelled of camphor. Warmth spread immediately where she applied it, and gradually the dull pain subsided as well.

"There's also an ointment for your black eye. Leslie really thought of everything. But it says it needs to be iced for at least 20 minutes after the first application for full effect - do you want to try this now?" Adelie's voice was somewhere next to him, and he forced his unhurt eye open to see her, still in her Viwis, studying a small tube.

"Can we wait a bit?"

"Sure." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I'll let you rest and get a hot shower."

He relaxed back into the pillow and listened to the rain against the windows and the sounds coming from the bathroom. On her way to get her well-deserved shower, Adelie must have switched on the electric candles in the tall lanterns beside the sofa. They flickered and cast a nice orange glow into the late afternoon grey.

He woke to Adelie talking to someone in a low but urgent voice. "I want at least one guy around here monitoring the entrance and my door. I hate to say it, but I don't feel safe for the first time." She stood at the window and looked outside into the rainy darkness. Her wild and wavy mane fell over a plum-coloured, off-the-shoulder top, and he wanted to dig his hands into the silky softness. She didn't sound like she was up to any intimacy, though. "Thank you. - Yes. I want additional guards for Nate at all times. - Logan, I don't need to know how you do it; I want you to make it happen. You have enough men



sitting around, as you're always complaining. Put them to work."

He wondered who this Logan was she was talking to. No, not talking to. Ordering to do what she wanted. She ended the call, closed the InstaCom with a snap, and then turned around. "Oh, you're awake. Sorry if I woke you up."

He stretched in an unsuccessful attempt to get the battered feeling out of his limbs. "It's alright; how long have I been out?"

A cute smile, a loving brush through his hair. "Two hours, two and a half-ish, maybe?"

"Who did you talk to? You sounded different."

She sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "My Chief of Security, Logan."

His brain worked not as fast as he wanted it to. "You have a security detail?"

She tucked her legs under and futzed with her shirt. "I usually don't talk about this because the fewer people know, the more I can live a peaceful life, but I guess I need to come clean with you. I have a lot: security, an office, an assistant, even a manager who handles things. My former life and my businesses didn't stop existing just because I decided to go back to school." That totally made sense, but it was still a truth bomb he needed to process. Adelie continued: "I can't ignore who I am or that I have a lot of money, either. As they say, I am a person of interest and need protection." She giggled. "Although Logan keeps complaining that 23 burly cadets around me all the time make his job sort of obsolete - and now he's upset that I have work for him to do."

"Is his holiday over?"

"Yes. The agreement between the Academy and us was that there wouldn't be any guards on sight at the Star City Complex, but tonight ..." Her voice dwindled off, and she hugged her knees.

"What? Are you okay?" He sat up and pulled her towards him. A visibly shaken Adelie huddled close. He breathed a kiss on her temple and held her tightly.

"No, I'm not okay. I'm distraught. And upset. Having a first line of defence around my home feels better. Having someone protecting you, too."

He squeezed her. "What do you mean, protecting me?"

"You have bodyguards from now on." She grinned sheepishly. "Don't worry; they blend in easily with all the other trained and fit guys around here. You won't even notice."

"Oh, you mean it's not a bald guy in a black suit with sunglasses and a comlink in his ear?"

She laughed. "No. They are very stealthy. But if you want the black tie treatment, I can arrange that."

There it was, the amused twinkle in her eye that had been missing all evening. He brushed another kiss against her temple, and she leaned into him. "I want to know you're safe and protected. I hope that's okay with you."

"I appreciate it." He buried his face in her hair before he continued. "I don't feel quite safe right now either. Knowing someone is looking out on my behalf is reassuring."

"Good." She still had trouble looking at his face for long. And every time she did, the tiny crease between her brows reappeared. "We should treat your eye. It looks particularly nasty."

"Alright, then. Do your nurse thing."

She giggled as she got up to fetch the tube. "I don't particularly enjoy patching you up, you know?"

"But you're doing a damn good job."

The turquoise gel Adelie dabbed on his lid and around his eye tingled uncomfortably. He distracted himself with the appealing sights the loose top provided of her cleavage. After she was done, she comfortably cradled his head in her lap to hold the ice pack to his eye and cheek. Heavy rain splashed against the windows again; otherwise, it was quiet. A sense of calm spread through him, slowly but reassuringly. Adelie's unoccupied hand rested on his chest, and he put his over it, knotting their fingers together.

"You're still angry." He couldn't pinpoint what gave it away; he simply knew that she was.

A sigh. "Yes, I am."

"It's okay, Lily. It's just stupid boys doing stupid boy stuff. If someone gets what we think we deserve, we bonk them on the head."

Sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally. It's how we operate."

"This doesn't make all this acceptable. I can accept your rugby injuries; they are part of the sport. This here is reckless and unnecessary." Her hand balled into a fist. "I still want to lay siege to the guesthouse in Oak Avenue. Which is probably also a stupid boy reaction, to quote you."

He could not prevent laughing, which his stomach's abused muscles didn't appreciate. "Damn, ouch. Yes, maybe you've been among us for too long. But I would bet that even if you'd lay siege to the guesthouse, you'd proceed smarter than we would. You are, after all, a level-headed person. With a personal army."

"Haha. No, that's not what they are. And Logan would not allow me to send them in. That's not in their contract, even though they like a good fight. At least I heard rumours of them roughing up the shady bars behind the freight yards." She put away the ice pack and carefully examined his eye. The swelling had decreased quite a bit, and he could pry it open again. "This looks a lot better than before. More ice, or are you done?"

He propped himself up and turned towards her. "I think I'm done. Done with ice, done with this day."

A snigger, then she moved closer, seeking his warmth. He pulled up the blanket to cover them both. Peace settled as soon as their bodies touched. He remembered her earlier breakdown and the anger that had built up in her. Despite his body's protest, he cradled her in his arms and held her tightly. "Enough about me, though. How much damage have you suffered? I've never seen you this wound up."

A sigh expanded her chest, but it took her a moment to answer. "You mean between yesterday's disappointment and today's events? I don't know. I don't know what to feel right now besides wanting to punch Hans into orbit." She looked angry enough to catapult Hans into the next star system. Adelie reached up and cupped the unhurt part of his face with her soft palm. Her thumb caressed his cheek as their looks met. Her beautiful brown eyes clouded with sadness. "I'm sorry about last night, I overreacted, and my ambition got the better of me. That was definitely not my finest moment. You're right; I

haven't lost anything yet."

He hugged her, relieved to feel her hugging him back. "I'm sorry, too. I should've been more understanding about your disappointment."

Another sigh. "I can't shake the feeling that Payne wanted us to come head to head on the leaderboard, but I can't figure out why. It just doesn't make sense unless there's something I do not know about." She propped herself up on her elbow and looked at him from her slightly higher vantage point. Her dark hair tumbled in a wavy mess over her shoulders, tempting him to brush it away, but he resisted. "Westerhaven never had a female Flight Captain in any of its squadrons. Women don't make rank as easily as men."

"So you think it's political?" He finally brushed the hair away from her face, overwhelmed by the need to touch the silky strands.

Adelie shrugged. "I don't know what to think anymore. I need to sort all my emotions and thoughts and come to terms with this new situation and possible outcomes."

He pulled her back down. "First, you need to calm down; you're twitchy as heck. How about letting me hold you for a while? You've gone through a lot in the last 24 hours. Us both, actually." His suggestion was met with a sweet smile. He cradled her in his arms and felt how she took a few deep breaths. With each out-breath, she settled deeper into his hold, slowly unwinding until she wasn't a tightly coiled spring under tension anymore.



# THURSDAY

## NEW RESPONSIBILITY

With every step, with every breath,  
We carry on, we never rest.  
For family, for crown, for colony,  
We push through pain and agony.

The weight of duty, heavy and true,  
Is our guiding star, our moral cue.  
We'll never falter, never flee,  
For honour is our legacy.

Through stormy seas and treacherous lands,  
We hold our ground, we make our stand.  
So never give up, never yield,  
For our cause is just and sealed.

We'll do our duty, faithfully,  
For family, for crown, for colony.  
(The Klaiber Family Creed)

Payne stared long and hard at his cadets, who sat uncomfortably before him. His arms were behind his back, and the steep crease between his brows rivalled Adelie's. Nate wanted to shrink into non-existence while the Major looked at his massive black eye.

"Well, aren't you a sorry-looking bunch." Payne's gaze fell on Adelie. "Except for Klaiber, who appears to have managed to stay out of whatever you punks have gotten yourself into this time. Maybe she can tell me what the blazes happened to the rest of you?" Adelie looked utterly impeccable in her blue uniform, especially with the backdrop of two beaten-up squadrons. Not a hair out of place, not a wrinkle anywhere. She cleared her throat and got out of her chair. Her voice was calm and mellow, as usual. "As far as I know, this room got raided yesterday afternoon by our guests of the 56th Battalion, who seem to be very sore losers. They have trouble accepting that we took out the ferries. I only got involved afterwards to help with clean up. MacLaren called me in."

Jake shot out of his seat, not even raising his hand. "Excuse me, sir. But, sir, this is a vast understatement of what she actually did."

Payne raised an eyebrow but asked: "What did she do, Barker? Please, enlighten me."

"She conjured up beautiful angels who cared for the wounded, organised the clean up, and saved Nate from being electrocuted by lightning, catching pneumonia, or both."

Nate wanted to hide his face in his hands after this jumbled account. But he followed the example of his girlfriend and stoically looked straight ahead, not twitching a muscle.

Payne furrowed his brows and turned to Adelie again. "What does he mean with 'beautiful angels'? Is this a new drug I should know of?"

"No, sir. My friend is a medic level Nurse at the hospital, and she currently trains a batch of freshers. She recently told me about her need for real training patients to drive home the seriousness of the job. I remembered this, and she brought them over to let them care for the injured to benefit all involved. I had my men taken care of, and her students finally understood that first aid is no joke."

"Your men, eh?" Payne appeared amused. Then he became serious

again. "And what was that about Havisham and electrocution?"

"I was on my way home during the thunderstorm when I found him tied to the flagpole in the middle of the plaza. We had just returned to the car when MacLaren called me to help with the aftermath of what had happened here."

"I see." Payne looked at the naked wall where the flag used to be. "And they took our pride, too. Or did someone put it away before all of this happened, for end-of-semester dry-cleaning, maybe?"

"No sir, they also stole the flag," Adelie replied.

The Major was silent for a full minute, staring at the empty wall. Adelie slipped back into her seat, and Nate nodded at her. She acknowledged with a slight tilt of her head. At last, the Major addressed the room again: "I have to make an official complaint considering that they endangered Havisham recklessly, but I will leave it at that for now. You will be responsible for returning the flag before the end of the week." He looked at Adelie. "Specifically, you, Klaiber, will have the responsibility. You obviously have the resources and connections and, most importantly, the brain to handle this without further bloodshed. I will postpone announcing who will receive the honour of becoming your Flight Captain until this matter is settled and the flag is back in its place. No flag, no Flight Captain. Have I made myself understood?"

"Yes, sir!" The squadron answered in unison.

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"See. You are still his best shot." Nate's voice oozed a rock-solid certainty Adelie wished she would feel, too. Instead, she was bewildered. They stood outside the gate and watched their fellow members walking towards the shuttle bus terminal. The urge to drive home, crawl back into bed and forget about the whole thing was crossing her mind. It had been a restless night to begin with, as finding sleep next to a boyfriend constantly nestling to find a more comfortable position had been impossible. Her emotional state also hadn't facilitated sleep - she could still feel a tight parcel of pain and anger in her stomach. Hiding under the bedsheets became more

enticing by the minute. But she had to help Ophelia and devise a plan to get the flag back. Running away from her responsibilities wasn't an option, regardless of how tired she was or defeated she felt.

"Maybe. Or maybe I am just the only one available who's fit for the task, considering how beaten up you all are. You can barely walk."

Nate's movements had lost all of their usual harmonious fluidity. Instead, he walked like he was considering every step carefully. Very carefully. Leslie's balms and tinctures were doing their job, the swelling of his eye had vanished overnight, but it still was a purple-black mess with hints of green at the edges. Despite his pitiful condition, he chuckled and put an arm around her shoulder. Thankful for his proximity, she leaned in and squeezed him.

"Angel, you're not his last resort. He specifically tasked you because you're smart and resourceful. He said so."

She huffed. Just as she thought she had found her footing in the new situation, the rug was pulled from under her again. Confidence had left the building for good. Nate chuckled again and then kissed her temple.

"So. What is your plan to get the flag back?"

"I don't know yet; I need to think. Gather some intel. Think some more. I doubt assembling Alpha and Omega and barging in is the right strategy, although I would love to burn that damn guesthouse to the ground right about now."

This elicited rumbling laughter in Nate. "And you wonder why he chose you. You're mad to the point of fury and still keep your head. Listen, babe - I am sure you'd come up with something. In the meantime, I'll go home, get a batch of fresh clothes and give this poor body of mine some TLC. Call me when you need me."

"Sure." She kissed him goodbye and watched him stiffly climbing his motorcycle. Only as a black van passed her in pursuit of Nate's bike she relaxed. Both passengers inside nodded at her, and she nodded back. Logan had come through. After both vehicles were out of sight, she entered her own car. The ELF was designed with confidence and power in mind, and a little bit of this seeped back into her as she took it to the street. A call came through the com system as



she parked near the Library. The caller ID made her furrow her brow. Either she was in trouble, or there was more trouble to deal with.

“Hey Meira, what’s the matter so early in the morning?” She said.

Meira was her manager from the start until the end of her racing career, and she still featured as a mother figure in Adelie’s life because they both wanted it that way. She couldn’t imagine not having the woman on speed dial. Meira had made it her mission to keep teenage Adelie out of trouble. She nursed her first broken heart after a fellow teammate dumped her when she was 15, she constantly reminded her of her duties towards the team and sponsors, and most importantly, she always had a hug ready when Adelie was lonely. Meira was her rock during an exciting time mostly spent away from home and the watchful eyes of her parents, and Adelie knew that she owed her a great deal. When she decided to leave Eden after the failed engagement to Christopher, Meira was the first person she called. To her great relief, she immediately and enthusiastically said yes when Adelie offered her the position to manage her life again.

“Adelie, love, where are you?”

“I just parked my car on campus because I am going to help a friend with a research project. Why?”

An audible sigh of relief. Then: “Logan just called to complain that you doubled security measures and included your boyfriend. He also told us that your precious boy was beaten up badly. I am worried about you; what is going on? Are you alright?”

Logan was the one in trouble, Adelie thought. Aloud, she said: “Both squadrons got beaten up, not just Nathan. We had a combined exercise with visiting ground forces on Tuesday, and let’s say they don’t like pilots very much? It seems to be an example of hurt male pride if I believe what Nathan told me about it.”

“Are you in danger?”

Adelie looked into her rear mirror, where another black van had just parked, and three guys the size of wardrobes climbed out. She usually didn’t pay much attention to her bodyguards, but right now, she was happy to see them. “No, I’m not in danger. You can relax. Besides, remember, I now know 45 ways to kill someone with my bare hands. These idiot tank drivers better stay away from me.”

“I assume Nathan also has that knowledge and still got hurt.”

“He was ambushed. I have capable backup in the form of Enrique, Salvatore and Henry. I appreciate that you care so much about us, but you don’t have to worry. I have at least that part of my life covered and under control. Logan is just upset that I broke up their usual Thursday card game tournament. I should find more things for them to do; this assignment looks too much like a workation. I’m not paying them to play cards after all.”

A moment of quiet. Then Meira said: “You’re absolutely right, dear. I also trust your sense of safety; you’ve always been responsible-minded and careful. I have another question: Darya and I are considering coming to Meadow Junction for your End of Semester ceremony on Saturday. Would that be okay for you?”

“This is a touchy subject right now for several reasons, and depending on how things will turn out, there’s a chance of nothing to celebrate. Would it be okay for you to come down on short notice?”

“Love, what’s going on?” Meira never let her off the hook easily, so Adelie told her everything about her less than stellar week.

“You see, that’s why I’m not so sure of you going through the hassle of a three hour drive just to meet me in a very crappy mood.”

“Yes, I understand. But I’m sure you’ll come out victorious at the end, I know you. You love to prove everybody wrong. And now I won’t keep you from helping your friend any longer. Stay safe, and enjoy your day. Bye!”

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The cafeteria on campus was a friendly, yellow building not far from the Faculty of Tactical Aeronautics. It stood nestled between old oak trees and welcomed every guest with the scent of fresh coffee. Adelie had fond memories about it because it was where she and Nate went after she had saved him from nearly being run over by a speeding van. Little did she know back then that this innocent half an hour of drinking lemonades and catching their breaths would turn them into lovers down the line. This early in the day, the cafeteria was mostly empty. She got herself a cup of tea from the counter and joined Ophelia at a table next to one of the windows.

Her friend gave her a quizzical look. "You look worse than yesterday. What happened?"

She told her about the previous afternoon's events, her subsequently miserable night, and the new responsibility to retrieve the flag. "I just want to go home and tell everyone to leave me alone."

Ophelia nodded. "I feel you."

Adelie twirled the cup of tea in her hand. "And please, can Payne make up his mind?"

Ophelia patted her arm. "Men are not known for being rational creatures."

She rubbed her eyebrows. "Come on. First, I'm just good enough for wingman, and now, suddenly, I am the most capable person for the job. I don't get it."

"Cherie - I think you're jumping to conclusions. Maybe this has nothing to do with you, and you imagine things. You said it would be business as usual with you as lead, and he had to test others as well."

"Hmph. Maybe. Nate's telling me the same thing." She sighed. "This week is more of an emotional rollercoaster than I had anticipated. And I'm worried about Nate."

"Why? Is your relationship already crumbling because of the Flight Captain conflict?"

"No, we had an excellent talk last night. But he can barely move. He's brushing it off as not worse than a particularly intense rugby match, but he's as stiff as a bean pole. I can't imagine how bad it would be if not for Leslie's bruise balm."

Ophelia nodded in mutual concern. "Playing the tough guy, eh? Luckily, you had Leslie's balm. She has all kinds of great concoctions. Once, I had a nasty rash after I wasn't careful with a cleaning solvent in the workshop, and she saved my skin with a lovely chamomile tincture."

"Leslie is a true healer. She loves nothing more than cooking up new things in her free time. The chamomile tincture that saved your skin - the hospital put it through the clearance process because it works wonders on surgery wounds. Reduces scarring. They got it approved, and it's going into production. I am so proud of her." She omitted the fact that she encouraged Leslie to get it approved. A

fondness for her friend temporarily replaced the dread looming in Adelie's chest. Then she remembered the reason why she and Ophelia met up in the first place. "I hope your suit improvement will have a similar fate. Have you heard from Ched? How is the centrifuge doing?"

Desperation clouded Ophelia's face. "No, I haven't. Not going to lie; I'm getting worried that this project is cursed or something. Too much is going wrong; I feel like I'm running into a dead end at every turn."

"Let's go and check on him. I need a distraction from my life, and riding in the centrifuge might do the trick again. It's like high-velocity yoga, forcing you to pay attention to your breath, body, and nothing else."

Ophelia laughed. "Always happy to help."

They walked outside into a grey and dull day. Scattered leaves and branches littering the paths reminded of the thunderstorms. The Physics building was even chillier than the day before. They descended into the basement and walked towards the door of the centrifuge room. It was open, and they heard someone talking in a booming and agitated voice. The two women shared a look.

"Someone's mood is even worse than mine," Adelie concluded.

"I'm with you. Shall we enter or leave them to their business?"

"Let's check back in an hour. I doubt our appearance would improve the situation." As they turned, Adelie noticed a door in the wall next to them, which was slightly ajar. It wasn't white like the other doors in the hallway. Crafted from sturdy oak with matching iron fittings, it looked as old as the house. "Hey, what's this?"

"A door?"

She gave her friend a stern look. "Of course. But where does it lead?"

"It looks like it leads straight into a dungeon."

"Don't be silly." She reached for the door handle and pulled it open. It was heavy enough for her to use some effort and screeched a little in its hinges. They looked around to see if anybody had heard and came to investigate the noise, but nothing happened. "Let's go

and check it out. Maybe there's an old wine cellar down here. Or treasure."

Behind the door, a pitch-black tunnel stretched out in front of them. Its floor was paved with the same red bricks most of the old buildings were built from, and the walls were reinforced with dark grey stones.

"This doesn't look like a wine cellar to me. More like an entry to the underworld." Ophelia eyed the gaping tunnel doubtfully. It smelled old and musty.

Inside Adelie, a strange giddiness arose as she understood what she found. "I know what this is. It's part of the tunnel network that runs underneath the old part of town. We should explore them."

"Wait, what - what do you want to do?" Ophelia blinked at her. "Why do you want to go in there? It's just dust and dirt. And creepy crawlies, most certainly. We could get lost."

"I just read a book about the history of Westerhaven, and it mentioned these tunnels." She closed the door and pulled off the heavy iron key. "I'm going to borrow this." She had to find out if her idea would work, but it was still so sketchy that she didn't see a point in telling Ophelia. Helplessness was replaced by spinning wheels of ideas. Maybe there was an easy way of getting the flag back.

A uniformed man barging out of the centrifuge room pulled her out of her thoughts. His cheeks were bright red and shone with the sweat of anger. Ophelia inched closer to the door, peeked inside to see if Ched was in there, and then waved Adelie to come over.

"Ched - are you okay?" Ophelia asked carefully.

Ched slumped in the operations booth and did not look okay. He sported the distinct look of defeat after a night of unsuccessful work: Unshaved cheeks, a crumpled shirt and dark circles under his eyes. Adelie felt sorry for him. "You're in dire need of coffee and something to eat. I'll be right back."

She dashed back to the cafeteria to fetch a take-away coffee and tuna sandwich. As she returned, Ophelia had managed to cheer up the operator. Gladly, he received coffee and sandwich.

"Oh, thank you so much. I was starving."

“You’re very welcome.” She pulled up a chair. “Looks like the centrifuge is still not working as it should?”

“Negative. A persistent fault in the new firmware is corrupting the navigation module’s transient memory and jumbling prior orders. This gradually leads to overload, inevitably causing a system shutdown, thus necessitating a hard reset. We are scrupulously checking the code to determine the cause of this bug, yet without success. I hope this doesn’t put your project too much into jeopardy, habibi.” Ched looked at Ophelia with worried eyes.

The engineer sighed. Unlike Adelie, she seemed to have fully understood what Ched just explained. “I need the data and must know how it reacts in close to real-life conditions. But I only have to hand everything in on Sunday at Midnight. I obviously would like to do it earlier, but if I have to?” She shrugged.

Ched looked crushed. “Golly, I hope we have it up and running tomorrow morning.”

Ophelia nodded. “That would be great. Then I would have two days left to prepare the paper.”

Adelie realised something. “Smarts, your willingness to make the deadline no matter what is commendable, but you should notify your supervisor about the problems with the centrifuge. This is out of your control and has nothing to do with you slacking. They can extend the deadline if the centrifuge is out all week.”

Ophelia turned to Adelie with surprise. “Wait - that’s an option?”

Ched nodded. “Yes, it’s an option. A friend of mine had to do it for a mid-term paper because an appliance in his lab had died, and they extended his deadline by two days. He still had to scramble to make it, but he did. Believe it or not, they acknowledge that life sometimes has plans outside your control.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that was even possible. I will tell them right away.” Ophelia’s shoulders dropped with relief.

“Great, how do we proceed now that we’ve settled this?” Adelie pulled out her InstaCom and checked her schedule. “I suggest we meet here tomorrow morning at ten-hundred and see how things are then. Would this work for you, Ched?”

The operator nodded his head. “That would be okay.”

“That would work for me, too,” Ophelia said.

“Fantastic.” She keyed in the date into her calendar and put the InstaCom away. “And Ched, please - go get some sleep. Put a well-rested colleague to work and let them deal with the bug. You’re too tired to be efficient right now.”

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After saying goodbye to Ophelia, Adelie aimlessly wandered around. She needed to think, and she did that best when walking. Finding an access spot to the tunnels had given her an unexpected option, but for her idea to work, she needed to know if the guesthouse at Oak Avenue was also connected to the underground network. Without that, she was back at the drawing board. What else did she need? Provided the house was connected to the tunnels, she had to find a way to get its inhabitants out so she could sneak in. No way was she going to risk meeting anyone of them face to face; the episode at the Arcade had been enough. She would also need to know about any surveillance systems and guards posted. Academy property usually had at least one guard preventing unauthorised access. She realised that she also needed a team; otherwise, she wouldn’t make the end-of-the-week deadline if she had to do all of this alone. Nate would undoubtedly help her, and if Nate was on board, Jake would be, too. Except for the part that both of them were injured. But they could do research regarding the tunnels that would not tax their bodies too much. Ophelia would certainly be helpful in figuring out all surveillance matters, while Leslie could provide medical assistance should anything happen. A mental list of tasks began to form in her head, and the dreadful feeling of overwhelm slowly subsided. She got this.

Her steps had guided her to the Library. Its section about tactical warfare would provide more ideas and hints of things she still needed to consider. With newly found energy, she scaled the steps and happily buried herself in research.

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Early afternoon was still dull with a touch of gloomy as Adelie parked the ELF in front of the barn at Wild Sage Acres. Right behind her, Jake arrived in his car. Ophelia exited the sports car and stretched her back. “Merde, do you have any shock absorbers installed at all?”

Adelie laughed. “Believe it or not, I do.” She walked over to the passenger side of Jake’s car and opened it. “Welcome to the farm, Leslie. How was your ride?”

Before Leslie could answer, a black, barking lightning bolt shot from the porch towards Adelie. Snoot was overjoyed to see her and excited to meet new friends. She danced around all four of them, trying to get as much attention as possible. Adelie grabbed her glossy black coat and wedged the wiggly dog between her legs before she got the idea to jump at anybody. “Shush! You crazy love machine. You’ll get all the cuddles if you calm down.”

“This dog.” Nate stepped slowly down from the porch. His careful movements still spoke novels about sore muscles. “Sorry, everyone, I should’ve locked her in the kitchen. She’s faster than greased lightning.”

Leslie eyed the panting dog carefully. “She’s not dangerous, is she?”

Adelie scratched Snoot’s perky ear. “No, she’s the most loving floofball you’ll ever meet. She loves to give kisses and licks and crawls all over you when you try to watch a movie. Very cuddly. She’s even friends with the barn cats, who don’t allow any human closer than arm’s length.” Carefully, she released the dog. “Do you behave now?”

Snoot obediently sat down, cocked her head and wagged her tail against the ground. “Good girl.”

“Even the dog respects your leadership,” Nate observed. “But to be fair, you’re also the only one who ever bothered to train her at least a little.” He looked at his guests. “Welcome to Wild Sage Acres. You’ve met Snoot, the resident troublemaker. Eddie’s busy working in the shop; he’ll say Hello later. I have snacks on the back porch. Come on in, come on in.” He ushered them towards the house.

Adelie followed a little slower, and he fell back, too.



“How are you feeling, Tiger?”

“The bike ride home this morning was a little stiff. I’m glad I don’t have to do anything today. But overall, it could be worse, thanks to your care and Leslie’s magical ointments last night.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Adelie kissed his cheek, and he quickly squeezed her.

“I’m okay, Angel.”

The others had already made themselves comfortable in the wicker chairs around the coffee table. A rambling rose climbed along the porch railing, filling the air with its sweet scent. Leslie examined Jake’s head wound while Ophelia tried not to look at it.

“This is looking good.” The Nurse pulled out a small brown glass bottle from her purse and applied a sweetly smelling ointment with a dropper to Jake’s forehead. Then she wrapped his head with a black bandage. “You’ll be as good as new in a few days.”

Jake nodded and appeared slightly mesmerised by Leslie’s charm. “Thanks, Doc.”

“Wait, I know that smell,” Ophelia said. “That’s the magic tincture you gave me.”

Leslie smiled. “It is. And it’s not magic; it’s azulene. You can distil it from chamomile. Highly anti-inflammatory.”

Adelie interrupted the pharmaceutical lesson by placing a book in the middle of the table.

Jake snorted. “Infiltration 101. You’re not joking around.”

“No, I’m not. I have a mission to fulfil, a responsibility to carry, and most importantly, our honour to restore. I am not taking any chances. Which is why I called you in.”

Jake’s back straightened immediately at the seriousness of her tone. Standing behind him, leaning against one of the porch pillars, Nate grinned as much as his battered lips allowed.

“What’s your plan, cherie? It looks like you have one,” Ophelia asked.

Adelie sat down on the porch swing. “I do have a half-baked thing in my head, but I need to know more before I can form it into an actual plan. We can hardly walk into the guest house at Oak Avenue 14 and request the flag back.”

"No, Sweetie, you're not going to try that." Leslie looked at her, somewhat perturbed.

Adelie pointed at the book. "I need more intel about the place and what we're up against. Jake and Nate, you need mostly rest to heal, so I want you to go into the Library and research the tunnel system underneath the town. I need to know if Oak Avenue 14 has a connection to it. We found an access point in the Physics Department."

"The Library. Seriously?" Jake sighed. "You couldn't find anything less heroic, could you?"

"Oh buddy, you're gathering vital information for her." Nate slapped his shoulder, and Jake winced. "Also, the chance that some idiot ambushes us there is relatively small. They didn't look like they were incredibly interested in knowledge."

Adelie decided not to acknowledge Jake's antics and carried on. "Leslie, you will observe the guest house undercover."

"What, me?" Her friend made wide eyes. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You don't have to sit in a bush, no worries. I want you to walk past the house to gather information about the location. Are there guards? How does it even look like, and so on."

"Oh, okay. I can do that, I think."

"Of course, you can."

"That leaves you and me, Smarts." She turned to Ophelia. "We have some sleuthing of the technical kind to do."

"What do you want?" Ophelia smiled at her encouragingly.

"I want to know if some sort of alarm system is installed at the guest house."

Ophelia blinked. "I honestly expected that you want me to cobble up some gadgets for you, but no. I wonder what your plan is."

Adelie leaned back and smiled at her friends. "I will tell you once I have all the pieces on the board. I need everyone for the second stage, too. I think that covers all I had in my mind. Let's dig into Nate's delicious snacks and then see how much intel we can scare up. We'll meet back here at twenty-hundred hours."

Nate couldn't say that he had ever enjoyed library work. The reading rooms with towering bookshelves and the hushed voices of those who dared to speak filled him with the peculiar academic dread of not quite belonging. In moments like these, he was painfully aware of his working-class background. Adelie had him trailing in her confident wake of someone with status, but right now, his only companion was Jake, who was equally stunned by the Temple of Wisdom. In front of them, the generous foyer of the old mansion welcomed them with the splendour of past days. From a huge glass dome in the centre of the ceiling, daylight illuminated intricately carved wooden pillars. An elegant staircase swooped down from the first-floor gallery.

Jake studied the info board in the middle of the grand lobby. He ran his index finger downwards until he found what he sought. "There it is. Room G204, first floor, west wing. 'History of Westerhaven' - that's where Adelie said we should start. You think they really have old maps up there?"

Nate eyed the stairs with disdain. His body was still sore and reluctant to move. "I sure hope so."

Room G204 was situated at the back of the building and overlooked the extensive lawn that probably once was part of a park or an ornate garden. It had tall windows that let in ample daylight, and indeed there was a whole aisle dedicated to old maps, all neatly rolled up into tubes.

"Guess we should look into the map catalogue to see which would be the most helpful," Nate suggested.

"Man, you go ahead. I don't know anything about that library thing. You've spent much more time studying with Adelie in this building than me." Jake looked at him bewildered.

He snickered. "Who knew that this phase of courting her would come in handy at a different time? Come on. I'll show you." He walked up to a computer terminal sitting near the windows. "You enter your keywords here, and click there, and presto, it gives you all the ID numbers you could ever need."

The catalogue returned an exhaustive list of maps for Meadow Junction. Nate scrolled through them. “Hm, no, no, no, oh, that one could yield some results. Go and look for a tube with the number UG-234-45.”

“Alright, that I can do.” Jake returned to the map aisle.

Nate jotted down three more IDs that could give them what they were after and then followed him. Jake had located the tube and helped him track down the others. Then they carried them all to a large table in the middle of the room.

The first three were from the right time but showed no underground tunnels. The fourth had the tunnels but did not show any street names or buildings above them. Nate sighed. “Guess I have to go looking again.”

Armed with better keywords, they identified another map, which was what Adelie had told them she was looking for: A street map showing the tunnels underneath and which houses were connected to them.

“Wow. I had no idea. And this is all hiding under Meadow Junction?” Jake stared baffled at the old map. It was yellowed, and some parts had faded quite a bit, but it was readable.

“Okay, this looks promising.” Nate was relieved. He smoothed the old paper and tried to find Oak Avenue. There it was. And there was the guesthouse in which the 56th Battalion was housed. Next to it stood, in a beautiful ornate script: ‘House Belvedere’. He couldn’t quite believe it, but it looked connected to the tunnel system.

“What did you find?” Jake inquired, studying the map as well. “Man, what a maze. You could get lost down there.”

“We are lucky bastards. There is a connection to the tunnels from the guesthouse, which is what Adelie wanted to know. I think I’m getting an idea of what she wants to do. She’s a clever one.”

“Well, d’uh - Payne picked her for a reason, and I doubt it’s been her looks. I absolutely don’t understand why the rank is even up for debate. She’s the Flight Captain, period.”

“Yeah, I don’t understand it either. She suspects politics.”

Jake scratched his head. “Politics? Because she’s a woman?”

Nate shrugged. "That's what she thinks. I believe she's overthinking it, and whatever the reason they are postponing the decision, it has nothing to do with her being who she is and what she is. Come on, let's get the intel back to her."

He carried the map to the scanner and placed it carefully onto its glass bed. With a whirring sound, it took a picture of the document and transferred it immediately to his InstaCom.

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Adelie sat on a squeaky stool she had unearthed from under a pile of fabric in Ophelia's workshop. The room condition had gotten even more disorderly in the week's progression. The engineer herself was sitting at her overflowing desk, with the back towards her, and silently worked at her task. She did not dare to disturb her; the databases of the Academy were extensive and exhaustive.

"Ha, there!" Ophelia eventually exclaimed, and Adelie scooted closer. "There are indeed floor plans of all Academy-owned buildings. Buried ten levels deep in the folder structure."

"Nate's message said Oak Avenue 14 connects to the tunnel system. Can you figure out where the entry is?"

Ophelia saved the plans to her computer and opened them. The images had the typical blue background with white floor schematics. "Hm, ground floor - nope. Ah, there's a basement. This here, this looks like it could be a door leading to tunnels. See?" She zoomed into the image, and Adelie saw a door marked in the wall but no room behind it. "This must be it."

"It sure does look like it."

Ophelia swivelled around in her chair and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "You want to break in via the tunnels, am I right?"

"Well, as I said, we can hardly get in through the front door. Besides, I would prefer a way that wouldn't even let them know I was there. Access via the tunnels would be very convenient in that aspect. Sting them silently but deadly."

"Indeed, indeed." Her friend scratched her silver-dyed head. "The floor plans alone don't tell us if there's something in front of that door. Or if it even is a door. What did you want to know about the alarm system?"

“My half-cooked plan entails that you trigger, if possible, the fire alarm in the middle of the night. They have to leave the house; I sneak in via the tunnels, get the flag, and sneak out before they get back in.”

“That’s not a half-baked plan, not at all. I like it. Let’s see if I’m worth my engineering salt and can find the information we seek.” She returned to the databases and clicked and typed for a while. “Ha, wouldn’t you know? They still have COBRA 1.1 running at the guesthouse. How careless, but an advantage for us.”

“Cobra?” Adelie had no idea what Ophelia was talking about.

“COBRA is a fire safety and monitoring system, which they use everywhere on campus - just not that terribly, terribly outdated version. For instance, this building here is protected by version 3.5. I can hack into 1.1 without leaving a trace - and trigger everything under the moon if you want me to do so.”

Adelie rubbed her hands. “You mean we could haunt them?”

Ophelia laughed. “In theory, yes.”

She grinned at her friend. “Let me think about it. I’m still thirsty for revenge.”

“Sure. But let’s see if I can find this door on the surveillance feed.” She typed some more on her keyboard, and then a window opened with a grid of video feeds.

“Smarts, you truly are a mastermind. This is so helpful.”

The inside of Oak Avenue 14 was a strange mix of military minimalism and former splendour. There were pillars, frescos, and giant candelabras, but also rooms filled with bunk beds, not a single carpet anywhere, and only non-descriptive furniture. Practical, not pretty. A sudden pity for the former mansion swept through Adelie. She could not imagine how she would feel if her parent’s estate or townhouse were stripped so bare and all art and furnishings were removed. After a few minutes, Ophelia located the part of the basement where the door was. She manipulated the camera until she found the exact spot and lo’ and behold, there was another sturdy, wooden door with iron fittings. Nothing obstructed it. Adelie couldn’t believe her luck.

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Eddie took the transformation of his home into the headquarter of Operation Silent Sting in stride, even though it looked like parts of Ophelia's workshop had exploded inside his seldom-used dining room. In a way, it had, Adelie thought, as she observed the utter chaos. Computers, cables, monitors, more cables, com systems of every size - gadgets and gear piled up on every available surface and the floor. She had gotten Eddie's rickety old blue truck and filled its cargo bed with all the equipment Ophelia deemed necessary to monitor the mission. Now Eddie stood amidst all of it unfazed, intrigued even.

"I understand - you can't stick a giant antenna up on the roof of a Star City building and run kilometres of cables through its hallways. And your squadron room is not suited for a covert operation, either. Too public, word would get to those, how did you call them - tin can drivers? Anyway, they would catch wind of it eventually." He pulled a crumpled package of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his coveralls and lit one.

"Thanks, Eddie, I owe you one," Adelie said while she pulled a data cable through the window from the aforementioned antenna she and Nate had positioned in the farmhouse garden. Nate was still outside, connecting it to a power cube.

"Oh, you owe me nothing. Let me play with your ELF again sometime; that would be compensation enough."

"Are you always so accommodating, Mr O'Flannigan?" Ophelia chimed in, stuck halfway under the massive dining table, plugging various cables into a computer tower.

"Only for Adelie, Miss LeBlanc. And please, call me Eddie." He puffed out a cloud of smoke and smiled.

"You must know, Smarts, he knew me before I even set foot onto this planet. He's been a great fan of mine while I was still racing."

"Ah. This explains a lot." Ophelia crawled out from under the table. "Hi, I'm Ophelia." She shook the mechanic's hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise. Smarts, eh?"

"I'm an engineer."

Eddie grinned. "I never had the smarts for that." He tugged at his coveralls. "Right, kids, I leave you alone and go upstairs. Call when you need anything, like a generator or a flame thrower. Just don't burn down the house, 'kay?"

"Bye, Eddie." Adelie hugged him. "Thank you."

"Anytime, Adelie, anytime. Good luck with your mission."

Jake stood at the antique sideboard and sorted various power packs into their respective chargers. "Payne was right - you have the connections and resources to pull this off. Where did you even get all this stuff?"

Adelie pointed at Ophelia. "It always helps to have strong ties to the tech department."

Ophelia waved at Jake with a broad grin. "See, it pays off to befriend someone from the Engineer Corps. We're a handy bunch to have around."

He rolled his eyes. Then he seemed to remember something. "Speaking of handy friends - where's Leslie? I haven't seen her in a while."

"She's taken refuge in the kitchen, cooking us dinner," Adelie replied. "All the techy stuff made her nervous."

"I'll go and check on her. Maybe she needs help." He nearly bumped into Nate at the door, who had returned from installing the antenna outside.

"Why's he in such a hurry?" Her boyfriend inquired, hitching a thumb into the direction Jake had vanished.

Ophelia shrugged. "Beats me; maybe tech stuff makes him nervous, too."

After a satisfying dinner of Leslie's famous spaghetti, Adelie once more gathered her team around the dining table, which now housed several monitors and computers.

"Welcome back, everybody. I'm pleased that our respective missions were more successful than I expected. Nate and Jake discovered a link between Oak Avenue 14 and the tunnel system, and Ophelia and I the entry point into the house. Leslie, how did your scouting mission go?"

The Nurse smiled. "Swimmingly. I know where they keep the flag."



She could've just as well dropped a grenade. Adelie huffed out a big gulp of air. "How did you accomplish that?"

"Oh, I ... well, as I walked by the house, someone catcalled me, and I decided to play along to see if I could milk them for information. Complimented their tanks and whatnot. There was one blonde guy with a chubby face, and he bragged that they stole a flag from some wimpy pilots."

"Hans," Nate growled.

"I played innocent and impressed, and he said they have hung it from the first-floor gallery in the entrance hall."

Ophelia looked at Adelie. "This must be the only location where no surveillance camera looks at - they all monitor the entrance. Otherwise, we would have seen it."

Adelie nodded. "Possible." She turned to Leslie. "Les, I'm very impressed. This is valuable information, and I think we now have all the puzzle pieces we need. Were there any guards I need to know of?"

"Yes." She nodded. "There is a single guard at the front door."

"Good. The one way in I'm certainly not taking."

Jake crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I think we all understood that you want to use the tunnels. But how do you plan this to go down?"

Adelie nodded at Ophelia, who opened a file on the screen. It showed the images Nate had sent of the map, and the floor plans she and Ophelia had found in the digital archives. Ophelia had superimposed them all over each other and painted a route into them.

"Adelie is going to enter the tunnels from the door we discovered in the Physics basement. Luckily, there is a 24-hour access policy, so nobody will ask why we're there in the middle of the night. We traced a possible route through the tunnels leading her directly to the guest house. As soon as she reaches the basement, she will contact us. This will be my signal to trigger the fire alarm in the guest house to force them all out of the house. Jake will be positioned somewhere outside the house to report as our outside spy. As soon as they are all out, Adelie will sneak in, reclaim the flag, and vanish back into the tunnels before the fire brigade searches the house for a fire. Depending on

how fast our guests get out of the house, she will have 5 to 10 minutes before the brigade arrives. Nate will wait with the rest of Alpha and Omega in the squad room. Should anything go wrong, you're supposed to raid the guest house and get the flag by force. Leslie will be on alert with her nurses. If everything goes according to plan, Adelie will meet you at the squad room with the flag."

"Wait, wait, wait." Nate leaned forward in his seat. "Did I understand correctly that you will sneak into the house alone?"

Adelie took his hand and squeezed it. "Yes, that's the plan. I need you as the leader of the other boys and Jake as my eye outside the house. Ophelia has to stay here, and Leslie has to take care of her nurses. You're the only one with equal authority."

"What about Gerald? Can't he accompany you?"

"I'll be faster alone."

He sighed deeply. "And when is this supposed to happen?"

"Tomorrow night. We still have to scout out the tunnel maze. We don't know how safe they are or how accurate the map is."

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Jake agreed to drive Leslie and Ophelia home, and Nate found himself alone with Adelie on a quiet porch. He sat in one of the wicker chairs and looked into the garden. Night gathered between the rose bushes, and he wondered if any of Adelie's bodyguards were crouching between them. Except for the guy standing in front of her studio's door as they left, he hadn't noticed them throughout the day. The guard at the door had saluted sharply at Adelie and was the most intimidating man Nate had ever seen. He glanced at his girlfriend, who sat on the porch swing, engrossed with the book about Infiltration tactics. She did not appear as someone who had an entourage of people, and yet she had one. She was somebody's boss and had been for a while. No wonder she was so good at giving orders and making people do things. And that confidence was what he had found so alluring from the moment he met her.

"It's not the smartest idea to fall in love with your biggest rival, right?" He broke the silence. "Not that I stood a chance anyway."

She looked up and shot him an amused smile. He was a sucker for

her smiles that broke through her impassive face like sun rays through storm clouds. She got up and walked over to him, sitting on his lap. Her voice was back down in the velvety depth it only ever had when they were alone. "What do you mean?"

He wrapped his arms around her waist. She settled into his hold in a way that said she intended to stay a while, a prospect he didn't object to.

"Every damn time we met by chance, and you smiled at me, I fell for you a bit more. I was a lost cause in no time, couldn't imagine not having you around and in my life. Your sweet smiles, your witty banter, just you. I couldn't help it." He still had no idea how he managed to win this glorious woman currently and hopefully forever comfortable in his arms, looking at him like he was the most precious thing in her world.

Adelie ruffled his hair affectionately. "First, it's not like I was unaffected by your charms. And maybe falling in love wasn't our most brilliant idea, but I don't regret it. As much as everybody wants to paint it as rivalry, we are a perfect match on and off the battlefield. Our talents combined become a deadly force, and up until Tuesday, I believed Payne knew better than to drive us apart."

"True." He nuzzled her neck. The powdery scent of her skin was maddeningly sweet. "We are his top scorers; why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Before he tasked me with retrieving the flag, I'd say he favours you as Flight Captain, but now I am back at Square One, none the wiser. It would've been much easier to accept you catching up with me in a way that doesn't feel so much like a setup."

He cradled her face in his palms, forcing her to look at him, which she did with blinking eyes. "So you were not upset because I caught up with you but because of the way it happened?"

Adelie shook her head and stroked her fingers through his hair, smoothing it until it pleased her. "I worked hard to get to this point, and I'm disappointed that the decision will now be made elsewhere. On the other hand, you worked far harder to carve yourself a future, so of course, even in my entitled worldview, you would be the more deserving candidate by a long shot. It's not like I can't see that."

"Woah, Angel, stop, stop, stop." Nate remembered the unkind

things he had hurled at her that fateful Tuesday night. "I was angry, okay? All I wanted was to celebrate our victory, and you pulled out with the shady excuse of a headache, and back then, it all felt like you grudged my success. I'm sorry, it was so silly to think that."

"I get why you said it. I wouldn't even say it's completely unjustified - I had a better start at life than most people, especially you. I had an early advantage, and it would only be fair to step back and allow others a little fortune, too."

"I still shouldn't have thrown that into your face like I did." He squeezed her. "Please, don't overthink it, okay? I love you, and I love you just the way you are."

She leaned her forehead against his, her fingers caressing his nape. "I love you, too. We've both been exhausted, surprised and disappointed, and I guess a fight was bound to happen one day, anyway."

"Promise that you'll be careful tomorrow?" He could not help pushing his luck.

A cute giggle. "In our mutual interest, yes - I promise that I'll be cautious. First, I don't want to meet the business end of Hans's fist, and second, I don't want to attend the End of Semester Ceremony looking like a car crash survivor."

"I don't doubt your skills. I'm just ..." His voice refused to work, and he had to take a deep breath to get past the suffocating feeling pooling in his chest. Adelle's soft palm cupping his face wasn't helping with the emotions. "I'm worried about you. I can't imagine seeing you in the same state you found me in yesterday. I would go mad."

Pain flickered through her pretty eyes. "Who says that it doesn't drive me mad? I guess I have more practice seeing you hurt, with you playing rugby and sporting a bloody face every other weekend. But even with this ample practice, realising that it was you at the flagpole was unbelievably painful."

"Touché." He hugged her. "I guess I really can't convince you to take Gerald with you, can I? You want to win this thing on your own."

She rested her head on his shoulder and laughed softly. "You think I'm this ego-driven?"

"You're a former competitive racer."

She nodded. "Which is far more of a team sport than most people know." She paused for a moment, furrowing her brows. "I should listen to you. Why do you want me to take Gerald? I assume it's not just for protection."

"No, you shouldn't take Gerald just for my peace of mind. Although I would be considerably more at ease if I knew you have company. I think it's not wise to break into a guesthouse alone, into enemy territory. Your plan is sound, and there should be little risk of an actual attack, but things never go according to plan. Two more eyes and two more hands might be helpful, even if things don't go wrong."

Adelie pulled back and looked into the dark garden for a while. "You're right," she eventually said. "It would be wise to take Gerald with me. I'm just concerned that if I drag anybody into this, and things go awry, or maybe I misjudged Payne completely, and this isn't what he wanted me to do ... I don't want to ruin anybody's career besides my own. I have other options, but not everybody is so lucky."

"Wait, what ... what do you mean? What other options?"

She looked at him again and stroked his hair. "Tiger, I'm filthily rich. Whether I make it in the Space Force or not doesn't matter. But I don't want any of you risking your prospects of a stellar career over a stupid flag, so I delegated backup duty to you and the observer duty to Jake. This should take you out of the line of fire if things take a turn for the dumpster."



# FRIDAY

## OPERATION SILENT STING

The mysterious network of tunnels and chambers beneath the historic district of Meadow Junction trace their roots back to its early days as a settlement. Since then, modifications and expansions have been made throughout the years, yet the primary purpose for this complex and mysterious infrastructure consisting of various passageways and chambers, remain unclear.

Speculation abounds as to what their original intent may have been, with some suggesting that these structures served as a sewage system or an escape route during times of crisis. It is believed that the tunnels once connected the sprawling mansions and warehouses of the city, as well as its original flight facility which later become part of USF Westerhaven Airbase. There is also evidence to suggest that these passageways were employed by smugglers to smuggle contraband goods into and out of Meadow Junction, or alternatively used by the local upper-echelon for clandestine activities, evidenced by exclusive access points within some of the most exclusive buildings in the area. Today, however, the majority of the tunnel system is inaccessible due to sealed entrances or blocked routes.  
(USF Archives entry)

Adelie and Gerald met at the Physics department just as the sun crossed the horizon. The earlier they sneaked through the door, the smaller the risk somebody would catch them doing so. No signs indicated the consequences of trespassing, but Adelie suspected that an underground tunnel system was off-limits to regular folk, including nosy academy students.

“Why do you think they built these tunnels?” Gerald examined the brick walls with his flashlight. “The walls look like they were made to last forever.”

“And they did so far.” Adelie stuck a tiny round beacon at the wall and programmed it into the mapping device. “I don’t have the foggiest idea why they went through the trouble to build these tunnels. There are a few theories, though. One suggests that the Golden Times on Westerhaven weren’t as golden as the splendid estates make us believe, and these were escape tunnels in case the town was attacked by competing mercenary groups or even law enforcement. Others think they’re just an old sewage system.”

“Maybe they are both.”

Adelie shrugged. “You know, I don’t really care; I’m just happy they exist and come in handy now. But we should move; we still have a way to go.” She pushed the mapper into her thigh pocket. Ophelia had connections to Geo Exploration and got the device from her friend there, no questions asked. It was supposed to help in uncharted regions to keep people from getting lost. The tunnel system was well-mapped, but there was still the danger of taking a wrong turn, and the beacons would prevent them from doing that. The tunnels were in almost perfect condition. Extremely dusty, but the walls were still holding up nicely. Here and there, a few roots dangled from the ceiling, and where they had breached the walls, moisture had also made its way in, but otherwise, it was dry. Sometimes, she could see tiny shadows with tails scurrying away, their eyes reflecting the light of the torches. The air was cool and had that typical dusty basement smell.

“Thank you for considering me.” Gerald said after a few more meters.

“Don’t thank me, thank Nate.” Adelie laughed. “He suggested that I take you with me.”

“And you listened to him.”

“I would be a bad leader if I wouldn’t listen to legitimate concerns or ideas. And you’re my wingman, after all. Why should I not take you with me?”

“I’m not as burly as Jake or Nate are. I’m not much help in a fight.”

They rounded a corner, and Adelie consulted the map. “Speaking of fights, this is the tunnel underneath Oak Avenue. We need to count; the fourth connection is the one to the guest house.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“Then we either end up in Widow Merryfair’s basement or the Humanities building.”

They carefully walked along the tunnel, counting the gaping holes with stairs leading up to the houses above. Adelie stuck a beacon next to each and programmed them into the mapper.

“Here it is.” They stopped in front of another stairway leading upwards.

Gerald turned towards her and asked with furrowed brows: “Will you go up and check the door?”

Adelie scratched her neck. “I guess we should at least go up and look at it, but I’m not going to test if it is locked. What if I open it, and there happens to be somebody else on the other side.”

“They’d get a nice surprise.” Gerald chuckled.

“Oh, I’m sure. We look like the apocalypse is about to happen in our cave explorer outfits.”

“We could ask what year it is to confuse them even more.”

Adelie giggled. “Stop being silly. Let’s go and see what will await us tonight.”

The door that kept them away from the current inhabitants of the guesthouse looked precisely like the door in the basement of the Physics building. It was made from sturdy wood with iron-wrought fittings. There was no key, but that was to be expected. Adelie stared at the handle, which teased her in the bright circle of torchlight. Anticipation bristled in her neck. In the coming night, she would



press it down and sneak into the house. But not now. Now was the moment to ensure everything would go according to their plan. She placed a bundle of supplies next to the door.

“What’s this?” Gerald wanted to know.

“Smoke bombs, tear gas, brass knuckles. A bag to carry the flag. Night vision goggles. And a few tools to open the door because I don’t expect it to be unlocked and open.”

“You don’t joke around, and you don’t take any chances.”

“No, I don’t. Nate laughs, but I am still furious that they dared to beat you all up because of a stupid exercise. It’s ridiculous.”

“If their ego can’t handle losing an exercise, I don’t want to know what it will do if they learn that a woman outsmarted them. They don’t appear to be from the equal opportunity camp after all.”

“You’re right; I haven’t seen a single woman in their ranks. Weird.”

“Westerhaven has always been a progressive leader. Not every Academy has embraced the changes so enthusiastically,” Gerald said.

Adelie adjusted the little bundle by the door. “It’s been decades since they allowed women into the Force. I hardly see what they do here as enthusiastic. It’s a matter of fact.”

Gerald laughed and said, “Take a good look at the tank division and then reevaluate your assessment. My brother is also in a ground force division, and they struggle with integrating women, too. He’s hilariously envious of me after I told him that I am your wingman.”

She sighed. “I will never understand what the problem truly is. But we better return; we still have a lot of preparation to do, and I have another date with the centrifuge this morning, too.”

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The outside world was a stark contrast compared to the dusty darkness of the tunnels. Adelie enjoyed the walk back to where she came from after she and Gerald had stowed their gear in the squad room. Wednesday’s rain had replenished the extensive lawns around the buildings to a lush green. White paths crisscrossed all over, appearing even brighter next to the saturated grass. A young man clad in a Westerhaven shirt fell into step with her: Enrique.

“Nice disguise,” Adelie mocked him, not slowing down her step.

“Thanks.”

“What’s up?” she asked. Her guards usually kept their distance, playing by the rules they had established as it became clear that she would return to school.

“The boss isn’t happy with the planned shenanigans of you going in there alone.”

“I’m the boss,” Adelie reminded him. “But I can easily imagine that Logan isn’t happy. Tell him that Nate acted as the voice of reason and convinced me to expand the team. Gerald will accompany me. I doubt this will soothe his nerves, but it’s the best we could do.”

“I will.” He nodded at her and then fell back again. The clock on the Academy bell tower struck ten as Adelie reached Ophelia, who once again waited for her under the shady canopy of the oak tree near the building.

“Hi, Smarts. Sorry, I’m a little late.”

“You’re precisely on time. No complaints on my part. Who was the guy you were talking to?”

“One of my bodyguards. My Chief of Security isn’t happy with Operation Silent Sting.”

Ophelia coughed, astonished. “You have bodyguards?”

Adelie grinned. “Yes, three men are following me everywhere I go.”

“Wow. Wow, wow, wow. Is that a recent development after Wednesday, or do you always had guards? I’ve never noticed anyone following us.”

This made Adelie snigger. “You see, the Academy understood that several parties, myself included, were highly interested in keeping me safe. But they made it clear that my need for protection should not interfere with the regular proceedings of my education or general academy life. So they transformed into some kind of undercover guards. Blending in, not making a fuss. Being there, but not. Wednesday night was the first time I broke those rules and posted a guy in front of my door.”

“So you do break the rules if you deem it necessary. Interesting.”

Adelie shot her an arched look, but Ophelia only grinned and then moved on: “Are you ready for some suit testing? Ched texted me early

this morning to tell me that they have finally fixed the bug in the firmware that was causing so much trouble, and the centrifuge is up and running again.”

“Oh, that is some great news. Now you will be able to make your Sunday at Midnight deadline.”

Ophelia shrugged, unconvinced. “This project has been on the struggle bus from the get-go. I have lost my optimism in the process. I took your and Ched’s advice and informed my supervisor, and they were helpful and extended my deadline for two days.”

Adelie smiled at her friend. “That’s good news.”

“Speaking of good news, Nate didn’t appear thrilled by your idea of breaking into the guesthouse alone.”

“He wasn’t. We talked it through. I am taking Gerald with me.”

Ophelia nodded. “That’s good. Both, actually. The talking it through part and taking Gerald with you. I must admit; I was a bit worried about you being alone there, too.”

Adelie sighed. “I have never done so much talking things through like this week. And I still don’t have a solution for saving my relationship from exploding because we ignored that we are each other’s competition. At least I am confident that we both want to make it work, regardless of how the board will decide.”

Her friend smiled compassionately and squeezed her arm. “That’s the hard part of being a couple, right? Falling in love is easy. Staying in love that’s where it gets tricky. Even without being each other’s rivals.”

“True. But - time’s a-wasting; we should get you the data for your project before yet another thing comes up.”

Ched had heeded Adelie’s advice and got some rest. He looked much better but still exhausted. “Ladies, welcome back. I am pleased to tell you that we are back in business and at your service.”

Ophelia let out a deep exhale of relief. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear this. I expected that something had come up again between your message and now.”

The operator grinned and adjusted his coveralls. “Habibi, what do you think of me? We did extensive testing all through the night to prevent this from happening. I texted you only after I was 100% sure

everything was working as it should. Anyway, she's ready for Miss Klaiber. Let's go."

Once more, Adelie climbed into the centrifuge, and Ophelia stuck the adhesive sensor patches to her skin. Once more, she gave Ched the signal, and the giant arm began rotating. But unlike before, sweat didn't start forming after ten minutes. The Viwis didn't stick to her skin immediately. It took the first half of the simulation program before Adelie noticed a slightly damp feeling, but that was it. She finished the program, the centrifuge stopped, and she was not even close to sweaty. The door to the cabin opened, and Ophelia's head appeared, with expectant eyes trained on her. "And?"

Adelie laughed at her eagerness and peeled off the sensors. "You might have to fight me to get your suit back. It's awesome. What do the readings say?"

"They are significantly better compared to the old suit. I'm so relieved."

"You should be proud. All your hard work produced something truly excellent. I want to try it in a real plane."

The engineer helped her out of her seat and the centrifuge. "Are you sure?"

"Oh yes. Nothing is as hot as a Stingray. If you really want to test it, that's the only way. And I'm convinced it will hold up beautifully to this stress test."

Ched smiled as they entered the operating room again. "You don't look as pink as the last time, Miss Klaiber."

"Please, call me Adelie. And yes, I feel less warm than in the regular suit."

The operator's face lit up. "With pleasure. I'm Ched - and delighted that our work produced such a great result."

Adelie checked her wristwatch. "Smarts, if you hurry, you can even begin compiling the data before we start our other operation."

Ched chuckled. "I see; you two are two incredibly busy bees."

Ophelia picked up the data recorder connected to the steering console. "She did me a favour; now it's my turn."

The clock in the Academy bell tower struck one in the morning as two figures entered the Physics building. Despite the 24-hour access policy, Adelie felt like a trespasser as she and Gerald crossed the great hall. Their steps echoed louder than they should on the marble tiles. But the building was empty. Ophelia had checked the night guard's tour schedule and identified a two-hour window where Adelie and Gerald could go in and out of the building unnoticed. They had stowed all their gear in the tunnel and wore only black battle coveralls not to garner any attention from anybody looking at the surveillance feeds. Undetected, they snuck through the door in the basement and silently put on equally black soft-shell armour, which allowed for movement but would provide at least a little protection against the fists and boots of the tank battalion, should it be needed. Geared up, Adelie established the com link.

"Team Scorpion-1 is in position, Operation Silent Sting ready to roll. Report in."

"Scorpion-1, this is Scorpion-2; I'm also in position." Jake, from his post outside the guesthouse.

"Scorpion-1, this is Scorpion-3. We're ready." Nate, who had gathered Leslie's nurses and the remaining squad members in the squad room on the base.

"Here's the Watchtower; I read you all three clearly. Everything is ready, awaiting the signal from Scorpion-1 when at destination." Ophelia, from the farmhouse. Excellent.

"We're moving in. Read you on the other side. Scorpion-1 out." She nodded at Gerald. "Okay, let's move. It's a 20-minute walk."

Somehow the tunnels seemed darker at night, but navigation was quick and easy thanks to the beacons they had placed earlier. Then they were back at the door. Adelie stared at it. She had all her chess pieces in position. She had enough anger in her to fuel a small rocket ship. All that was left to do was to open the door and get the flag back. She took a deep breath and looked at Gerald, who had patiently waited beside her: "Ready?"

"Ready when you are, Chief."

She pulled out a stick of LockBust, broke off a piece the size of her thumbnail and kneaded it into a marble. Quickly, she pushed it into the lock. Ten seconds later, it exploded with an almost inaudible pop. The smell of singed metal filled the dusty air of the tunnel. She tested the handle, which was warm from the reaction. It opened easily.

“Step One accomplished,” Gerald said.

“Time for Operation Silent Sting, Step Two then,” Adelie said. “Watchtower, come in.”

“Listening, Scorpion-1.”

“We are ready and in position. You can scare them out of their dreams.”

“With pleasure.”

Moments later, the shrill sound of the fire alarm reached even down to the tunnel.

“Gawd, what a nasty noise,” Gerald remarked.

“Serves them right.” Adelie had no compassion for her adversaries.

“They are now all assembling outside. Their CTO just came outside and declared the building empty. The coast is clear,” Jake informed them.

The clock was ticking, and the brigade probably was already on the way. Adelie and Gerald activated their night vision goggles - using their flashlights would alert those outside to their presence. Then, they snuck through the door into the basement hallway. Up the stairs, through another door. They reached the grand foyer without any difficulties. The staircase was sweeping down from the first-floor gallery, and the flag hung right next to it. Adelie was relieved to see it, but her joy was only short-lived.

“I can hear sirens. Still far away, but you have to hurry.” Jake’s voice in her headpiece crackled with urgency.

They scampered up the stairs as quickly as the view through the goggles allowed and cut the flag free. With a satisfying thump, it fell to the floor just as the flashing blue lights of the fire trucks filled the foyer with eerie illumination. “Go, get the flag. I’ll meet you in the basement.” Adelie hissed, digging in her thigh pocket for what she hoped would be a good diversion. Gerald didn’t answer. Instead, he vanished down the stairs. She pulled out a handful of smooth, grey

orbs, roughly two centimetres in diameter. One of Ophelia's inventions: tiny smoke bombs. She placed them near the entrance to the upper hallway and grated them with the heel of her boot. Immediately, the liquids inside the balls reacted with the air, and thick smoke began to form. She didn't wait for it to billow further but dashed down the stairs as quickly as possible. Just as she reached the bottom, the front doors opened. She would have no chance to get to the basement door on the far side of the foyer undetected. Instead, she pressed herself into the shadows underneath the stairs and waited. Two burly firefighters entered, the light beams of their torches cutting through the darkness like searching fingers, inching closer. Adelie didn't dare to twitch. They swept past her, once, twice. Then the shadow of a firefighter appeared right before her, and her heart dropped. But before he could check out her hiding place, his colleague called: "Look, up there, smoke!"

"I bet one of those bastards smoked in their room." The man turned away and joined his comrade to investigate the first floor. The two scouts climbed the stairs, the wooden steps creaking with their weight over her head. As soon as she was reasonably sure they wouldn't notice her, Adelie hurried towards the basement, not waiting for their reaction to smoke forming without a fire. Gerald awaited her at the door leading to the tunnels.

"Where have you been?"

"Had to hide underneath the stairs because I didn't make it to the door in time."

"Shit. Well, you made it."

Adelie gathered the pile of flag pooling at his feet. "We need to get inside the tunnels quickly. I'm sure they will search the house from top to bottom soon. Smoke without a fire is suspicious."

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The squad room was flooded with glaring fluorescent light. The members of Alpha and Omega sat around a table with a small black box on it. They were dressed in black fatigues and soft shell armour in case Adelie's plan would not work, and they had to take the flag back by force. Scattered between the cadets sat a handful of young women

wearing the white and light blue uniform of the Nurse Corps. The room was dead quiet; everyone focused on the com device, which had been silent for the last five minutes. Nate looked around, only to find the same worry in the faces of the others. Leslie even looked like she was about to puke. What had happened? Had Adelie been caught? But then Jake or Ophelia would have said so. A crack and then static noise.

“Scorpion-1 incoming. We have the flag,” came Adelie’s distorted voice from the device. “Sorry for the radio silence; we had to wrestle the flag into the tunnel without making a noise. The brigade is now swarming the house.”

Another crack, then Ophelia’s voice: “I was so worried. The cameras didn’t show if you reached the door; I just saw you hiding under the stairs.”

“All good. We will go back now. See you all at the squad room.”

Nate released a deep breath he had been unaware of holding. Her plan had worked so far. They got the flag; they didn’t run into Hans.

“Haystack better brings her home in one piece,” Left Eye said. “She’s a smart one.” Agreeing murmur filled the room as the men slowly relaxed. Nobody had been too keen on another confrontation with the tank battalion.

“Is it too early to bring out the beer?” Shorty wanted to know.

“Yes,” Nate snapped. “They’re not back yet, don’t jinx it.”

Jake, not hampered by navigating narrow and dark tunnels, arrived first. Ophelia had decided to stay at Wild Sage Acres as Eddie’s guest.

“This was the most rewarding sight of the whole semester: Seeing those fuckers huddle in the drizzle outside, in their PJs and not happy.” Jake looked pleased with their mission. He high-fived everyone around and even got a squeeze from Leslie. Nate found himself unable to relax already. Scorpion-1 wasn’t back yet. Minutes ticked by. Realistically, he knew it would take them at least twenty minutes to make it back through the tunnel and probably another ten to make it out of the building, to Adelie’s car and then to the squad room. It had not even been fifteen minutes since he had last heard of her. He wished that time would speed up already. At long last and



what felt like two eternities, he heard the familiar roar of the sports car growling outside. He was up and across the room before noticing he was walking.

It was chilly outside, and the only light source was a street lamp. Adelie stepped out of the darkness into its bright light like a spectre forming out of thin air. Her hair had come loose, and there was a streak of dust on her forehead. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkled with delight, and she was apparently riding one hell of an adrenaline rush. A broad smile appeared as she recognised him. To his surprise, she walked straight up, grabbed him by the collar, and kissed him. *More of that, please.* Eventually, she let him breathe.

“Hi.” He fumbled for words, the past worry and the fresh kiss wrecking his brain. Luckily, his body operated independently, pulling her tightly towards him.

Another smile as she ran her hand through his hair. “Hello, handsome.”

Somewhere somebody cleared their throat audibly, and Adelie backed away, remembering where she was. “Sorry, Gerald.”

Her wingman carried a stuffed duffel bag and grinned. “Don’t mind me, I enjoyed the show. But maybe we should get inside; the others are probably waiting. I’m surprised nobody followed Nate outside.”

He was glad they didn’t.

Back inside the squad room, the scene had changed. Loud music blared, a crate of beer had materialised in place of the com box, and some cadets even scored a Nurse dance partner. Adelie was greeted with a loud cheer, and Jake dared to lift her on his shoulders. “The queen has returned!”

Adelie laughed and only half-heartedly tried to get back on solid ground. “Jake, please.”

“Let’s greet her with three loud hoorays!” Jake made an excellent Master of Ceremonies, Nate thought as he stepped back to watch the spectacle. His fellow squad mates and Leslie’s nurses were in the highest spirits, insisting that Adelie put the flag back in its place. It was a wobbly act of acrobatics, as the flag was at least two by two meters in size and of heavy, embroidered brocade fabric. Adelie

struggled quite a bit, balancing on Jake's broad shoulders. Nate registered amused how quite a few of the others spotted for her, in case she should fall as if she were a gymnast. With considerable effort, Adelie managed to place the eyelets over the hooks in the wall, and the whole room cheered again. Gently, Jake put her back on the ground and then hugged her. She punched his substantial upper arm and said something Nate couldn't understand, thanks to the music and the chatter of the others. It must have been praise because Jake rubbed his neck and cast his eyes down, but there was also pride on his face. Nate knew from experience what credit from her could do, and he was happy for his chosen brother. Jake deserved recognition. Adelie continued her way through the room, talking to everybody, not unlike an actual queen making her rounds. Eventually, she looked up searchingly and located him lurking in his comfortable corner. A smile played on her lips as she walked across the room towards him.

"Why is my mighty Tiger hiding? Come celebrate with us." She unfastened the clips that held the front and back part of her armour plates together and placed them on a nearby table. The black battle suit underneath hugged her curves in all the right places, thanks to being squished all night by the armour.

He cleared his throat. "I'm still stiff and hurting. Sitting here and watching the party is quite nice."

Adelie made a compassionate sound and sat in his lap. He couldn't understand what had put her usual policy of 'No public displays of affection while on base, on duty or in fatigues' out of commission, but he wasn't complaining. Instead, he hugged her closer. She brushed through his hair while they watched their friends celebrating.

"You okay?" she asked after a while of silent observation.

"Yeah. You're back in one piece, no asshole hurt you, and we have the flag back. Could've done without the waiting for your return part while being forced to twiddle thumbs, though. That was hard."

She looked at the flag presiding over the room once more. "Fortune favours the bold. We both had to be brave tonight, but Fortuna smiled at us. I'm sorry I made you suffer so much."

"It's okay. I survived just so."

Adelie sniggered, then cupped his face. He dove into the gold-speckled brown of her eyes as she moved in to kiss him senseless. Desire burned right through him.

“Stop doing that, or I might have to drag you to the bathroom,” he mumbled into the sweet skin of her neck. A throaty giggle and hands that ransacked his hair.

She glanced around. “I’ve got a better idea: Let’s go home. They’re all happy, and I prefer beds over bathroom stalls.”



# SATURDAY

## END OF THE SEMESTER

Welcome to Westerhaven Academy, one of the foremost centres for excellence in warfare and training the United Space Force has to offer. Here, we will hone your skills and sharpen your abilities until you are ready to take on the toughest challenges that space has to offer. Our rigorous selection process ensures that only the brightest and most talented applicants are accepted into our ranks.

We specialise in aerial combat, giving our students a comprehensive understanding of all aspects of flight, tactics, communication, and teamwork. With our renowned faculty behind you, you will become a formidable officer in no time, prepared to lead the charge against any threats that stand in your way. Our alumni have gone on to do incredible things – astronauts, military heroes, diplomats, scientists – all with one common thread: They served the USF with honour and distinction after graduating from Westerhaven Academy. So don't wait – Join us and become a part of the legacy.

(From a brochure about Westerhaven Academy)

Dawn turned the sky outside a brighter shade of dark. Inside the Star City studio, a path of passionate destruction led from the door to the bed. Adelie assessed the damage with half-closed eyes. Boots, pants and various other pieces of clothing were scattered across the floor and the furniture. She still tried to find the edges of her body in her consciousness as a groan turned her attention to the other side of the bed. She discovered Nate spreadeagled on his back, eyes slowly blinking open. Not wanting to move, she observed his beautiful body, enjoying the sight. Smooth bulges of meticulously sculpted muscles shone with dewy perspiration in the warm light of her bedside table lamp. Her eyes followed the fine line of black hair that ran from his chest to his crotch. The exhausted limpness she found there made her smile - it was also an apt representation of how she felt. Satisfied. Deliciously empty. He sighed, stretched and then rolled on his side to face her. They stared into each other's eyes, still too exhausted to speak. There was no need for words anyway. His arm reached for her, and soon enough, she was cradled against his warm body. She pressed her face into the coarse patch of chest hair and inhaled the musky scent of his skin.

"What the eff, Lily. You being high on victory is something else," he eventually mumbled into her hair, his breath warm against her scalp. "I'm royally pissed that Payne ruined your mood Tuesday."

"Don't be. This won't be my last victory you're going to witness." This made him chuckle, but he didn't object to the prospect. She stroked the vast expanse of his broad back. "You seem to be turned on by combat suits."

"Oh, erm," he cleared his throat, "fucking you straight out of fatigues was a long-standing fantasy of mine."

"But why? They're so ugly and bulky and ..."

"Powerful," he finished her sentence. "The word you're looking for is powerful. And this is extremely sexy."

Knowing how devastatingly sexy she found him glistening with sweat after any form of training, a fact she could not explain as well as he just explained the allure of fatigues, she let it rest. Instead, she murmured, "It's getting bright."

“Yes. Do you want to catch some Zs?” Nate didn't sound tired, and she wasn't tired at all. Relaxed, yes, but not sleepy. There was still too much excitement running through them, even after they'd let off steam. She shook her head. A smile pursed his lips as he brushed hair out of her face before he kissed her again. Eventually, they settled in their usual position, him on his back and she resting her head on his shoulder, one leg hooked over his.

“I don't want this to change,” she said into the quiet.

“What are you even afraid of? Do you expect me to throw a hissy fit and walk out of your life just because you make rank?”

“No, of course not. But I'm afraid it will drive a little wedge between us, no matter the outcome. Not enough to drive us apart immediately, but these things tend to add up.” She remembered Ophelia's concern. “As long as we are together, there will be this kind of competition for ranks, honours, medals; you name it. How will we handle this in the long run?”

He nodded. “Good point. We need a strategy.” They were silent for a moment. Then he said: “Mom always says that happy relationships are about finding a reasonable compromise. But that's hard to achieve here. The winner takes it all.”

“True, there is no trade-off. No way to compensate the other for their loss. And that's what I'm afraid of. Is this thing we have with each other enough to soften the blow, or will life break us apart.”

Nate put his warm hand over hers. “I like this thing we have and want to keep it. I am determined not to lose you, Lily.”

“Me too. But being a good sport is hard. And as you now know, I am a sore loser.”

“We will find a way. I know it.”

They fell quiet again, and from the shelter of his embrace, she watched the sky turn from lavender to pink. There was no use in trying to predict what would happen. Right now, he was there, and she was in his arms. In this brief moment, they had peace.

Nate chuckled and then pulled her closer, seeking eye contact. “I just had an idea of something that would lessen the sting a little.”

She pushed her hands into his thick hair. “Oh really? What would that be?”

He leaned closer and whispered his idea into her ear. Heat rose on her cheeks, and she swallowed to regain her composure, but to no avail. His smirk wasn't helping either. After all, he celebrated every time he found her blush button. "It would be one, uhm, interesting form of compensation."

He was still smirking. "You think this would work?"

"I am not sure, but I am willing to try. It does at least acknowledge that one of us lost something, and the other is aware of it."

A smile spread over his face. "So we have a deal."

"Under one condition."

"Yes."

She cupped his jaws and pulled his face closer. "We will never, ever, under no circumstances, reveal this agreement and the compensation to anybody else."

"Of course not. That's something entirely between you and me."

"Then we have a deal."

They sealed it with a kiss.

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"Ah, Klaiber, the brightest star in the firmament of the future." Payne greeted her with an inviting smile.

Adelie furrowed her brows. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

Payne sighed in dismay. "You're giving me the same look my wife gives me when I try to read her one of my poems."

"Maybe poetry is not your forte, sir."

He laughed. "That's what she said, and I always assumed she just had no taste."

"I'm sorry, sir."

Payne laughed and pointed at the chair in front of his desk. "Don't be; there are worse fates than that. Please, take a seat." Still confused, she sat down. He didn't look angry or upset, but then why did he call her in so early in the morning? "It came to my attention that the flag is back in place."

"It is, sir."

"I assume the call the Fire Brigade answered at Oak Avenue at 2 AM this morning has nothing to do with it?"

“No comment on that, sir - although you might want to inform the responsible department to update the security system of the guest house.”

Payne scrutinised her for a moment, pondering her reply. Then he grinned and sat back in his chair. “Duly noted.” He straightened a pile of documents on his desk, then looked at her. “Surprisingly, the flag's return is not why I have asked you to come. Your talents have not gone unnoticed, and there's an offer I have to inform you about.”

“Pardon my forwardness, sir - but you don't sound happy about this offer.”

He smiled. “I'm absolutely not. But I'm obliged to inform you if I like it or not. You have been asked to join WILP, a new initiative courtesy of the Academy Association. Their goal is to establish more female officers in command roles. They invite you to join next semester.”

Adelie remembered the leaflet still stuck in the breast pocket of her flight suit. “Interesting; I just recently found a flyer advertising the whole thing. I had no idea that they also actively ask students to join.”

The Major barked a laugh. “Neither had I before they approached me last week. They obviously want promising cadets like you in their ranks.”

“And why are you not happy about this? So far, it sounds like a good thing.”

“Should you decide to join, you would have to switch schools because it is housed at Whitestone. And I am not happy about it because that would mean I would lose one of my most promising cadets - and although I am not supposed to tell you this - Westerhaven would lose its chance to appoint the first female Flight Captain in its history.”

A lot of things suddenly made more sense. “So you tested Havisham in the exercise and waited for the last moment to tell me about this offer because you're afraid I will accept it?”

The Major scratched his neck. “I am sorry, but I had to ensure he could pull it off. It is ridiculous; for the first time in my career, I needed a fallback for this position.”

Adelie resisted rubbing her suddenly sweaty palms over her thighs.



"I'm not sure how to answer this right away. You just said that I have the chance to make Flight Captain, which is seen as the crucial first step towards a career in command. May I speak freely?"

"Please."

"If you had offered me the same thing Wednesday morning, I would have packed my things then and there. I was convinced you wouldn't want me to make rank; I was sure it was because I'm a woman."

The Major's face fell. "I'm sorry, Klaiber. But please, continue."

"After the attack on my squadron mates and you tasking me to retrieve the flag, I wasn't sure what to believe anymore. I now understand a bit more what was going on on your side, but to be honest, feeling disregarded because of something I can't change isn't great. Not having to repeatedly prove myself against a bunch of boys was a very enticing prospect when I read the flyer."

The Major pondered her reply and said, "But it isn't now. What has changed?"

Adelie made eye contact. "Because Alpha and Omega turned to me in distress. They trusted me to clean up the mess. Then you tasked me with getting the flag, which was a surprise. And now you just offered me the coveted rank, so things aren't looking grim anymore."

He nodded. "Klaiber, I understand your emotional pain, and I'm sorry I had to put you through this. You're a highly respected member of Omega; I want you to know this. I don't know how you cleared out the Arcade on Monday, but it testifies to how much weight you pull. Don't underestimate yourself, ever. Westerhaven will suffer a devastating loss if you decide to leave."

"When do you need to know about how I have decided?"

"Noon, I'm afraid. Here are some more brochures to aid your decision - they seem to have more funds for marketing than we do."

She couldn't keep herself from chuckling. "You really waited for the last possible moment to tell me. Tough deadline, but I can do that."

Outside Payne's office, a late spring morning welcomed her with warm, fragrant air and bright sunlight. A baby blue sky spanned the campus with its red brick buildings, white paths and green lawns.

They were mostly deserted as the semester was finally over, and everybody was looking towards a few weeks off from school work, maybe even a trip home to see family. Adelle walked the empty paths until she ended up once more in front of the Library. The pillars of its impressive portico shone white in the morning sunlight. She sat down on the warm stone stairs and looked along the axis the path leading up to the building cut through campus, guiding the eye towards a large fountain in the distance. She pulled the brochures out of her purse and started reading them.

*The United Space Force's Women in Leadership Program (WILP) is an initiative that empowers and encourages women to take on leadership roles in the USF. Through this program, women are provided with unique opportunities to advance their careers and build their professional skills. WILP provides access to a global network of experts, resources, and career development programs. The program also offers mentorship from experienced professionals and guidance on how to navigate the ever-evolving United Space Force. Additionally, WILP provides practical learning experiences that can help propel women towards successful careers in a field dominated by men. With the support of WILP, women have the power to make a difference in their own lives and those of others around them by taking on leadership roles at the highest level.*

It sounded by far too good to be true, she thought. Somewhere, there must be a catch of some sort.

"Whatcha readin'?" Nate came up the path and sat beside her, picking up one of the brochures. "WILP? Ah, I remember. The new initiative."

She looked at him, puzzled. "How come you do know about this? You definitely aren't part of the target group."

He grinned and stretched out his long legs, squinting into the sunshine. "Heard about it in passing in one of my classes two weeks ago? Supposedly, they ask all the top female students everywhere to join." Then it dawned on him. "They've asked you too, haven't they?"

"They did. That's why Payne wanted to see me. He's not happy about it."

"Can't blame him." Nate's face was suddenly guarded, and she realised that leaving Westerhaven would also mean leaving him. There it was, catch number one.

She pointed at a small section she found in one brochure. "They offer nothing in the field of diplomacy or humanitarian development. And their offerings in aeronautics are measly compared to Westerhaven." Catch number two.

"Whitestone is training people mostly in warfare on the ground. Their aviation branch is tiny." He picked up a pebble and threw it into the grass to the side of the stairs. "Rumours have it that they ask the top female students to form some kind of elite women's program. Some say they ask those who already are on a good way to have a great career, as they want to later claim this as justification that the program worked."

She shook her head and looked up into the cloudless skies. "Not a bad strategy, but I wonder if it would help women in the long run. After all, unless they also want to establish all-female units everywhere, you need to be able to work with men and know how they tick. Especially if you have to give them orders."

"Some would benefit from being away from us men. We can be a degrading bunch. Not every girl is as confident as you. And just think about your experiences this week. Even your seemingly boundless confidence has limits."

He had a point there, so she nodded. "If he'd made the offer Wednesday morning, I would've jumped at the chance."

Nate avoided her look. "You're a tough cookie, and I believe you don't need a special program to make your way to Admiralty." His hands clenched into fists. "Please don't go."

"Hey, handsome." She reached for his hand. Their fingers intertwined, his tanned, hers pale. "You think a shiny brochure filled with buzzwords is enough to make me drop everything and leave?"

Finally, he met her eyes. "You were quite upset all week. I'd understand if you'd want to spare yourself further pain and surround yourself with other like-minded women."

She stood up and brushed the dust from her skirt. "That's so far the only interesting thing, but I'm not sure I also want to change my trajectory just for the sake of being among women."

Nate stopped her against his body, arms interlocking behind her back. "Does staying here mean you're the Flight Captain?"

She put her arms around his neck and made eye contact. Here it was, the moment she dreaded so much. She cleared her throat, then answered: "If I understood the man correctly, I have the rank if I stay in Westerhaven; otherwise, the honour will be awarded to you. Hence him testing you during the exercise. He needed a fallback should I decide to leave." His chest expanded in a deep breath, but he didn't look away. She gazed into the bright blue of his eyes and saw the flicker of loss. She squeezed him and whispered. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I know us, and I know the difference between you and me. As Leslie said, you radiate command and embrace what it means to be in command. You care. You inspire everyone to do their damn best. I'm not sure I'd do this as well as you do. What I do know for sure, though, is that if they had picked me instead of you, there would have been mutiny." His hold of her tightened as he asked with a rough voice: "But you're not leaving, are you? You're not going to leave Westerhaven - and me."

She reached up and brushed over his hair. "Payne has assured me that I will not suffer setbacks if I stay. After all, Westerhaven is an excellent address in its own right. Far more than Whitestone is. Plus, Westerhaven has something Whitestone hasn't."

He raised an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

"You."

He chuckled and then kissed her.

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Mid-morning saw Adelie and Ophelia meeting on the airbase. Ophelia stood on the apron and looked anxiously up to the cockpit of Adelie's Stingray. "Are you sure about this? I will never forgive myself if you faint and crash."

Adelie adjusted her helmet strap. "Relax, Smarts. I am not in a dog fight exercise; I control how many Gs I pull and which muscles to

contract to keep the blood in my brain. Nothing bad will happen should the suit not do what it's supposed to do. But I'm sure it will work perfectly because it did in the centrifuge. You deserve some real, actual flight data for your project."

"I sure hope these are not famous last words. Well then, let me connect the sensors." The engineer climbed up the metal ladder and, just like in the centrifuge, handed her the one for the chest. "I think by now you know the drill."

"I certainly do."

Ophelia connected all the extra sensors to the plane's computer and hugged her. "I'm beyond grateful for what you do for me. Really, I am."

Adelie thought about the flashy headlines about sisterhood she had read in the WILP brochures. "We have to lift each other whenever we can, Smarts. Just pay it forward." With that, she pushed the button to close the canopy. It was time to fly, and how did she long to fly. Some distance to the ground would do her good. She taxied to the designated runway, waiting for clearance.

"KLA0286, you're cleared for take-off," came the instruction from the tower. *Finally.*

Climbing up into the endless blue above Meadow Junction, with no objective but to sweat into Ophelia's excellent flight suit, all worries seemingly dropped to the ground. She pointed the nose of her craft towards the Echo Range, intending to circle Maiden Head and then come back to the base. Just like on Tuesday, she observed the change from gently rolling hills to the foothills and then the peaks of the range themselves. She did some barrel rolls just for the fun of it and the sensors. As if the upside-down motions of the rolls had loosened up a bunch of stuck thoughts, things fell into perspective the moment she was right-side up again. It was as clear as the blue sky that she loved being in Westerhaven. She enjoyed being a member of the Albatross Squadrons and was thoroughly looking forward to being their Flight Captain. For the first time in her life, she had friends, actual, true friends. A purpose. A partner who loved and respected her. And a place that was a home, not just temporary

quarters. Being above cloud level really put things into perspective.

Swinging around Maiden Head, she figured the flight suit was doing a great job in real-life conditions. She was significantly drier and not as hot as she used to be. Like Leslie's wound care, this thing had to hit production sooner than later. Again the WILP brochures appeared before her mental eye. Women needed support from other women, regardless of initiatives. And she was the one with money and connections. She had the power to do something about it. Just as she was running through a mental list of people her assistant should call, her flight computer's tracking sensors alerted her to movement on the ground. She hadn't been aware that the trackers were running, but she called up the screen out of pure curiosity - who was moving around fenced-off military property? A group of people dressed in olive green appeared on her screen. Adelie checked the distance and the wind as a malicious idea of revenge formed in her head. Delicious revenge. They were just the right distance; she was flying into the wind and had the sun behind her. They would not see or hear her coming, but if she did everything right, the most delightful sonic boom would erupt precisely over them. A faint grin played on her lips as she accelerated the plane.

Half an hour later, as she was back on the ground and handing over the sweaty flight suit to its inventor, Payne was approaching them across the apron. His face was red, and his eyes moist.

"Klaiber." He managed, less stern than usual. In fact, he appeared to be amused.

"Yes, sir?" Adelie eyed him cautiously. "What's the matter?"

Payne unsuccessfully tried to control his composure. "Were you flying at Maiden Head earlier?"

"Yes, sir. I was."

He finally had himself under control again, but his eyes were still twinkling with unbridled amusement. "I have not the foggiest idea how you pulled it off, but if you had planned to scare the literal crap out of our guests, you were successful. We just had to dispatch two trucks to collect them. Chapeau, Klaiber." Again, he chuckled.

Ophelia looked between them. "What the heck did you do?"

Payne answered before she could: "She hit the sound barrier right above a group of hikers at a low height. Imagine someone popping a balloon right behind you, but make the balloon the size of a house."

"Oh." Ophelia grinned. "But isn't that stretching regulations a bit far?"

Payne grinned. "It certainly is, and I know that Klaiber knows it, but I do understand a certain desire for revenge. It's not like they only stole the Albatross flag or beat up Alpha and Omega; they were causing trouble left, right and centre. The board is contemplating an official complaint."

"Oh, wow." Adelie was stunned. "That's some news. And I'm sorry if anybody got hurt."

"Don't be." Payne slapped her shoulder. "They utterly deserve it. Just maybe - don't pull off a stunt like this once you're Flight Captain." He winked.

"Understood, sir."

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The Academy's Grand Hall shone festively in the light of half a dozen chandeliers, their light reflected in mirrored wall panels. Hushed voices filled it while friends and family found their seats. The End of Semester Ceremony was mandatory only for those getting promoted, but Alpha and Omega had shown up in full force. After Adelie had informed Payne that she intended to stay, the news that she would be their Flight Captain spread faster among the cadets than wildfire. And they were all eager to celebrate with her, to her delight. The most eager were Nate, Jake and Gerald, who all looked mighty fine in their dress uniforms, consisting of Westerhaven blue dress pants and jackets with gold buttons and a black belt. Adelie wore the female version, which exchanged the pants for a knee-length skirt.

"Y'all look like an absolute unit. I'm impressed." Ophelia walked up to them with her broadest grin, wearing herself the male version of the dress uniform. In her wake trailed Leslie, who had chosen her best pastel yellow Sunday dress, complete with a little pillbox hat and white gloves. As a civilian guest, she was free not to appear in Westerhaven Blue.

“Smarts, what are you doing here?” Adelie raised an eyebrow at her friend. “Shouldn't you be writing your report?”

“Oh, absolutely. But do you really expect me to miss out on this? To see my dear friend walk up on stage and receive this honour? I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world, even if it means I must pull another all-nighter.”

Adelie didn't know what to say. Instead, she hugged the engineer fiercely.

Then it was time to take their seats. Adelie had to sit with the other lucky recipients of honours and promotions in the first row. They were all equal measures of excitement and terrified. The ceremony started with the Academy orchestra playing the Westerhaven hymn “Golden Hills so beautiful”, and then the heads of the school took each turn talking about the year. Adelie's excitement dwindled, but eventually, they moved on to the actual task: Awarding students for their outstanding achievements. At long last, after a seemingly never-ending string of names and people, Payne took the stage. Her mouth became dry - making history was nerve-wracking.

“Dear guests and friends of Westerhaven Academy - I have served as Chief Training Officer for the aviation branch for over a decade and have awarded the rank of Flight Captain many times. This year was in no way the same procedure as every other year. Alpha and Omega witnessed the fiercest competition for this rank in their history, which speaks for this particular class' excellence. For the first time, there was a draw.” Payne paused. “And there will be another first, but I hope this will not be the last time this happens. Please celebrate with me the first female Flight Captain in the history of Westerhaven Academy - Miss Adelie Klaiber.”

Adelie rose from her seat as the hall erupted in a standing ovation. Pride filled her heart as she walked up on stage and shook Payne's hand. After countless award ceremonies during her racing career, this was vastly different. Not a hard-earned reward at the end of a long season of races, but a beginning. The beginning of something with a lot more impact.

“Congratulations, Klaiber. Well deserved, well deserved. Now



show these punks who's boss." Payne handed her the little box with her new shoulder boards - adorned with two embroidered diagonals that formed an arrow of silver thread on Westerhaven blue fabric, the stylised wings of the Albatross.

"Thank you - I will."

"I do not doubt it." He winked at her.

After the ceremony, Adelie found herself cut off from her friends by journalists. Not only the Academy Press wanted an interview, but no, even the Galactic Post was there.

"Miss Klaiber, a few words?"

"Miss Klaiber, how does it feel to make history - again?"

"Miss Klaiber, a photograph for the Post?"

Before she could become overwhelmed, two broad backs in Campus Security uniform materialised in front of her, pushing back the bouquet of microphones and attached journalists. Salvatore and Enrique sorted the press into a neat line-up, and Adelie had the chance to sort her thoughts before they were broadcasted into the furthest corner of the Union. At least she had practice with that, although she sorely missed her PR Assistant Monica, who'd have organised a press conference and set up rules which questions could be asked beforehand. To her relief, Adelie discovered that no scandal-thirsty tabloids were present in the military setting, and the questions were mostly about how she felt about being the first female Flight Captain at this academy. After everyone had a few words and a picture, she could join the others who waited patiently nearby.

"Damn, you're a pro. I would have been reduced to a flustered, stuttering picture of incompetence." Jake was impressed.

Nate smiled at her proudly. "Got a taste of old times? How did it feel?"

She smiled back at him. "I just remembered that nostalgia is not worth half a dime. I completely forgot that answering the press is so unglamorous."

Two familiar faces caught her eye: the women she credited with keeping her sane through a tumultuous adolescence threaded their way past the crowds of people. Her manager Meira and custodian

Darya looked uncharacteristically moved as they reached her.

“Adelie!” Two hugs that made her ribs crack.

“You made it!” She beamed, confused but delighted to see them.

“Logan kept us in the loop about the happenings here, so we were already on our way when your message reached us.” Meira hugged her again.

“I think I have to remind Mr Logan that he is my Chief of Security and not the Chief Informant of my chosen family. That's the second time this week he went behind my back.” Adelie was irritated.

“Cut him some slack; he's been responsible for your safety since you were 5. You're like a daughter to him, and I believe he has not yet adjusted to the fact that you are his boss now and not us.” Meira winked at her. “I am so happy to see you. You look so much better since the last time you visited us in Lewiston. Happier. And taller. Have you grown?”

“Oh, of course, she looks happier. One of these handsome boys must be the one she told us about.” Darya gestured at the group of cadets.

Adelie pushed the anger about her Chief of Security away and turned around. Nate stood a few steps away, eyes trained on her, arms casually crossed. Even a purple-black bruise around his eye couldn't diminish his handsomeness. “Come here, Tiger. I want you to meet two essential people.” She took his hand, and he squeezed it lightly. “Meira, Darya, this is Nathan Havisham, my partner in crime. Nate, these are Meira, my manager and chosen mother, and Darya, who used to be my custodian and now takes care of my finances because she's simply the best.”

“Pleased to me you.” He shook hands with them. “You have the advantage; Adelie never mentioned a single thing about your existence.”

This triggered a laugh from both women. “Of course not,” Meira explained, “she had it drilled into her cute little head from a very young age to never tell anybody anything.”

“She is good at that,” Nate nodded.

“We're sorry, we had to eliminate the possibility of blackmailing,

or worse: kidnapping.” Darya smiled warmly at him. “So I apologise if your girlfriend is a bit secretive. Nevertheless, welcome to the family, Nathan.”

“Secretive is an understatement. But now I understand why, and everything makes a lot more sense.” With one of his dazzling smiles, he put his arm around her waist. She leaned into him for a bit of physical reassurance. Meeting her chosen family without warning must have been a shock, but he handled it well. He handled everything well, including her secrecy, her insecurities, and her becoming Flight Captain, making him a tower of calm confidence and strength. She squeezed him, and their eyes met. The surroundings faded for a brief moment of wordless understanding.

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“Lord’s mercy, this party will be granted legendary status in the Marmoset club annals.” Nate sat on the edge of Adelie’s bed, cradling his head because the world was spinning. “Why do you still look as fresh as a daisy? It’s four in the morning, and if I remember correctly, it was your achievement we celebrated.”

Adelie laughed and sat beside him, already dressed in her dusky pink pyjamas. “Someone has to stay sober. I had one flute of champagne and left it at that. I do have something for your head, though. It has helped me after long nights out with my cousin, who also knows how to party.” She handed him a small triangular sachet. Bold white letters spelled out Schleebronner’s PartyRelief on a green and blue background. “It helps with the effects of alcohol and whatever else you might be able to consume in Eden’s most notorious clubs.” He ripped it open to find a white liquid. Its unexpected sharp taste of ginger already had a sobering effect on him and forced him to cough.

“I should’ve stuck to water and lemonade as you did. How come you have this PartyRelief stuff handy? You never deemed me like someone who likes excessive partying.”

One of her wicked grins. “There was a time in my life when parties were the only exciting thing. Plus, it works for more things than just hangovers. I take it when I feel that I’ll come down with a cold.” She

patted his shoulder. "The remedy should kick in shortly. Give it a few minutes. And I think you got the approval of Meira and Darya; they like you."

"Achievement unlocked. Impressed future in-laws." He reclined onto the bed and pulled her with him. Cute giggles rose from her like champagne bubbles.

"They are not my parents, nor will they be your in-laws."

"They are the ones you look up to. The ones you turn to when you need advice and guidance. I don't care if they are your actual parents or not."

"Do you like them?" She rolled to her side and propped her head up. Her silky hair spilling over her shoulders sidetracked his still slightly drunk brain. Her eyes sparkled with delight and love, and her skin glowed rosy in the dim light of the bedside table lamps. Damn, his Flight Captain was a pretty one. He remembered her question just in time before it became awkward.

"I do like them. I see now why you turned out so remarkably grounded despite your background and fame. And they are genuinely lovely people - I understand why you made them a part of your team. They appear as if they can solve whatever problem you throw at them."

"I only work with the very best." She grinned. "And they ensured that I was always aware of my privilege. It wasn't always a pleasant experience for me. Imagine your family telling you every commoner is beneath you and somebody else reminding you at any given moment that you need to care about everybody and treat them as your equal. I doubt that I would have turned out a nice person if I had been around my actual family more than I was."

"You're not very fond of your family, are you?" He felt sorry for her.

Adelie sighed and plucked at the bedsheet. "I love them; I just have a hunger for life they can't satisfy. They live a sheltered and privileged life, removed from the troubles normal people experience. I don't blame them for their ignorance, but once I tasted freedom and experienced struggles and how to overcome them, I couldn't go back. Life outside their golden cage has so much more nuance, emotions

and experiences; I simply don't fit in anymore. It bores me to death.”

Sudden shame bloomed hot in his chest. “And I went and accused you of being entitled. No wonder you left me standing there like the prime idiot I was back then. I’m so sorry.”

“Tuesday was a shitty day. They happen.” She shrugged, then reached out to tug at his shirt. “Aren’t you a bit overdressed for bed?”

He realised he was still wearing his dress pants and a now wrinkly button-down. The world had also stopped spinning; sitting up and removing surplus layers of clothing seemed viable. Adelle sat crosslegged on the downy comforter of her bed and watched him discarding his crumpled clothes onto the closest armrest available. “Speaking of being entitled - I wonder if I should pull some strings to get Smart’s flight suit prototype into production. She should at the very least get it patented.”

“Like you did with Leslie's tincture a few months ago.” He wiggled out of his pants.

“Exactly. The suit would improve the lives of so many pilots; it has to be produced.” Adelle’s eyes shone with determination.

After he had discarded everything except his pair of boxer shorts, he sat down on his side of the bed and slid under the comforter. Adelle followed his example and then switched the lights off. Darkness engulfed them, but she knew where to find him and snuggled close. He decided to pick up the conversation again. “First, she needs to hand in her project. I don’t think you should start pulling any strings before she has completed it. But then, by all means, if you have the power, do it. You told me that you want to make a difference. Lily, you are the difference from all I’ve seen this week alone. Embrace it.”

To his surprise, she moved on top of him and kissed him in a way that ignited his core. “You. Without you, I’d be nothing. I’d still be sad, lost, and lonely.” More kisses, some delicate, some hungry, and all stoked the fire within him. “I owe you, not only because of our little agreement.”

*Oh, that.*



# A WEEK LATER

## CAMPING IN THE ECHOS

Ladies and gentlemen, the gossip mill is abuzz with a shocking scandal about one of the most notorious of our Baronesses! Already pushing the boundaries of propriety by racing outrageously fast rally cars, we have now learned that Adelie von Klaiber has been seen in public wearing an outfit that lacks the appropriate modesty and decorum expected from such dignified women. It is beyond despicable that a Baroness of one of our colony's greatest families would behave with such disregard for respectability. As representatives of our society, a Baroness should always dress in a manner that reflects their esteemed position. Therefore, the Eden Gazette implores them to be cognisant of what they choose to wear and ensure that it is done with propriety—or else they'll find themselves on the front page of tomorrow's paper!

(The Eden Gazette after Adelie dared to go to the gym in shorts and a sweatshirt at the age of 16)

It was another clear and crisp morning in the Echo Mountains. The lake lay like an ink-black mirror between the deep pine forest, a veil of mist over its surface. Birds sang as the first rays of sunshine poured over the mountain ridges. Adelie had snuck out of the tent and climbed on one of the large smooth boulders at the bank close to their camp to paint the early morning scenery. Her sketchbook was filling up with memories of the camping trip, and she looked forward to turning some of the sketches into fully developed paintings back home. Getting away from Meadow Junction, the Academy, and even their friends had been one of Nate's better ideas. She hadn't been aware of how much she needed to unwind and enjoy a change of scenery after the long semester. Camping in the mountains provided exactly that.

They had explored the surrounding forests on beautiful hikes. She had time to capture the best vistas in quick watercolour sketches, because Nate was a patient companion and genuinely interested in her art. He already earmarked a few sketches to be made into paintings for his room. After their hikes, they had gathered around their campfire to read and relax, before Nate would cook a delicious meal. The fact that they had uninterrupted time with each other was the best thing of the trip. No classes, duty or rugby pulled them apart, and it had been glorious. Having him all for herself allowed for discovering new things about him. Every evening after dinner, they had shared intimate things while staring into the flames of the campfire, and he had really opened up about the hardships of his youth and the divorce of his parents. Deep inside, she struggled with accepting that a young Nate had to suffer so much while she had had everything and then some. Yet she was also incredibly proud of his achievements despite the unfortunate circumstances. With a sigh, lamenting life's unfairness, she set her sketchbook aside to let it dry and simply observed the beautiful and untouched landscape in front of her, inhaling the fresh mountain air. The sun finally reached the lake and their campground, illuminating the scenery in vivid colours before a background of pine-green shadows.

Just as she wanted to get back down, she heard the tell-tale sound of a tent zipper and then a loud yawn. Before she could say Good Morning, Nate zoomed past her boulder and dove in a perfect arch into the lake waters. He surfaced again a few meters away, shaking his head and causing water droplets to fly.

“Woohoooo!” His deep voice had gone up several octaves because spring lake water was icy at best.

“Have you lost your mind?” She called down from her perch.

“You should try it; it's awesome! Really wakes you up!” he called back, treading water. No thanks; it would take her hours to thaw afterwards. He turned to swim to the tiny island in the middle of the lake like he had done every morning. This would take him 10 minutes or so, plenty of time to get the kettle going. She gathered her painting supplies and scooted down the smooth boulder surface. Back at camp, she stoked the fire back to life and set up the kettle. As expected, the water started to boil as Nate walked up to the fire, dripping wet. It was a nice view: The bruises had faded, and his movements were back to their usual style of poetry in motion. The painter and the lover in her equally admired his perfect proportions: Broad shoulders, flat stomach, narrow hips, all carried by long and muscular legs. He'd shaken out the water from his hair, resulting in a wild mop on his head, while his chest hair was still flattened against his sculpted pecs. Water dripped down the fine line of black hair that ran across his stomach south to his crotch. Only then she realised that he hadn't bothered with putting on any clothes. Not that the icy waters had left much to blush about, but out of principle, she did anyway. She was still a Baroness, after all, and not accustomed to the audacity of swimming without the appropriate attire.

Nate just grinned as he passed her in all his glory. “Good Morning, babe,” he said while he reached for his towel hanging on a tent line. His tanned skin had a lovely pink glow thanks to the swim. To relieve her, he then put on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt.

“You, naked, on an empty stomach, first thing in the morning, is hard to deal with.” She replied while putting two teabags into their enamel cups and pouring water over them. Steam billowed in the morning sun.



He just laughed. "You are not a prude. And I know you enjoy the sights." That she certainly did.

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Nate sat beside her and cradled the hot tea between his hands. Adelie still had a cute pink tint in her cheeks and busied herself with making porridge. She wore a knitted cardigan and thick woollen socks over her sweatpants because, in true female fashion, the current 15 degrees Celsius were deemed cold. But to his surprise, she hadn't mind the outdoor life. Baroness or not, she was an adventurer at heart and enjoyed their little stint in the wilderness, readily dropping carefully set hair, a five-step beauty routine, and silk pyjamas. Instead, she embraced quickly braided hair and brushing her teeth over an enamel bowl, spending the whole day in practical outdoor clothes and sleeping in sweatpants. True to herself, she brought the most luxurious sleeping mats Nate had ever seen, though. He had no idea what kind of magic they contained because they folded into tiny squares and expanded into 5 centimetres of incredibly comfortable foam, making their nights much more enjoyable. Snuggling with her at night in the tent was his favourite thing about the whole trip, followed by sitting around the campfire after dinner, drinking tea, and talking while the stars above them sparkled in the sky. The flickering flames, his girl in his arms and the fact they were all alone made sharing his deepest secrets easy, and it felt good to share them for the first time. In return, Adelie shared bits and pieces from her own past and a youth so very different from his. There was only one thing he couldn't get her to do: go for a midnight swim with him.

"Let me guess, you've never been skinny-dipping, right?" He rebooted their conversation.

Her eyes widened in shock. "Certainly not. Too risky."

"Risky?"

She sighed. "Look, I respect my guards, plus there was always the danger of paparazzi lurking. I rather not make the front page just dressed in my birthday suit."

Understandable. "But there are no guards or paparazzi here, babe. We're the only people in a 10-kilometre radius. Really, the water is awesome once you get over the shock."

She stirred her tea, looking out at the motionless lake before them. "I would never get warm again."

"Nonsense, you're fit and trained, your muscles will keep you warm. Plus, I know a few moves that will make you heat up quickly, should you really feel cold," he teased her.

She giggled into her tea. "Oh, no doubt about that."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Adelie looked at him pensively. "Why do you insist so much that I try this? You can just say if you want to see me naked."

He reached over and squeezed her thigh. "It may come as a surprise, but seeing you naked is not always on the forefront of my mind. You should try it because having nothing between you and nature feels great. It gets your blood pumping. It's invigorating, and it makes you feel alive like nothing else. Wild and untamed. I'm not sure you were ever allowed to feel wild and untamed."

He could see the sparkle of adventure light up in her beautiful eyes. "Well, if you put it like this ... You convinced me. But you have to make me soup afterwards."

"I promise I'll do everything possible to make you feel warm again, babe."

She got up and peeled herself out of her clothes. Goosebumps rippled over her pale skin, but her face was graced with an expression of careful examination. Slowly, she stretched out her arms as if she wanted to touch the morning around them. "You are right; this differs from having a layer between you and the air."

He knew he was staring, but it was also impossible to look away. Adelie's body married the concepts of beauty and strength stunningly; her toned and curvaceous figure commanded admiration, captivating him every time he saw her. She moved with grace and poise, her muscles perfectly toned like a classical sculpture. The rosy hue of her skin gave her an inner radiance that left him both beguiled and awestruck. He removed his clothes before it became awkward and then took her hand. "We have to run and jump because there is no slowly easing in. It's all or nothing."

She punched his upper arm. "Man, you're really set on pushing me out of my comfort zone today, aren't you?"

He pulled her close so their bodies touched, naked and raw in the cool morning air. A tremble ran through her, and for a split second, he thought about returning to the tent with her instead of plunging into ice-cold water again. Adelie laced her fingers through his before he could dwell on it, a mischievous smile on her face. "On the count of three, mister? Or do you have second thoughts about this all of a sudden?" Her glance dipped down, and she smirked as she encountered evidence. She knew him all too well.

He cleared his throat. "On the count of three."

"One... two... three..."

Hand in hand, they dashed down towards the bank and jumped into the water. The sensation of sudden cold all over his body punched him right in the guts and the air out of his lungs. Next to him, Adelie surfaced, gulping for air and then letting it all out in a sound of surprise. "Woaaaaah. Cold, cold, cold!!! Why did I let you talk me into this?!"

"Keep breathing and keep swimming. You'll get warm."

She followed him to the island. On the way back, her face was more relaxed, despite her huffing with the effort.

"You're doing great, babe."

"It's awesome. Cold. But awesome." She beamed at him.

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At first, Adelie thought she would die. But Nate had been right; once her body adjusted to the shock, she felt more alive than ever. Her skin prickled from the cold, and not being dressed in a swimsuit added new sensations in regions usually covered by fabric. It was nothing to do for long, but the ten minutes it took to swim to the island and back were perfect. She was considerably out of breath as they reached the shore again and climbed out. The air on her skin was warm compared to the water; she hadn't expected that.

Nate's gaze was glued on her, his chest heaving as much as hers. He reached for her, too breathless to say anything, but she understood anyway. His skin was cold, his lips were cold, but his kiss was warm. Water dripped down from her hair over her back. Air caressed her naked, wet skin. Wild and untamed, indeed. Unthinkable for

someone raised in the strict confinement of expectations Eden's society placed on noble offspring, especially the daughters.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He squeezed her. "You're welcome."

Hand in hand again, they returned to the fire, and as promised, Nate cooked her a hearty soup as a second breakfast. While stirring the pot, he said, "This was a perfect way to end our little trip."

"Yeah. You were absolutely right; it made me feel incredibly alive - after I was done thinking I was dying."

Her boyfriend laughed. "Glad you enjoyed it. And I hope you don't feel as cold as you feared you would."

"I'm looking forward to your soup, but I'm not a solid block of ice."

Nate flashed her smile across the fire. He looked proud and thrilled. "Dang, I'd hoped I'd get to snuggle you back to warmth."

She scooted over to him as much as his cooking activity allowed. He put his arm around her to pull her even closer, and for a while, they just sat there, enjoying each other's company, the warmth of the fire and the beauty of nature. Then Nate's chest expanded in a deep sigh, and his hold of her tightened. She craned her head to catch a glimpse of his face. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I just realised how much you trusted me with this silly swimming idea, and it was a bit overwhelming."

"Of course, I trust you. Always. And I know if you say it feels awesome, it will feel awesome."

"How so?" His voice was adorably rough.

She squeezed him. "Because you enjoy physical things, you like living in your body and experiencing life with all your senses. If swimming in ice-cold water would've been anything less than awesome, you wouldn't have done it every morning. You'd have done your usual 100 push-ups instead after the first try."

He chuckled. "You're right. Of course, you're right. You always know what you're doing, and I'd blindly follow you through Hell and back again without a second thought. But you resisted a midnight swim all week, and I didn't expect that I could convince you to go swimming with me at all, even less while being completely naked."

“Maybe you should find a hot spring next time. I’d go for a midnight dip in warm waters any time.” She reached up and brushed her fingers over his bristly cheek and into his hair, his body relaxing into her touch. Lips found lips in a lopsided kiss, which helped despite not being perfectly aligned. “You’ve never done anything that made me doubt my trust in you. I can close my eyes and let myself fall, and you will catch me. Hey, even others know that I’m safe with you around,” she eventually said.

“I was surprised they let you go on this trip; I fully expected to have company,” he answered, knowing she alluded to her bodyguards.

“Me too. But fact is, as you said earlier, the Echos are scarce in people, and they agreed that as long as I checked in twice a day and always shared my position, I would be safe enough.”

Nate’s soup was ready, and they ate silently. Conversation wasn’t always needed, and silence was never awkward. Another thing she liked about him, after making her feel safe. “Thank you for this camping idea. I really enjoyed this week.”

He kissed her cheek. “You’re welcome. I enjoyed it, too. Camping is a lot of fun with you.”

“I like having you all for myself,” she admitted, which made him grin. “Especially after last week’s drama.”

Nate nodded. “Yeah, last week was difficult in many aspects. And I enjoy having you all for myself, as well. We never really had a break together until now, and having a relaxed you was a sweet treat.”

She poked him. “Am I this tense all the time?”

He poked her back. “Not all the time, but most of the time. Which is okay, we have a lot on our plates, and you are very focused. I’m just happy to learn that you not only work hard but also play hard.”

She leaned in and ruffled his hair. “Doofus. You should know by now that I don’t do anything by halves.”

He responded by wrapping her in his arms and hugging her. “True. Our very first vacation and it was a success.”

“Yeah. It was.”

After finishing the soup, they started packing camp, trying to leave

as little behind as possible. Around noon, no traces were left beside yellowed grass where the tent had been and the campfire, now safely put out. Everything was neatly packed into the two backpacks, Nate's a bit bigger than Adelie's. Time to start the trek down the mountain, back to civilisation, duty and another school year.

THE END