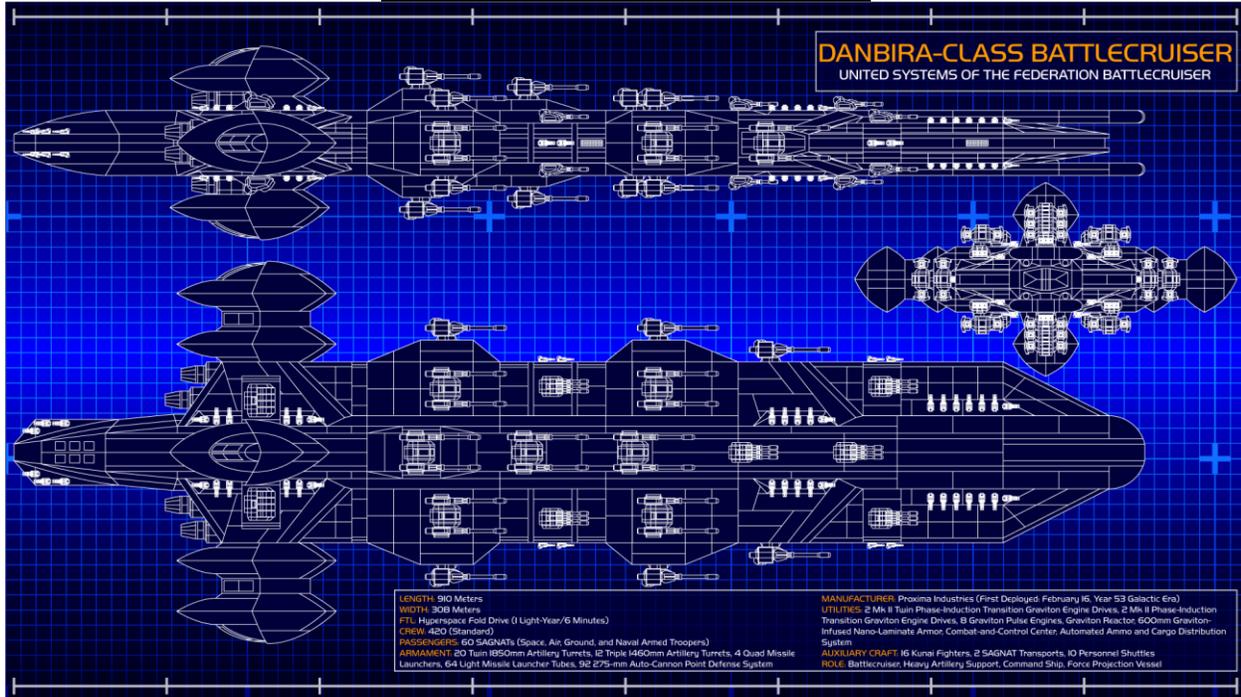


Warring Factions: Alternate Timeline Remake
The Cost of Peace/The Divide Within



PART 2

*Shuttle and Fighter Bay, Deck 8-Bow Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
12:24pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“Get a grip, man!”

Lieutenant Jake hid behind the right side of the starboard entry hatch to the shuttle and fighter bay. Despite being in airtight flight suit with the helmet on, he still slapped the side of his helmet to come to his senses. He could not do it too hard. Otherwise, he could create an opening in the helmet, causing his suit to depressurize the moment he tried to enter the airless bay. He also had to be careful of his momentum since the airlock had no active gravity, forcing him to rely on his magnetic boots. One slip and he would be floating in zero-gravity, forcing him to use his suit’s thrusters and later explaining to the CAL why his suit lost some propellant.

He peeked through the window of the hatch once more. The bay was in the shape of an octagon stretched horizontally. Towards the bow was the main entry hatch. It was obviously closed as the ship proceeded through fold subspace towards the Liekan border for a rescue mission the Rear Admiral was ordered to undertake and taking the fleet there. Towards the aft of the bay were a pair of large armored doors that lead to the cargo and ammo holds. Along the ceiling, the floor and the walls excluding the diagonal edges were the bays for the ten personnel shuttles and two SAGNAT transports that move the crew to and from the ship if the vessel is not docked. There were additional harnesses on the ceiling and floor this time, however, as the ship was expected to berth a few additional shuttles or transports for some refugees. Again, he was not too focused on the details now, though he expected to go through a full mission briefing tomorrow concerning the details of their deployment.

Mounted on the diagonal edges were a total of sixteen Kunai fighters, the mainstream fighters of the Federation. There were four on each of the diagonal edges with one pair in front of the other. Squadrons of eight pilots and their fighters were generally rotated every three months during peace time. The squadron whose fighters were berthed on the starboard diagonal edges had just transferred earlier this morning. This squadron of pilots are known as Cobra Squadron, and every one of them are Enhanced Humans. Unlike Jake's Panther Squadron berthed on the port side of which he was known as Panther Two, his squadron was made up of "Natural" Humans. Only Panther One and the current CAL on board, Lieutenant Michel, was different as he was a Centauri. However, a Centauri's reflexes are just as quick as an Enhanced which was tested some time ago when fighters became more mainstream in the Federation forces. Normally, Enhanced pilots tend to keep to themselves, only socializing with Naturals when necessary. It was easy to spot Enhanced pilots by a patch they have on their flight suits and on their flight jackets. The patch was like a badge of honor for an Enhanced, though in reality it was a reminder to Naturals that Enhanced were better than them genetically. Because of uniform code, any Enhanced that are the crew of a ship are not allowed to wear one. There was also the fact that to the untrained eye or for the "aliens," they cannot tell the difference either until Enhanced or Naturals are put under a medical scanner.

Normally, because Enhanced pilots tend to keep their distance from pilots that are not like them, a social divide had developed among the pilots of both groups. They do not speak to each other outside mission briefings, and they certainly do not try to engage in relationships. However, Jake was not expecting to see what he saw when Cobra Squadron came on board. As he looked out the window of the hatch again into the bay, about twenty meters away on the lower diagonal was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen. He already knew her name from the report he received earlier that morning.

Her name is Lieutenant Commander Janice, leader of Cobra Squadron. When he read the list of names, he did not think much of them. However, when he saw the squadron up close later without their helmets in a meeting with the CAL, he was in shock. Janice was gorgeous! She was a Caucasian woman with shoulder length strawberry blonde hair and was well-toned yet fully figured. Jake had begun to ask himself if he was falling in love with such a woman that had an aura of discipline and authority around her. He had managed to keep his feelings in check for that entire meeting, but he felt he needed to meet her on a more personal level. He knew this was a "love at first sight" situation, but Jake had to at least give it a shot.

Right now, she was talking to the fighter maintenance chief about the upkeep of her squad's fighters. She was not facing the hatch where Jake was behind. He steadied his nerves and took a deep breath. He reached for the door handle to open it.

An alarm in the airlock he was in suddenly activated. The hatch in front of him displayed the word "locked" just above the handle. Jake soon heard the hissing sound of air filling the airlock and realized that someone was about to come in from the door behind him. Jake turned around to look at the hatch behind him, but whoever it was did not look through the window in the hatch. Jake could only hope it was another member of the fighter maintenance crew. If it was another pilot from Cobra Squadron, this was not going to go well.

As soon as the hissing faded and the airlock pressurized, the opposite hatch opened and a giant seven-foot-tall Human male in his flight suit stepped in. He had the patch on him that indicated he was an Enhanced and a Cobra Squad member. Jake was not sure what to do or think about this huge man as he walked up using his magnetic boots and put his huge right hand on Jake's right shoulder. He had a serious expression on his face.

“I will save you the trouble and tell you not to do it,” the giant man said.

Jake steadied his nerves in the face of this giant.

“Who are you?” Jake asked, also with a serious expression on his face.

“Lieutenant Tristan,” the giant man said as he took his hand off Jake’s shoulder. “I am Cobra Squadron’s Number Two. I already know who you are, Lieutenant Jake and Number Two of Panther Squadron.”

“Very well. You know who I am, but let me ask you this: What is it you think I am about to do here?”

“Is it not obvious? This airlock provides access to our squadron on this side of this ship. The only reason you are here is because you have a childish infatuation with our squadron’s leader. You are not the first man, Enhanced or Natural, to try to swoon her.”

“I see,” Jake said, sounding disappointed. “So, I take it you and she are an item, then?”

Tristan laughed. The giant’s audio was very heavy and booming in the airlock.

“This is the first time anyone has ever asked me that question,” Tristan said. “Do not get the wrong idea, pal. We are not ‘an item’ as you call it.”

“If that is the case,” Jake said, “then is she seeing someone or is she a rather picky woman? Considering you said that both Enhanced and Naturals were being turned away, it does not sound like your typical separation between the two versions of our race.”

“If you really want to know, she is not seeing anyone, but she is very picky about who she wants to date. She wants a guy who can impress her more through actions and skill rather than by words or physique. The man she wants must be intelligent, cool, and most importantly skillful at the controls of a fighter. She is an ace pilot, and because she is one, she is made only one decree. ‘I will only go out with the guy who can out-fly and out-perform me in combat whether simulated or not.’ She does not seem to have a preference whether it is a Natural or Enhanced, though she likely can only be beaten by an Enhanced. No Natural can best her, hence why I said not to try.”

“Wow, she is very picky. Has anyone ever bested her behind the controls of a Kunai?”

Tristan crossed his arms and laughed loudly.

“She is still single, is she not?” Tristan said, with a smile on his face.

“*Lieutenant Tristan!*” a female voice yelled through the speakers of the airlock.

Both Tristan and Jake looked around the airlock before they realized whose voice that was. They looked over at the window in the hatch leading to the bay and saw Janice through the window. She was staring back at them with eyes full of anger as she communicated to them through her helmet into the airlock’s speakers.

“*What are you and Lieutenant Jake doing in the airlock?*” she yelled.

“We were having a conversation, ma’am!” Tristan said as he saluted his superior.

“*Let me guess. Jake is ‘admiring me,’ is he not?*”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jake was starting to get embarrassed and needed to speak up, by Janice was quick to response to Tristan’s answer.

“*Take a hike, Lieutenant Jake!*” Janice said as she looked at Jake, her eyes filled with fire. “*I do not have time for anymore little boys with overactive sex drives! If I see this happen again, I will report it to the CAL! Am I clear?*”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jake said as he saluted his superior.

“*Good. Now, both of you, get out of the airlock. I need to come in, and I cannot do so with the airlock occupied by you two.*”

“Right away, ma’am!” Tristan said as he turned to leave out of the opposite hatch.

Jake followed behind Tristan as they left the airlock. Once they were out, Tristan closed the hatch behind them and locked it to secure the airlock. As the airlock indicated that it was now removing the atmosphere inside the chamber, Tristan turned to Jake.

“Well, you heard her,” Tristan said as he pointed towards an exit hatch inside the room that they were in. “Beat it. You are better off looking for another woman somewhere else.”

Jake walked away towards the exit, his head down in disappointment. He left the room through the hatch, closing it behind him. He began to walk towards the aft of the ship down the corridor, hanging his head low as his feelings were crushed. However, he still felt determined.

“What am I going to do?” he mumbled under his breath. “I want a woman like that is going to be all alone in the world if no one can best her, but how am I going to be able to do so?”

As he continued walking towards the aft section of the ship, an idea suddenly came to him. Maybe there was a way he could best her in simulated combat, but he would need to do some training considering she was an Enhanced. Besting her was not going to be easy.

He quickly ran towards the fighter simulation room located near the pilot briefing room on the same deck with newfound determination. If he can best her, it will be a miracle.

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*Hallway near Flight Simulators, Deck 8-Midsection, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
12:33pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“This ship is larger than I thought.”

Tiffany and Julana were being escorted by Lieutenant Commander Renee, the *Kasagi*'s main helmsman. Since the ship was currently in transit to its destination by autopilot using its Fold Drive, Renee was assigned to escort the two senators around the ship. Since the trip was going to take less than a day to make the journey, the two senators asked for a tour of the ship to know where everything was and where they could go.

However, the ship was far larger than Tiffany had realized. The distance from the docking port to the CCC was not that long since the docking ramp was close to the portside PITGED engines. However, the length of the vessel they could access was more than three times the distance from the docking port to the CCC, and they wanted to look at all sixteen decks as well. Renee was taking them to see the flight simulator room and the pilot briefing room locations, though they cannot enter either without permission on their own.

When Deandre had mentioned that this ship was not a cruise ship, she knew that he was not joking. When Julana and Tiffany walked from the docking ramp to the CCC, they could tell from the utilitarian design of the hallways and rooms that this was built for combat, not luxury. The gray angular metal walls, floors, and ceilings struck Tiffany as rigid and strict like the crew on board. She had heard that the senior staff on board with the rank of Lieutenant Commander and higher had their own quarters they could decorate their own way if needed, but officers ranked Lieutenant down to Ensign were paired in quarters. Crewmen and pilots regardless of rank slept in Spartan-style quarters with one bed above another built into the wall and eight beds total in each room. Lockers were available to stow their gear. Because squadrons were rotated on a regular basis in peace time, it made more sense for squadrons to carry light than to assign them regular quarters which meant their stay on board was permanent.

Renee turned to Tiffany after the latter made her comment.

“I can tell you have never been on a battlecruiser before,” Renee said.

“I have never been on a military ship before,” Tiffany said. “This is my first time on board a naval vessel.”

“You have never been on one before? Being married to the XO, I thought you would have at least attended a ceremony on one that he was assigned to.”

“There was never a ceremony that Alto attended that I could not or would not attend. Besides, I heard those ceremonies were not on board the ships he was assigned to. Instead, they were at a base or station.”

“That is true. Internal festivities involving the crew of the ship are only held during certain celebrations. Those are usually meant for the crew only.”

“If I may ask,” Julana said, “what is down this hallway aside from the simulator room and pilot briefing room?”

“Well,” Renee said, “the only other rooms down this corridor lead to the cargo bay, the starboard side ammo storage bays, and the maintenance rooms for the turrets and launchers. This corridor can also take you towards the shuttle and fighter bay. As this corridor is on the starboard side of the ship, this is the closest access corridor to reach one of the two fighter squadrons that are currently stationed aboard this vessel.”

“If I may ask as well,” Tiffany said, “which squadrons are those?”

Renee took a deep breath, which made Tiffany curious why Renee would seem hesitant to answer that question.

“Actually,” Renee said, “I think it would be better if we went down the portside corridor. I had briefly forgotten who was stationed on the starboard side.”

“Is there something wrong?” Tiffany asked.

“The port squadron is Panther and the starboard squadron is Cobra. I have some history with members of Cobra Squadron.”

“I have heard of Cobra Squadron,” Tiffany said, “but I am surprised. Have you had issues with them before?”

“Cobra was only transferred to this ship today, but I have had issues with them in the past that I do not feel comfortable talking about right now. We better go ahead and head for the port corridor so that I may avoid trouble.”

Julana looked behind Renee down the hall after something got her attention. It looked like a male Human pilot running down the hallway in his flight suit.

“Ms. Renee,” Julana said. “Is that person one of the members of Cobra Squadron running down the corridor?”

“What?” Renee asked as she turned around to look at who Julana was mentioning about.

There was a pilot running down the corridor coming their direction, his helmet in his right hand. As he approached, Renee put her right hand out, indicating him to stop. He did so about two meters away, taking a moment to catch his breath.

“Lieutenant Jake?” Renee said with a puzzled expression on her face. “What are you doing on this side of the ship?”

Tiffany was now puzzled. Julana was as well based on her expression.

“Is he not a member of Cobra Squadron?” Tiffany asked.

Renee turned slightly to look at Tiffany.

“No, he is not,” Renee said. “He is part of Panther Squadron, their Number Two.”

Renee turned back towards Jake who looked like he was able to catch his breath.

“I still have not heard an answer to my question, Lieutenant,” Renee said.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Jack said as he came to attention. “I was checking out the new pilots.”

“Were you checking them all out or just their leader in particular?”

Jake was shocked at what Renee said, but only briefly before coming back to attention.

“I guess that answers my question,” Renee said.

“Pardon me for asking, ma’am,” Jake said, “but they only transferred today, and you were not at the meeting when they came on board. Do you know them?”

“In a manner of speaking, and that is all I have to say about that.”

Jake looked over at Julana and Tiffany with a look of curiosity in his eyes.

“In case you are wondering,” Renee said noticing his gaze, “these two are Senators Tiffany and Julana. They were designated as representatives of the Federation for this mission.”

“Representatives?” Jake asked.

“Oh, that is right. You have not been briefed yet by the CAL yet. I will not go into any further details about their purpose here until the CAL speaks with you all tomorrow.”

“Understood. Am I to assume you are showing them around by orders from the XO since you are not at your post either, ma’am?”

“That is partially correct. The order came from the CO.”

“The Rear Admiral? That is odd.”

“Considering Julana is the CO’s wife and Tiffany is the XO’s wife, that may not be as odd as you think.”

“They are married to the CO and XO?!”

“Keep it down, Lieutenant! Very few people know about this fact and both the CO and XO want to keep it that way.”

“Sorry, ma’am. I was quite surprised by what you told me.”

Renee took a deep breath.

“Speaking of surprised,” Renee said, “why were you running all the way from the fighter bay? Did members of Cobra Squadron scare you away?”

“No, ma’am,” Jake said. “I just needed to do some training in the flight simulator.”

Renee raised her right eyebrow after hearing Jake’s words. She took another deep breath.

“Very well, Lieutenant,” Renee said. “Go ahead, but do not overdo it. We have a mission tomorrow and the last thing we need is one less pilot out there who pushed their limits.”

Jake looked at Renee with a puzzled expression on his face again. After a few seconds, his expression went back to normal.

“Understood, ma’am,” Jake said as he saluted. “It was a pleasure to meet you, senators.”

Jake brought his right arm down and walked around their left side towards a door a few meters behind them. The sign above the door said “Flight Simulation” on it. After the doors closed behind him, Renee once again took a deep breath.

“We had better get out of this corridor towards another section of the ship,” Renee said. “I do not want to run into a member of Cobra Squadron right now.”

Renee started walking towards the aft of the vessel with Julana and Tiffany behind her. Tiffany was puzzled by Renee’s reactions a moment ago.

“Renee?” Tiffany asked. “Is your history with Cobra Squadron a personal matter?”

“Yes,” Renee said. “As I said earlier, I do not wish to talk about it. All I know is that Jake is about to bite off more than he can chew if he is doing what I think he is doing.”

“What would that be?”

Renee once again took a deep breath.

“He is trying to win against Cobra’s leader on her terms,” she said. “That is going to be next to impossible for him to do, and he is going to find that out the hard way.”

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*Quarters of Rear Admiral Deandre, Deck 6-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
12:57pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“I still cannot believe our wives are here.”

Rear Admiral Deandre retired to his quarters to have lunch while looking over reports and ship status by department. He asked Commander Alto to join him because he needed to talk to him about the matter of their wives being on board.

“I concur with that feeling, sir,” Alto said before taking a drink of water. “I calculated the possibility that they would come on board, but I was hoping that they would prove me and my calculations wrong.”

“Instead, you knew them well enough to be accurate in your probabilities,” Deandre said before taking another bite of his sandwich.

“Do you think we were too harsh on them for coming on this mission with us?”

Deandre paused for a moment to think about Alto’s question.

“Maybe,” Deandre said, “but like I told them, this is a military ship. This is not a pleasure cruise for their enjoyment. Even though they are civilians, we cannot bend the rules for them. Otherwise, we would have to bend them for everyone on board.”

“The pilot barracks already allow all genders to sleep in the same room with the explicit instructions to not pursue sexual relations,” Alto said. “The same is said for crew quarters with different genders. If our wives stayed in our quarters, you can believe that someone would start a petition to allow sexual relations to no longer be prohibited. I have already calculated that such a petition has more than a seventy percent chance of passing.”

“I know. When you consider that Humanity is still trying to recover our numbers in population from before our third World War, it is starting to become a second ‘Baby Boomer’ generation if it has not done so already.”

“Speaking about babies...”

“Do not even ask, Alto.”

“If I do not, then you know your wife will. Mine has and I am still trying to calculate the best possible answer to give her.”

“Calculate? Are you telling me that Minion brain of yours has not come up with an answer based on experience and probabilities?”

“I have done my research, Admiral. If you are wondering if I can care for a child, I can say that I can. It is the...timing that is difficult.”

“Can you be specific about timing?”

“I am referring to when the best time would be to make the attempt.”

“Biologically?”

“No, I am referring to sociably, especially in our relationship.”

“Oh, you are having a hard time deciding when is the best time to be able to support your wife while she is pregnant and once the child is born.”

“Correct. Being in the military allows me to support her and a future child financially. However, being there socially and paternally for the child is what I am finding difficult.”

Deandre took a deep breath.

“Now you know how I am feeling,” Deandre said. “We have already checked with doctors to see if we can biologically have a child, which is yes. I am like you in that respect. I can support Julana and my future child in a financial sense. Being there to support them and raise the child is the issue I have as an officer in the military.”

Alto took another sip of water before looking down at his empty plate that once held his sandwich and salad.

“So, I must ask,” Alto said before looking back at Deandre, “what are we going to do about this situation?”

Deandre leaned back in his chair, staring at his now empty plate as well on his desk as he thought about his response.

“Let us see how this mission plays out first,” Deandre said. “If things go smoothly and we do not start a war, we will seek some marriage counseling to see how we can make a family work for all of us.”

“And if we actually start a war over the refugees? What then?”

“Then we will wait until after the war ends. While I do not see us going to war and dying from it, the last thing I need to do is make my wife a single mother raising a child who will never know their father.”

“I can agree to that. Tell you what we can do, though. I looked over the rules and regulations concerning VIPs on board. It turns out that while VIPs are not allowed in crew quarters for the sake of sleeping in them, the commanding officer can offer to invite them to dinner in his quarters along with other members of the senior staff if necessary.”

Deandre looked at Alto with a surprised expression on his face.

“I must have missed that in the regulations,” Deandre said. “Where does it say that?”

“Paragraph Seven, Section Thirteen-B under the military code of conduct,” Alto said.

“Thirteen-B? Wait a moment. You mentioned about Thirteen-A earlier! How did you overlook that section during the meeting earlier?”

“I knew about it, but I did not want to give our wives a reason to invite them into our quarters until we talked about it first.”

“I see. Smart move, as always.”

“If we do this, we will need to setup a table with chairs and have food delivered from the galley. If they know it is for a meeting with VIPs, they should not have any problems delivering it to us. The question becomes are we going to be the only ones in your quarters or did you want to invite anyone else?”

“Let me think about that for a little while. I need to look over a report I had received a little while ago while you get back to the CCC.”

“What is the report about?”

“Some sort of sighting near the border. Our Tripwire border alert system detected something within a Light-year of the border in Ger-Holt.”

“Ger-Holt? That is thirteen Light-years from Termine along the Lieka border.”

“I know. I need to check it out and see what the system spotted. We will talk more about dinner plans in two hours. I will see you in the CCC in a little while.”

“Understood,” Alto said as he got up with his empty plate. “I will see you there.”

Alto turned and headed for the door as Deandre reclined in his chair. After Alto left, he grabbed his tablet and accessed the report he told Alto about. An image appeared on the screen, but it was so blurry and distant that he could hardly make it out. The best he could think of to describe what he was looking at were two disks on top of each other with an arrowhead on each of them facing the same direction. There was nothing definitive that he could tell in the picture. The disk shape seemed like Dexigalian vessels from the war, but he never seen them paired or possibly attached before. The arrow shapes attached to one side remind him more of the Liekan ships. Deandre began to wonder if the two nations have somehow joined forces in secret. If the

Coalition was indeed attacked by a combined force of Liekans and Dexigalians, it was within the realm of possibilities that the information they received about the refugees may be true. While it remained unclear as to what has been transpiring behind their former enemies' borders, there is one thing Deandre knew for certain seeing this object close to the border.

It meant that their former enemies may not be "former" for much longer.

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*Flight Simulators, Deck 8-Midsection, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
1:18pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

"Not again!"

Jake stumbled out of the simulation cockpit and landed face first on the ground. He was completely exhausted both mentally and physically. He had just finished his sixth simulated flight combat sortie against a computer-controlled virtual fighter craft that was loaded with the combat data from Janice's records.

Out of all six of the sorties he flew in, he lost the fight all six times.

Jake tried different scenarios, different strategies, even those that would be deemed unexpected and unorthodox. Nothing he tried worked. As he laid there on the padded deck breathing heavily, he began to wonder what he was thinking taking on an Enhanced pilot. He also realized that Renee earlier who he ran into with the two senators must have known what he was up to and tried to coax him not to strain himself. He wished he had realized this fact by now as he knew he was going to be sore tomorrow for not listening to her.

"This...cannot be...," he said between every breath. "Janice is...not...Human..."

"A rather old and racist cliché in this day and age, is it not?" a deep male voice said.

Jake recognized that low-toned voice from earlier coming from his right. As he slowly rolled over onto his left side with his muscles aching, he looked over to see Lieutenant Tristan leaning against a nearby wall.

"How many times have you done that simulation since earlier this afternoon?" Tristan asked with a slight grin on his face.

"Six...times..." Jake said as he continued to breath heavily.

"I take it you lost every one of them, huh?"

Jake didn't say a word, but Tristan could tell what the answer was.

"I figured as such," Tristan said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Let me fill you in on something in that brain you almost made into mush just now. The comment you made was only half right. She is an Enhanced Human as is everyone in Cobra Squadron as you well know when we came on board. You should already know what we are capable of with our increased strength, dexterity, reflexes, and most of all our intelligence."

"I am already aware of that," Jake said as he slowly made his way onto his feet.

"Then you also realize why we are the best aces in the fleet, and our leader is the best among us. You should forget about beating her. No Natural pilot will ever be able to do so."

Jake started to chuckle under his breath, almost psychotically. Tristan was puzzled by Jake's odd reaction.

"What is so funny?" Tristan asked. "Did you lose oxygen to your brain after all those crazy simulations?"

"Tristan," Jake said. "I want you to relay a message to Janice. I am challenging her in a simulated fighter combat at seventeen-hundred tonight."

Tristan laughed.

“I was right!” Tristan said. “You really did lose oxygen to your brain!”

“I am serious!” Jake yelled as he pounded his fist into the simulator cockpit he literally fell out of. “Either relay the message, or I will do it myself if you are a coward!”

Tristan stopped laughing and was suddenly enraged by Jake’s insult! He went up to Jake, grabbed him by his flight suit with his huge left hand, and pinned him to the simulation cockpit!

“Listen closely, small fry!” Tristan said angrily. “I tried to give you fair warning about her, even told you to forget about starting something with her as no Enhanced will ever have a relationship with a Natural! However, despite all that and your results, you still think you have a chance when you are a Natural? You lost in a simulated fight using her combat data six times! But to top it all off, you have the audacity to call me a coward?”

Tristan released Jake who nearly tumbled onto the floor as he was still fatigued. Tristan’s angry eyes stayed fix on Jake’s.

“I will deliver your message, punk,” Tristan said, “but know this! You had better win against her. If you do not, I am going to beat you to a pulp for insulting me! It will be a lesson that you and every Natural after you will learn to never mess with an Enhanced!”

Tristan stormed out of the Simulator Room. Jake, though, could feel his hands shaking before he clinched them into a fist.

“‘Enhanced’ Humans, huh?” Jake said aloud. “That is the one problem you have. You are still called ‘Human,’ and therefore, can still make mistakes.”

Before he could think of a plan, first things first. He needed something to eat since he did not have lunch yet. Before Jake left the room, however, another male voice called to him from the other side of the simulation cockpit.

“You sure have guts, Jake.”

Puzzled by who was speaking, Jake walked around to the other side of the simulation cockpit. He immediately recognized the tanned Human flight technician addressing Jake.

“Chief Engineer Billy?” Jake said. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to hear that entire conversation,” Billy said with a smile on his face. “Let me ask you something, is this Enhanced woman worth it?”

“Yes, she is. She is gorgeous beyond all comparison, and she has this aura of passion. She is also pretty hard to get, and I like the challenge.”

Billy sighed and shook his head.

“I figured,” Billy said. “I saw who you were referring to earlier from across the bay. You always go for the hard-to-get ones, huh? You know, trying to beat her in a one-on-one straight-on dogfighting contest is impossible.”

“Oh, come on, man! Do not tell me you think I will lose, too, do you?”

“That is why I am here to tell you about a something new that is under development that you can use to throw her off her game and give you the advantage.”

“Huh? Do not tell me you are going to rig the simulator in some fashion so that I can cheat against her?”

“No, you will never get her that way, anyway. Let me ask you this. Have you heard of the cybernetic implantation process?”

“Cybernetic implantation process? No, I cannot say that I have.”

“Because the primary races in the Federation who pilot fighters are the Centauri, the Minions, and the Enhanced, researchers in the field of cybernetics have been trying to find a way to advance their field to be able to link the mind of a Natural to that of a machine.”

“What purpose would that serve?”

“When the pilot is linked to a machine, their reflexes are almost instant and fast like those of an Enhanced if not better.”

“Wait, are you saying that with this process, my reflexes will be on par with Janice’s.”

“In theory, yes.”

“In theory?”

“It is still in the developmental stages. Right now, they are using a brain scanner to test this process. By using this device, it scans your brain while it instructs you to perform certain tasks inside the fighter. Once mapped, it will ask you to go hands free and perform the same tasks for confirmation. Once confirmed, you can use it to fly a fighter, at least in the simulation. Real-world fighter use has not been approved yet until cybernetic tests have caught up.”

“You are saying that one of these brain scanners is on board?”

“Yes. We were given one a few days ago for testing.”

“Okay, what is the catch? There has to be a price to using this system.”

“The only issue is repeated use will make you rely more on your brain than your limbs, and that is the last thing we need before tomorrow. You should be okay for a few times today, but after that, we will leave it for testing by others. Unlike you, I want to see one of those Enhanced taken down a peg, and you my friend have chosen the best among them on board. I want to be there when the leader of Cobra Squadron is beaten by Panther Squadron’s number two pilot. That would be a blow to their morale beyond comparison.”

“Heh, I see where you are coming from. While our motives may be different, I can see that our goals are the same. Very well. I agree to be your test subject for this project for the day. Let me grab a bite first, and then we will talk about this device and how it operates in more detail. I will see you in an hour, alright?”

“That sounds good. This will give me time to get the equipment and install it into the simulation cockpit. I will see you in an hour.”

“I will see you then,” Jake said as he turned to exit the simulation room.

He was now filled with confidence, despite his body still being sore. He can take some muscle relaxants tonight after the simulation competition. Besides, from the sounds of it, he will not be needing the muscles in his arms and legs for the contest. Jake only had two goals in his mind now aside from lunch.

Jake was going to win the hand of Janice and put Cobra Squadron in its place.

* * * * *

*Galley, Deck 9-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
1:58pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“I am so tired.”

Renee had brought Julana and Tiffany to the Galley to provide them a chance to rest. They had been walking for more than two hours for almost the entire length of the *Kasagi* and some of the decks. While there were still a few areas left that the Senators could visit, Renee could tell the senators were getting tired and the Galley was the closest place where they could sit and get a drink.

After Tiffany made her remark with her seat reclined and her head tilted back, Julana who sat on Tiffany’s right at their table looked over at Renee to her left.

“Are you not tired, Renee?” Julana asked. “We have walked for quite a while.”

Renee almost started to laugh before restraining herself.

“I am used to it as is everyone on board,” Renee said. “Bear in mind that many in the military go through rigorous training before being assigned to a ship. After my shift, I tend to work out for a couple of hours before cleaning up and going to dinner here in the Galley. This helps to keep me fit.”

“I see. Then this much walking must not be a burden on you at all.”

“I do not see how you all can do it,” Tiffany said, tilting her head back forward to look at Renee from across the table. “Maybe I need to get in better shape than I am now?”

“Well,” Renee said, “what it sounds like to me is that the two of you may need to be more active. If you do not mind me asking, what all do you do at home in terms of activity?”

Tiffany and Julana looked at each other before looking back at Renee.

“I would say cleaning, mostly,” Julana said. “I do so at least a couple of times a week. Otherwise, I am at work in Senate and committee meetings. When I am at home and not cleaning, I tend to either read, look at social media, or watch programs to keep me occupied when Deandre is not around.”

“Sounds like the same for me,” Tiffany said. “I guess the point is that we are not as active as we should be such as exercising like you.”

“Well,” Renee said, “for me, exercising can be rather invigorating. While I can easily assume that you brought nothing with you to do such an activity while on board, there is an alternative we can do to both pass the time while being fun and entertaining.”

“Oh?” Tiffany said. “What would that be?”

“You may have heard about it, but there is a recreation center for the crew to unwind during their downtime located one level down from here. It is right next to the fitness center.”

“What kind of recreational activities are available?”

“Arcade games, a few bowling lanes, a boxing ring, and some tables for card games. There are times it gets a bit rowdy in there, especially during a boxing match. Thankfully, the bowling lanes are found behind soundproof glass. Only alarms or alerts will chime in there when needed.”

“Bowling, huh? I have not done that in a while.”

“What is bowling?” Julana asked.

Tiffany looked at Julana, surprised by her question but soon realizing that those from other worlds would not know of the Human sport.

“I can teach you what it is when we get there,” Tiffany said before looking back at Renee. “Can you take us there?”

“I can,” Renee said, looking a little worried after she looked over at a nearby time display. “However, I do want to let you know that I was assigned to you by the Admiral for four hours. Half of that time has already been used.”

“That should be fine. We can go bowling for up to an hour and a half before you must return to duty. We know which deck our quarters are on and we should be able to head back on our own if needed.”

“Very well. I will take...”

Before Renee could finish her sentence, the audio speakers came on in the Galley.

“*Lieutenant Commander Renee,*” a male voice said. “*There is a call for you from Rear Admiral Deandre. Find the nearest terminal to accept the call.*”

Renee looked around the Galley and spotted a terminal screen on the far wall from the table they were sitting at.

“Excuse me for one moment, senators,” Renee said as she got up and walked over to the wall-mounted terminal.

Tiffany looked over at Julana.

“What do you think Deandre wants with Renee?” Tiffany asked.

“I am not sure,” Julana said, still looking at Renee who was taking the call. “I can only assume it has to do with us.”

As the two senators looked at Renee who was speaking to a video image of Deandre, too far to hear her voice, Renee was suddenly surprised. She then stood at attention and saluted as the video call ended. Once Deandre’s image disappeared, she lowered her arm from her salute, but was still looking incredibly surprised. Renee noticed the two senators were looking at her and proceeded to walk back towards their table.

“Is everything alright?” Julana asked.

“Yes,” Renee said, “though I must admit, I was not expecting what the Admiral said.”

“What was that?”

“Well, from my understanding, you two cannot sleep in their quarters per protocol since you are VIPs. However, you can dine with the Admiral and the Commander in the Admiral’s quarters as honored guests for dinner tonight at eighteen-hundred hours. I am sorry. I mean at six o’clock tonight.”

Tiffany looked puzzled at Renee before looking over at Julana.

“How convenient they remember that detail now,” Tiffany said.

“Deandre may have forgotten,” Julana said, “but Alto would not. I suppose they did not want us to get the wrong impression if they told us. They were also quite upset with us if you recall our meeting earlier.”

“Yes, I do.”

Tiffany looked back at Renee, but despite telling them what she was told, Renee still looked bewildered.

“Was there something else he said?” Tiffany asked. “You still look troubled.”

“Oh,” Renee said once Tiffany was addressing her. “It is just, when the Admiral had mentioned that to me, he told me two other details I was not expecting to hear him say.”

“What were those two details?”

“The first is that he extended my leave of absence today for the remainder of my shift to keep you two company.”

“Sounds like he wants to make sure someone is keeping an eye on us.”

“He may also want someone to escort us to their quarters,” Julana said. “Unless you happen to know where they are, Tiffany?”

Tiffany looked at Julana and was about to retort when she realized Julana was correct in her assumption.

“Valid point,” Tiffany said as she looked back at Renee. “If that is the first detail that he mentioned to you, Renee, what was the second detail?”

“Well,” Renee started to say, “I am still trying to process this in my mind as this was a rather huge surprise, but the Admiral has asked me to join you all for dinner as thanks for my service to the VIPs, namely you two.”

Tiffany and Julana looked at Renee in surprise. While it may be considered an honor in the military for someone in Renee’s position to sit with the Admiral and the Commander for dinner in the Admiral’s quarters, Tiffany began to think her invitation to dinner was for another reason. Tiffany was quick to realize what that reason was.

“Maybe I am reading this wrong,” Tiffany said, “but I think the reason you were invited to dinner was to make sure that neither I nor Julana stay in our husbands’ quarters.”

“Maybe so,” Renee said, “but it appears I am your chaperone already as it were.”

“That would seem to be the situation we are in,” Julana said. “That being the case, I guess we have some time to kill before dinner. Can you go ahead and take us to the recreation room? I am curious about this ‘bowling’ you are talking about.”

“Very well. The elevators that are closest to our position will take us close to the recreation room. Follow me please.”

Renee headed for the Galley’s exit with Tiffany and Julana getting up and following close behind. Once they left the Galley, they headed down the corridor to their right towards the elevators. As they approached the elevators, Tiffany stopped, looking down at the deck. Julana noticed that Tiffany had stopped, and she stopped as well, looking towards Tiffany.

“Is something wrong, Tiffany?” Julana asked.

Renee heard Julana’s question and stopped to look back at Tiffany. Tiffany looked up at Renee with a look of concern on her face.

“Hey, Renee?” Tiffany said. “Before we go any further, I have something to ask you.”

Renee had a look of curiosity on her face at Tiffany’s sudden question.

“What is it, ma’am?” Renee asked.

“Well,” Tiffany said, “have we become a burden on you?”

Renee stood there for a moment, thinking about it.

“To be honest,” Renee said, “I thought the two of you were going to cause trouble based on how the Admiral and the Commander decided to assign me as your escort. I honestly thought it was some sort of punishment for something I might have done wrong that I was not aware of.”

“Did our husbands make it sound like we were going to be trouble?” Julana asked.

“Well, if I may be blunt, you are only here because your husbands were always away for a couple of weeks. This mission provided you the perfect opportunity to not have to be away from them during that time despite the danger this mission presents. However, it was obvious that the two of you were not aware of military protocol in that regards where you are not able to stay in their quarters. How am I doing thus far?”

“You are more accurate than I would like to admit,” Tiffany said.

“However,” Renee continued, “I do not have many friends onboard. In a way, this is by far the most I have opened myself to anyone on board that I can remember. Maybe that answers your question, ma’am. I can finally be open with you two around. Therefore, to answer your previous question, no you are not a burden thus far.”

“Thus far?”

“The day is not over yet. I do not want to go pressing our luck if it can be avoided.”

Tiffany chuckled.

“Fair enough,” Tiffany said. “Let us get going.”

Renee nodded in agreement before proceeding to the elevators with Julana and Tiffany following behind her. Renee called one of the elevators and when it arrived, they got one that was empty. Once they got inside, Renee pressed the button for the deck she wanted, and they descended to Deck Ten just below them. Once they went down a deck, the doors opened, and they left the elevator with Renee heading towards their right. Ten meters from the elevators at the end of the corridor was a large armored door. As they reached the door, Renee grabbed the handle and opened it. Inside was a large room that took up two decks! To their right were a set of card game tables with arcade-style video games beyond them that lined the right side of the

room. To the left was a boxing ring, though it could easily be used for the ancient sport of wrestling provided the participants could play that sport by the higher ups due to the physical punishment that sport puts on the body. Six bowling lanes were placed against the far wall behind the soundproof glass Renee spoke of, and a lounge area was in the middle of the room.

The room was mostly vacant around this time since just about everyone on the ship was still on duty, save the night shift personnel. However, the three women noticed seven pilots sitting in the lounge area. Six of them were Human males and they sat together swapping stories, while the lone female sat a few meters away reading a paperback book, which was a rare item these days. No one noticed the three of them entering the room, as if they were ignoring them.

Renee looked to have recognized them based on the jumpsuits and the patches they were wearing. She had a serious look on her face.

“Julana and Tiffany,” Renee said quietly, “remember when I mentioned about how I wanted to avoid members of Cobra Squadron?”

“Yes,” Tiffany said quietly as well. “Wait, are these pilots from that squadron?”

“Yes. These are the pilots who transferred to this ship before we left port. Cobra Squadron consists of a group of aces consisting entirely of Enhanced Humans. However, except for the woman over there who is the squadron’s leader, the rest of the pilots are very cocky. It is a quality that I hated about them.”

Tiffany and Julana looked at Renee with puzzled expressions on their faces.

“You sound like you know them personally,” Julana said. “What past history do you have with this squadron?”

“She used to be one of us,” a booming male voice said from behind. “She is also an Enhanced Human. Is that not right, ‘Little Ren?’”

Julana and Tiffany turned around to see a huge man standing more than seven feet tall behind them. Renee did not turn around as she appeared to know who it was by voice alone.

“Tristan,” Renee said. “I knew the squadron was short one cocky pilot.”

“Ah, do not be like that. It is not our fault you were lacking a few good qualifications to be one of the best, especially in the physical department. For an Enhanced, you sure did not get a lot of improvements, did you, ‘Little Ren?’”

Tristan began to laugh with a deep booming voice. Renee suddenly turned around, her face red with anger.

“How about you stop it with the name calling, Tristan?!” Renee yelled. “I outrank your giant behind in case those eyes of yours are failing to see the rank insignia on my uniform!”

Unfortunately, Renee’s outburst had gotten the attention of the rest of the squadron. They looked over in Renee’s direction and started making various comments.

“Hey, is that ‘Little Ren?’” one of the pilots asked

“Hey, it is!” another pilot said.

“Looks like nothing has change much about her,” a third pilot was heard saying. “She is still as fiery as ever.”

As the pilots started talking about Renee, Tiffany soon heard their jabs at Renee change as their attention was suddenly directed toward who was accompanying her.

“Forget her,” a different pilot said. “Who are the other two women she is with?”

“One of them is a Celestian! Check out the wings!”

“Looks like ‘Little Ren’ has stooped to hanging out with Naturals and freaks.”

Tiffany was about to turn and say something to the rude pilots. However, the squadron leader who was reading her book closed her book hard and slammed it on the table in front of

her. Everyone in the room suddenly fell silent and looked her way as she stood up from her chair. There was a powerful air of authority the squadron leader had about her as Tiffany continued to look her way along with everyone else in the room.

“That is enough out of you, pilots!” the squadron leader yelled. “You need to show some respect to those two senators accompanying Lieutenant Commander Renee, who I might add is also your superior officer!”

The other squadron members looked back at the ladies, then stood up and saluted.

“We apologize for our conduct, senators!” the pilots said in unison. “Please forgive us.”

“It is more than the senators you should be apologizing to, morons!” the squadron leader barked at her pilots.

Tiffany noticed the moment squadron leader called her pilots “morons,” the pilots’ faces were showing signs of restraint from what appeared to be anger. Tiffany was quick to realize that calling an Enhanced a “moron” was a grave insult, especially coming from another Enhanced and a superior officer.

“Our apologies, Lieutenant Commander Renee!” the pilots yelled. “Please forgive us!”

Renee looked over her right shoulder at Tristan. When Tristan realized she was looking at him with anger in her eyes, his smile disappeared as he saluted.

“My apologies, ma’am!” Tristan yelled.

Renee looked back at the other pilots.

“Let me make one thing perfectly clear going forward,” Renee said. “That stupid nickname dies here in this room. If I so much as hear it again even as a whisper, you will be reported to your squadron leader for insubordination and I will leave it up to her to decide your punishment. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the pilots said including Tristan behind her.

Their leader turned towards her squadron again.

“Speaking of punishment,” their leader said, “all of you are to report to the fitness center immediately! You are to run fifty laps around the bay as your punishment for disrespecting your superior officer! Now, move out!”

All the pilots except for Tristan ran out of the recreation room in a single file line. Tristan went around Renee and the senators as he approached his leader.

“Tristan,” his leader said, “unless you got something important to say to me, you better go join the rest of them.”

“Actually, it is important,” Tristan said. “It has to do with Panther Two.”

As Tristan walked over to his leader and whispered something in her ear, Renee looked at Tiffany and Julana. They met Lieutenant Jake earlier near the flight simulation room. Renee put her right hand to her forehead as she closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Do not tell me he is going through with this,” Renee said quietly.

The face of Tristan’s squadron leader was quickly filled with more anger, but then she calmed down after taking a deep breath.

“Fine,” she said, looking at Tristan. “You can go tell him I accept his challenge. I want to put an end to this fiasco. Report to the fitness center after you are done. If you run to the flight simulation room and back, I will knock ten laps off your punishment. Now, go.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Tristan said as he saluted.

He turned and left the room at a running pace. Tristan made no effort to look at Renee and the other ladies. For Renee, that was fine with her. Once he left, his squadron leader approached Renee, Julana, and Tiffany.

“I must apologize for the rudeness of my men, senators,” she said. “I am Lieutenant Commander Janice, squad leader of Cobra Squadron. You two must be Senators Julana and Tiffany who were appointed by the Federation Senate. I was informed you were onboard prior to our departure from dock.”

Janice looked at Renee with a slight smile on her face.

“It has been a while, has it not, Renee?” Janice asked.

“Two years now,” Renee answered.

“Really? Time sure has a way of escaping some people. I am sorry about how the guys treated you. I guess they still consider you a quitter for leaving the squadron two years ago.”

“I could not take their ‘little’ jokes anymore. It was really aggravating me.”

“Yeah, I remember the torment they put you through. They just would not leave you alone. I must ask something, though. Why are you on board this ship? Are you assigned to this ship’s Panther Squad?”

“No, I no longer fly fighters. I am the primary helmsman for this ship.”

“You are the Helmsman?!” Janice said with a shocked expression on her face.

“And, as you can see, I am the same rank as you, now!”

“The rank insignia was a dead giveaway. You were an ensign at the time you left the squadron. I have a hard time believing you have jumped three ranks since then! I guess your calling was not behind the controls of a fighter. Rather, it was for you to be behind the controls of something much bigger with the lives of a lot more people in your hands.”

Janice gave Renee a hug.

“I am so proud of you, Renee,” Janice continued. “I really am. That is the best news I have heard since coming aboard.”

“Thanks, ma’am,” Renee said

Janice pulled back.

“We are the same rank now, remember?” Janice said. “You can call me by my first name going forward.”

“I know,” Renee said. “I got so use to saying ‘ma’am.’ Besides, you still have more experience than I do being at this rank. It just seems right to me.”

“I understand, but if we ever go out somewhere, it would be better to use my first name. Otherwise, people may start asking questions.”

“Okay...Janice,” Renee said with a smile.

“I am sorry to interrupt,” Julana said with a look of concern on her face. “If I may so bold to ask, but what is this challenge that brute told you about earlier?”

“Oh, that,” Janice said as she looked at Julana. “Ever since I came aboard, guys from all over the ship have been staring at me. It is something I am used to. However, the number two of Panther Squadron wants to challenge me in simulated fighter combat.”

“Lieutenant Jake?” Tiffany asked. “Why?”

“I have made it my creed that the only man I will ever want to be with is the one who can defeat me in combat, whether in simulation or in real combat. So far no one has been able to do it, nor can they. I am one of the best aces out there, and my performance record proves it.”

“Even after two years, huh?” Renee said. “I am not surprised Jake made that challenge, though. He was quite determined when we ran into him earlier. He must have heard about that challenge from somewhere, though.”

“I am willing to bet it was Tristan, that idiot.”

“I figured. We ran into Jake near the simulation room on the starboard side.”

“Tristan must have told him just prior to you running into him. I will give this Jake some credit. He is the only one in the past few months to make that challenge, and I could use the practice. I am beginning to feel a little apathetic from the lack of combat training.”

“I hope you do not intend to beat him too harshly. We need all of our able body pilots for tomorrow’s mission to be in prime shape.”

“I cannot make any guarantees. The challenge has been set for seventeen-hundred hours. Maybe you three should come by and see me whip his butt, provided he can entertain me at least for a few minutes.”

“We will think about it. It is less than three hours away, so we have plenty of time, but we have dinner plans at eighteen-hundred hours with the Admiral and the Commander.”

“With those two? How did you manage that?”

“You may be surprised to know that these two senators are their wives.”

Janice’s eyes almost bulged out of their sockets when Renee said that. Janice looked at Tiffany and Julana with shock on her face. She quickly snapped out of it.

“Say no more,” Janice said. “I better go and make sure my men are running those laps. I will see you all later today.”

“Bye, Janice” Renee said as Janice walked out of the recreational room.

After Janice left, the three ladies looked around and noticed no one else was in the room. Renee turned to Julana and Tiffany.

“So,” Renee said, “I do believe we need to teach Julana the fun sport of bowling. Shall we begin the lesson?”

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*Flight Simulators, Deck 8-Midsection, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
2:28pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“I cannot believe that was even possible!”

Jake stepped out of the simulation cockpit, and stood there on the platform, dumbfounded. He could not believe the latest results he had from the last simulation.

“So,” Billy said standing across from Jake. “Did that system work out well for you?”

Jake looked over at Billy, still shocked.

“Did that work?” Jake asked, surprised that Billy would ask that question. “I was able to keep up with the computer’s movements! Why has this system not been rolled out yet?”

“As I mentioned, the cybernetics team needs to catch up. Using the scanner alone puts a great deal of strain on the brain from excessive use. Now, I would say that you should be able to get at least three more uses out of it in one day before you start to feel side effects from repeated use. I would suggest not using it again until your match with Janice happens later.”

“More like ‘if’ it happens. I have not heard anything back yet from her after I told Tristan to relay my message.”

“That is provided he actually relayed your message to her. There is a chance that he may not tell her at all, thinking it is a complete waste of her time.”

“True, but after how upset he got, I will bet he is more willing to see her try to mop the deck with me than deny me the chance to win her heart.”

As Jake finished that sentence, the simulator door began to open. Billy quickly found the cockpit canopy controls on the control panel near the simulator and closed the canopy. Jake knew Billy was hiding the experimental equipment should it be anyone from Cobra Squadron.

Tristan soon appeared in the doorway, but he looked a bit tired like he was running.

“I do not need to come inside,” Tristan said between breaths, “but you got your match, punk. Janice will meet you here at seventeen-hundred hours. Then, she will wipe the floor with you and be done with it.”

Jake gave a slight smile.

“Something tells me that things may not go as you and Janice want,” Jake said, “but I will be here when she arrives.”

Tristan looked rather upset at Jake’s words, but held his tongue as he closed the door. Jake felt a slight laugh coming, but it was better not to tempt fate should Tristan be outside the door still. Jake waved Billy over so that they could talk privately.

“Do you think he knows?” Jake asked quietly.

“I doubt it,” Billy said quietly as well. “This system has been in development secretly for a while. It was only meant for Naturals. If the Enhanced were to find out about this system and the reasons for its development, there would be a lot of problems.”

“Do you think Janice will see this system when she arrives?”

“I will try to hide it where it will only deploy once the canopy is closed and she cannot see you. That will make it quite the surprise for her and her squadron if they come with her.”

“I am concerned about one thing, though. Will Janice complain about my use of experimental systems in a simulator as some form of cheating?”

“If she does complain about it, I can provide her the documentation saying that the Research and Development Department of the military has approved its use in simulations. Both the department head and the Admiralty have approved its testing as well, though the fact that this was again meant for Natural use and not Enhanced use will raise quite the stink back home. That is, of course, provided she knows about it. If the system can be hidden the moment your canopy is open again, they will be none the wiser.”

“Still, the fact I won a couple of times with no losses with this system you installed is quite the feat and an achievement. I now stand a chance of winning against her.”

“That is good. With this system that I installed for you to use, you now stand a fighting chance at not only beating her in a simulated fight but knocking that high-and-mighty ego of one of their own down several pegs.”

“Personal feelings aside, I have to admit, you really have outdone yourself. I cannot wait till the Federation puts this system into full service!”

Jake started to laugh, almost like he was crazy. But then he stopped.

“You know, I forgot to ask you something,” Jake said. “What was this system called? All I know is how it works based on what you told me.”

“Oh, right,” Billy said. “I never did tell you. This piece of equipment is called CRIPS, short for Cerebral Reading Interactive Piloting System.”

“That is an odd name for a system.”

“Do not look at me about the name. I did not name it. I am more focused on the results that what it is called.”

“I know. I am also a test subject for this device, effectively. Either way, I need to rest up before the fight. The last thing I need is for this system to misread my mind due to fatigue and cause me to look bad if not lose. That is not an option.”

“Especially if the rest of Cobra Squadron is here and ready to beat your butt down if you do lose to Janice.”

Jake suddenly slouched forward and looked like he was already defeated.

“Great,” Jake said. “Thanks for that reminder. Now I must win this fight, or I will be a stain on the wall somewhere.”

“Do you want me to provide some additional means of insurance for you to win?”

“No, Billy. You have already provided me with the CRIPS and that is all I will need to win. Anything more would be considered cheating, and I will not win anyone’s heart that way.”

“Let us hope that Cobra Squadron does not view the CRIPS as cheating on its own or you will be a stain either way. Although, I do find one thing amusing about the prospect of you winning with the CRIPS.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“You are fighting her using your mind to win over her heart. It is almost poetic in a sense when you think about it.”

Jake laughed. Billy would get no argument from Jake on that idea.

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