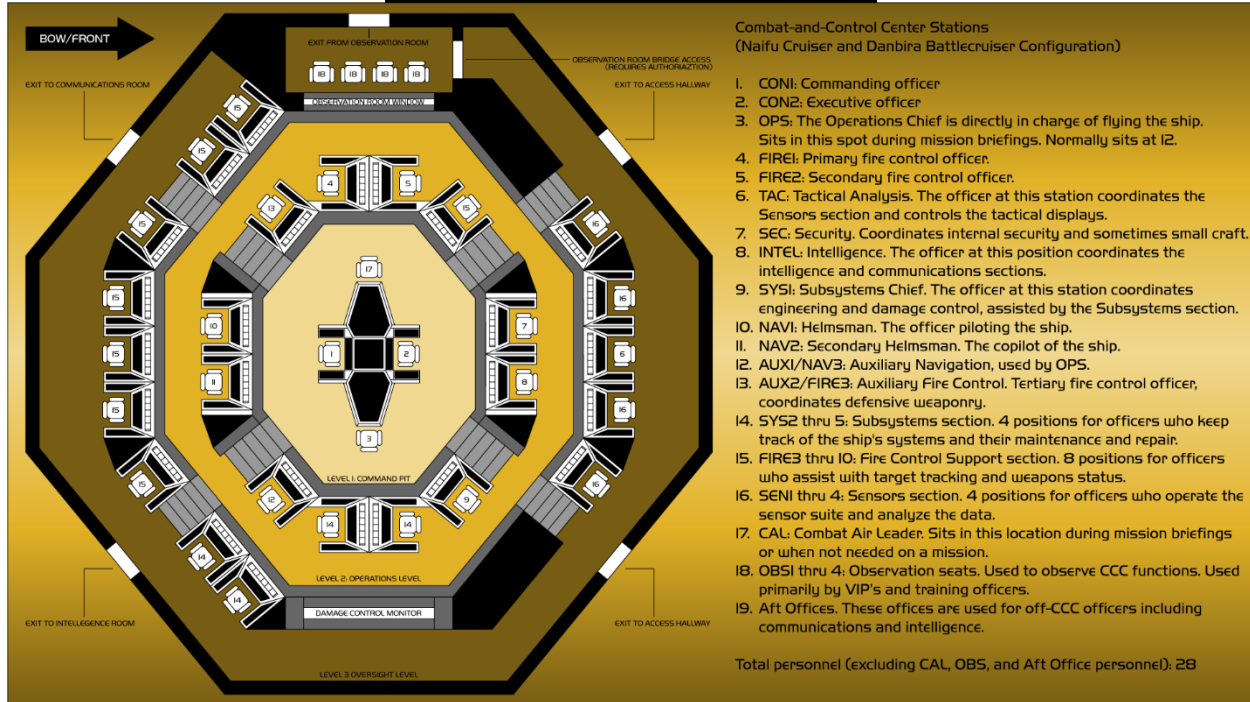


Warring Factions: Alternate Timeline Remake
The Cost of Peace/The Divide Within



PART 3

*Recreation Center, Deck 10-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
4:41pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“You won again, Renee.”

Tiffany was beginning to feel disappointed in how she had played bowling. Julana, Renee, and Tiffany just finished playing their second round of three games of bowling. Renee kept breaking more than one hundred points scored in both games while Tiffany did so only in the first game and Julana in the second game. Tiffany knew she was out of practice not having played in a long while, but the fact that Julana was improving was nice to see despite it being her first time doing so.

Tiffany began to wonder if she was also doing badly because her mind was on not only the mission, but this divide she was seeing on board the ship. She knew that Natural and Enhanced Humans are still not on the best of terms since the Colonial War that took place more than twenty-three years ago before the First Interstellar War occurred. However, she had hoped that during those twenty years, Humanity would be able to unite in the face of other species being present. The fact that they have not done so seems petty and selfish. She wondered how people like Julana must view these internal squabbles that Humans had towards each other.

She will have to ask her about her views later as she had a game to focus on.

“Sorry ladies,” Renee said, feeling apologetic. “I bowl whenever I get the chance to do so during my downtime. I am still not as good as Julana’s husband, though.”

Tiffany looked over at Julana with a puzzled expression. If Deandre knows how to bowl, why did Julana not know about the sport or how it is played?

“Julana, what does Renee mean?” Tiffany asked. “I thought you never heard of bowling before today?”

“My apologies, but I have heard of the sport,” Julana answered. “However, I do not know how it was played. I wanted to learn but Deandre and I are usually very busy, so he never had the chance to teach me. I wanted to be taught as someone who had never heard of the game before. I find that if you heard of something but never tried it before, you are taught differently than someone who has never heard of the sport. I am a fast learner of the sport from the looks of things. Deandre, however, has been bowling since he was little boy. The best I have heard him score is two-hundred seventy-nine.”

Tiffany’s jaw dropped!

“Is he that good?!” Tiffany asked with a shocked expression on her face

“Yes, he is. It sounds like he continues to practice while on board when he is not on active duty. It may be a while before I can be as good as him. I guess I need to practice some more before then, but it will surprise him when I do play with him or against him. He may even ask who I learned from.”

Renee laughed a little.

“It will be some interesting irony,” Renee said, “Deandre is the reason for why I bowl so well. I could not bowl as well as I do now were it not for some pointers he gave me.”

Tiffany looked over at Renee, but with a look that something was troubling her.

“What is wrong, Tiffany?” Renee asked. “Are you concerned about your bowling skills after this second game? I could give you some pointers as well if they will help.”

“It is not that, Renee,” Tiffany said. “Something has been on my mind ever since that Tristan guy brought it up earlier.”

The look on Renee’s face went from happy to serious. Renee looked like she knew what Tiffany was about to ask but Renee decided to wait and hear what Tiffany’s question was.

“Renee,” Tiffany said, “you are an Enhanced Human, but I have to ask, what is it about you that was enhanced?”

Tiffany looked at Renee square in the eyes, but Renee soon closed her eyes and lowered her head. She looked like she was ashamed of something.

“You want to know what was enhanced about me, Tiffany?” Renee asked. “Very well. I will tell you. My reflexes, data analysis, and reaction time were what was enhanced at the time I was conceived. Normally, these qualities are great to have as fighter pilots. Unfortunately, those enhancements were not good enough to fly with Cobra Squadron. My reflexes and reaction speed were slower than the rest of the pilots. Janice noticed this but told me to hang in there, thinking that additional training and practice might help me improve. Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, they did not.”

Renee opened her eyes and looked squarely in Tiffany’s eyes.

“You know that ‘little’ joke they talked about?” Renee asked. “They were not just referencing my height. They also referred to how I am always a ‘little’ late to react as a pilot.”

“So, that is what Tristan meant by ‘among other things,’ huh?” Tiffany asked.

“Yes, but while my skills are slower than that of fighter pilots for their squad, they are still far faster than that of any normal Human at the helm of a ship such as this one. The *Kasagi* may have a lot more mass than a fighter, but she can maneuver quite nimbly at my hands.”

Julana suddenly stood up from her seat with a look of disgust on her face. She took a few steps away from Tiffany and Renee who were suddenly puzzled about her actions.

“What is it, Julana?” Renee asked puzzled. “Is something bothering you?”

“Can I ask the two of you something?” Julana replied angrily. “Do you two have any idea as to how both of you sound right now?”

Tiffany and Renee looked at each other wondering if their discussion about Enhanced Humans was bothering Julana somehow. They looked back at Julana.

“Was our discussion bothering you, Julana?” Tiffany asked.

“It amazes me how, despite being part of an interstellar community, Humans can still be this way,” Julana said. “Humans are still using terms such as ‘Enhanced’ and ‘Natural’ when you all are the same race. I cannot believe Humans can still be so petty about such things!”

“But Julana,” Renee started to say before Julana turned around and raised her hand, stopping her.

“Just because someone in your race had their genetic makeup altered at the time of conception, what right do those who have not gone through the process to quickly call those who had the process done by some title other than just ‘Human?’ I have never seen such pettiness in my life! I did not want to bring this up, but I was told there was a war twenty-three years ago between both sets of Humans prior to the First Interstellar War over this same problem! Now here we are with Humans still dealing with the same problem they cannot or will not get over in the face of an interstellar community! How can we hope to achieve peace in the Federation when the race that founded the nation is still fighting among themselves?”

Renee and Tiffany could not bear to face Julana, feeling ashamed of the facts she was presenting. They knew she was right, but they did not know how to respond to this problem.

“Even more so,” Julana continued, “you do realize that we have some challenge between both sets of Humans happening in less than twenty minutes between Jake and Janice? Can you sit there and tell me this is not some stupid attempt to find out which kind of Human is better? I do not know about you two, but I have heard enough of this stupidity. I am going to take a stand on this matter by going to the flight simulator room where this ‘competition’ is being held and I am going to attempt to stop it! I can no longer stand by and watch one of our founding races continue to tear itself apart from the inside. I have had all I can stand of this nonsense!”

As Julana began heading over towards the exit, Tiffany stood up.

“Hold it, Julana,” she said.

Julana stopped and turned towards Tiffany.

“Tiffany, I am not about to have you stop me from what needs to be done!”

“Julana, I do not intend to. You are right. My race is still dealing with a problem that we know is petty and ridiculous in the face of an interstellar community. We have been suppressing this matter for more than two decades and even I know it needs to be addressed. There should not be a division between the two parts of my race but there still is. This competition is proof of that. What I want to know is where this sudden anger is coming from?”

Julana took a deep breath.

“Maybe,” Julana said, “I am still angry about the fact that we are on board this vessel our husbands are in command of and that stupid military protocol prohibits us from being with them in private like I was hoping we would be. However, if there was ever a good reason to release this frustration, it is on a matter that I can and needs to be remedied now.”

“Fair enough,” Tiffany said. “In that case, I am coming with you as well. I am curious to see how they react when a non-Human tells them off on this matter.”

“I am coming, too” Renee said. “Even I will agree that this needs to be addressed. Besides, you will need my help to get in since you two do not have access to that room on your own without me.”

“Then let us hurry up and go!” Julana yelled as she turned towards the door leading out of the bowling room.

“Wait a moment,” Tiffany said.

Julana stopped and turned towards Tiffany with a confused expression on her face.

“Why would you want to stop me?” Julana said. “They are starting shortly, and you said you wanted to join me in stopping this. We cannot waste any more time.”

Tiffany and Renee pointed down towards their feet. Julana looked down at her feet, then felt stupid when she realized why they stopped her.

“Oh, right,” she said, feeling silly. “I forgot that we have to return the bowling shoes, first. Alright, let us hurry and change them. They may start before we arrive, though.”

“What did you plan to do if they did?” Renee asked.

Julana found a seat near her original shoes and sat down to change. She looked at Renee to answer her question.

“Let me ask you something, Renee,” Julana said, “how would one suddenly stop an active simulation that is currently running?”

* * * * *

*Flight Simulators, Deck 8-Midsection, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
4:55pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“She should be here soon.”

Jake sat in one of the simulator cockpits with the canopy open looking over the settings of the controls one more time before his challenge started. Janice and the rest of Cobra Squadron had not arrived yet. Billy stood on the platform next to the cockpit on Jake’s right.

Jake investigated the inside of his helmet on his lap. Billy had spent some time after Jake’s last use of the CRIPS or Cerebral Reading Interactive Piloting System to modify the inside to house the equipment. This made hiding the experimental equipment easier, but the cables could not be hidden so easily. They would have to be draped on the left side of the cockpit to hide them from Janice’s view as she would be using the simulation cockpit to his right. Currently, the CRIPS was Jake’s best means of surpassing Janice or any Enhanced in simulated combat. The last thing he needed was for someone to spot it somehow, taking away his only advantage in this fight.

Jake looked back at the data pad to review the results as the CRIPS needed to scan his brain again to get a better reading after Billy modified his helmet.

“So,” Billy said, “do you think you are ready to face the real Janice instead of some computer-controlled version of her data?”

“I hope so,” Jake said. “One could fight against the AI all they want, but it is nothing compared to a living pilot. She may easily pull some maneuvers or tactics that the data does not cover, and that makes her very unpredictable.”

“Maybe so, but the biggest disadvantage she has in this fight is the lack of information on her opponent. Unlike yourself who has been studying her data, she has not done the same as far as I know. Her lack of preparation, the fact she has not trained against your data in this room, or that she does not know what your fighter is equipped with puts her at a great disadvantage. She probably believes that her skills and reflexes alone are enough to fight you without taking it seriously. This is just another example of the Enhanced superiority complex.”

“Somehow, I do not get that feeling from Janice.”

“You think she is an exception?”

“She does not give off an air of superiority as the rest of her squadron does. Maybe that is why she is the squadron leader. She may have a cooler head on her shoulders when it comes to flying and fighter combat. I do not doubt the possibility that she has not studied me, believing that her own reflexes far surpass mine. Under any normal circumstances, she would be right about her judgement. It is only due to the CRIPS that is installed that her judgement will be flawed in this competition.”

“Fair enough, lover boy. During a competition like this, I will serve as your flight controller and tell you her movements and position. Someone in Cobra Squadron will be doing the same thing for Janice, but we will be wearing headsets so we will not hear and know what the other person or pilot is doing.”

“What about the recorders for this combat? Are they ready to go?”

“Yes, and they will be broadcasting throughout the ship. Everyone will see this including the CAL. We can only hope that he does not come here to end this. While you have the means to win, just remember that her reflexes may be on par even with this equipment. There is the chance that she may still win, but you will definitely be pushing her limits and that will be enough for people to start talking about whether the Enhanced are really as superior as they think they are.”

“That did not help my confidence, but I am not doing this to push her limits. I am in this to win. Remember, Tristan and maybe even the entire Cobra Squadron will be here to beat me to a pulp if I lose.”

“Fair enough. I guess there is only one thing for you to do: win.”

The door on the starboard side of the room opened, and all the members of Cobra Squadron came walking in. Janice led the group wearing her flight suit with her helmet in hand. While her flight suit's ability to accent her figure was making Jake more determined, knowing that Tristan and the other six pilots were also present drove the point that Jake needed to win or face their wrath if he lost.

“Alright, joker,” Janice said. “Let us get this farce over with. I have more important things to do than play games with boys with delusions of grandeur.”

Jake looked over at Janice with a grin on his face.

“If I were you, ma'am,” Jake said, “I would take this competition a little more seriously.”

“Fine, then,” Janice said. “I will take it seriously and beat you in less than two minutes. I can guarantee that as a fact.”

Jake let out a small laugh.

“I would not make such a guarantee,” Jake said. “I am not going to be easy to beat.”

Janice sighed.

“Another cocky idiot,” she said. “Tristan, go make sure that the system has not been tampered with.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Tristan said as he made his way to the flight controller room located to the aft of the room.

Janice approached the second simulation cockpit as Tristan went past the unit and entered the room behind them. The rest of Cobra Squadron stood at the entryways to both port and starboard. Jake knew why they were positioning themselves at the doors. If he did lose, there was no escape for Jake.

Billy looked over at Jake.

“Should you fail,” Billy said, “the only other exit is in the back of the control room. The only problem is the fact that Tristan may lock the door between this room and the control room.”

“I know,” Jake said as he took a deep breath. “I guess then that I better win.”

“You better. The last thing I need to do is call a coroner.”

Billy climbed down from the platform and walked towards the control room. Jake looked back over at Janice, who did not return his gaze. Instead she closed her canopy. Jake looked at his display panel as he flipped the switch to close his own canopy. He put on his helmet after the canopy slid closed to prevent anyone from seeing the helmet’s cables while the holographic display that lined the canopy interior activated, showing a star-filled background. As the simulation ran checks on the system, Jake put his helmet on, and immediately felt the CRIPS inside activating. Jake relaxed in his seat as he mentally sent signals through the CRIPS. The controls were immediately responding to his thoughts.

“*Jake, can you hear me?*” Billy voice spoke through the helmet’s headset.

“Loud and clear,” Jake said calmly

“*Good. Everything is ready on this end. Right now, Tristan and I cannot hear each other, but I do not want to take any chances.*”

“I understand. I am ready.”

There was a slight pause over the intercom.

“*Tristan is signaling that Janice is ready to go. T-minus five seconds until we start broadcasting throughout the ship.*”

Jake took another deep breath. He needed to focus on beating Janice, not the audience he was about to have.

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*Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
4:58pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“Almost an hour left before dinner, sir.”

Alto’s reminder about the approaching dinner time made Deandre realize how close it was until they would be seeing their wives along with Renee in his quarters. Deandre had already informed the head chef in the Galley about the dinner plans and what to bring. He wanted to introduce Alto, Tiffany, and Renee to his favorite dish that he makes for Julana and himself at home. The dish was an alteration on an old Earth recipe that he called Chicken a la Queen. He provided his recipe to the Galley on how to prepare it specifically the same way he would have made it. He made sure the proportions were for five people along with salad and breadsticks.

After they had lunch, Deandre remained in his quarters to clean a few things up and to setup the table and chairs for later tonight before he reported back to the CCC to receive the end of the afternoon reports. Almost all the reports that were received were usually handled by Daniel, but occasionally, Deandre would look them over to spot any oddities that might occur. Usually there were no oddities save for the occasional infringement such as illegal gambling and unauthorized physical activities a various “varieties.” The head of Security was usually put in charge of those matters as they were also the reason why they were reported.

While Deandre knew of the recreational room located two floors down towards the aft, he was still on duty until after dinner has concluded. He usually goes bowling and sometimes Renee would be there to practice as well. He has been pondering about teaching Julana how to bowl as well. Since she was on board, he could see about teaching her after dinner. It would give them both something to do together for the remainder of the evening since there was no regulation against participating in such an activity. He had checked to make sure.

For the next thirty minutes, however, he was stuck in the CCC reading boring reports at his station in the Command Pit.

“Looking forward to dinner with the VIPs would be preferable compared to reading the afternoon reports,” Deandre said with little enthusiasm. “We only left a little over five hours ago. Is there anything more meaningful to report?”

“I am afraid not, sir,” Daniel said at his seat in the Command Pit at the starboard end of the holographic display table. “Unless we are experiencing a deviation in loss whether small to great in areas such as air and water recycling or power levels due to an unknown drain, it is the same boring reports.”

Deandre looked at Daniel with very little interest or energy in his posture.

“In other words,” Deandre said, “the same old boring routine. Do the head logistics guys in Gallonigher really go over these reports when we submit them? What purpose does it serve?”

“My guess?” Daniel asked. “Considering we operate based on taxpayers’ money that is budgeted by the Department of Defense, they want to make sure that we are all held accountable for any unnecessary waste of time, money, and resources.”

“There are times I find the monetary applications of the Federation complicated,” Alto said. “We Minions understand the need to keep consumerism in check and offer the drive to work for the means to achieve the finances for what society needs, but it is still foreign to us since we never had to use it.”

“Believe me,” Deandre said, “after Earth’s World War III, money was the last thing on people’s minds. Money really had no value as everyone struggled to survive. It only became necessary again once the situation was settled and life could resume once the colonies were growing in number to prevent apathy among the citizens. I was born a few decades after that happened, so I do not know what it was like before that time.”

Deandre looked past Alto at the Security station as the officer there had a puzzled expression on his face before looking at the Intel Officer next to him and conversing with him. The Intel Officer then looked at his station with a puzzled expression as he pulled up what appeared to be some sort of video feed at his station. The Intel Officer then looked over at Daniel who was still looking over the reports.

“Ops?” the Intel Officer said aloud. “There is a video transmission being fed throughout the ship’s terminals.”

Daniel looked to his right at the Intel Officer with a puzzled expression on his face.

“What sort of transmission?” Daniel asked.

“Security noticed it first,” the Intel Officer said, “but the transmission is originating from the flight simulation room.”

“Who is in there right now?”

“The entirety of Cobra Squadron including the squadron leader, Panther Two, and the simulation technician. Cobra One and Panther Two are in the simulator cockpits right now.”

“Why would those two be in the simulators and why is it being transmitted throughout the ship without authorization?”

“This is a problem,” Alto said, “and I am not just referring to the unauthorized feed running throughout the ship, either.”

“What do you mean?” Deandre said.

“Panther Squadron except for Panther One consists of Natural Humans. Panther One is a Centauri, but this is Panther Two in the simulators. Cobra Squadron however consists solely of Enhanced Humans. You realize what sort of competition this is, right, Admiral?”

“I do. This is a competition between a Natural versus an Enhanced. This is going to cause a problem for crew morale when Cobra One wins against Panther Two.”

“Sir, there is something you may need to know, especially if the simulation technician is present in that room as well.”

Alto turned around in his chair and looked at the Intel Officer.

“Monitor the situation for now,” Alto said. “I need to converse with the Admiral and Ops in private. We will have orders once I am finished.”

“Understood, sir,” the Intel Officer said.

Alto turned around back to his station and pressed a button. An energy field surrounded the perimeter of the Command Pit from the ceiling to the floor. The barrier was designed to prevent sound from entering and exiting so that those in the Command Pit could speak in private without the rest of the CCC listening in. The field could also be made opaque for total privacy if needed but the sound was what Alto wanted to prevent going in and out. It does not prevent anyone from entering or exiting the Command Pit, but that is only if it was an emergency.

Once the field was established, Alto looked at Deandre square in the eyes.

“There are a few things I need to make you aware of that normally I would not bother you with as they were matters that did not require your attention at the time,” Alto said.

“Because of that transmission, I feel they require your attention after all.”

“Hurry and tell me about it,” Deandre said. “That competition will not last long for Panther Two against Cobra One.”

“That is true, but not for the reasons you are thinking. There is a piece of equipment on board that is in the experimental stages. It was designed as a preliminary advancement for cybernetic enhancements for pilots that have not been modified like the Enhanced have been. This device scans the brain for commands relating to piloting and allows the user to fly using his mind, increasing his or her reflexes to that of an Enhanced or better. I signed off on this piece of equipment after we docked from our last mission.”

“I take it if this conversation is in private, it means that this is not known to anyone who is an Enhanced including their ruling council, am I right?”

“Yes, sir. If word of this was to get out, the ruling council for the Enhanced would view this as a threat to their superiority among Humanity.”

“But why risk this? Is Panther Two trying to prove something to either himself or to other Naturals in this competition?”

“I know the reason,” Daniels said. “I heard about this as Cobra Squadron came on board, but Cobra One made a decree that the only person she would ever be in a relationship with is someone who can best her in combat, whether simulated or real. There is a chance Panther Two has an interest in her and Billy who is the technician in the simulators gave him the means to make it possible to win against her.”

Deandre looked at Daniel with anger suddenly on his face.

“Are you telling me that Panther Two is risking an internal incident between Naturals and Enhanced in a ludicrous bid to win over Cobra One?!” Deandre yelled.

Deandre deactivated the soundproof field as the noise of the CCC started to flood back over the Command Pit. Deandre stood up from his seat and looked at both the Security and Intel Officers behind Alto.

“Security,” Deandre said, “get a detail to the flight simulators and shut this competition down immediately! I want the CAL to meet them there as well!”

“Yes, sir!” the Security Officer said.

“Intel, can you shut down the transmission running throughout the ship?”

“Yes, sir,” the Intel Officer said. “Do you want me to contact the flight simulation room as well and order them to cease the simulation?”

“No, I want them all there when the detail arrives. Warning them in advance will cause them to flee the scene. Keep an eye on the feed, however, and let me know when it has either concluded or the detail has arrived.”

“Understood, sir.”

Deandre sat back down and took a deep breath. He then looked over at Alto.

“The next time something like this comes aboard,” Deandre said, “you let me know, regardless of its importance. I do not want to risk something like this happening again.”

“Understood, sir,” Alto said. “Because of the nature of what is involved, I better go and speak with the technician about his error in judgement. The CAL does not know about it and I feel I better bring it up with him as well.”

“Very well. Get going, and fast.”

Alto nodded, acknowledging Deandre’s need for him to get going. Alto got up from his seat and ran up the port side stairs to his right and behind him. As he sprinted with great speed towards the door, Deandre leaned back in his chair as he began to ponder.

Was this situation worse than having to deal with his and Alto’s wives being on board?

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*Flight Simulators, Deck 8-Midsection, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
5:02pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“Tristan, how far away is Panther Two?”

While Janice knew that this was only a simulation she was “flying” in, her mental state was that of someone fighting a skilled enemy. There were no modifications made to her fighter after she went over the software in the cockpit while Tristan checked the hardware. She had come across cheaters in the past when she did simulated combat but despite their ways, the one thing they could not modify were the number of hits their fighter took. They also could not overcome their reflexes which were slower than her own. The fact that Panther Two was full of himself before the competition began made her believe that he was no different and that he was cheating as well.

She was listening to Tristan pressing a few buttons on his end to answer her previous question as to where Panther Two was.

“*Panther Two is one hundred twenty-five kilometers away and closing,*” Tristan said. “*He is visible to my scopes, so he is not cheating by using stealth like those three fools who tried that before.*”

“Coming straight at me without hiding his presence,” Janice said as she tightened her grip on the controls. “I will give him points for having guts, but that is all he has. Are you able to see if he has any special equipment on the fighter?”

“*Scans are not showing anything special on the outside of the fighter and I do detect one pilot, so he is not using some drone or remote operations like the four that tried that method with you once before.*”

“He also has nothing special on the fighter like the three that tried to add more guns and missiles to their fighters. What is his plan?”

“*He was training against your data earlier today. Maybe he found a weakness?*”

“A weakness? Not likely. Combat data can only tell you so much. He must think that he has built up an endurance in how to fight me that he thinks he can win.”

“Do you plan to finish him off like your previous challengers, then?”

“Yes. This fiasco will be over quickly.”

“He is eighty kilometers away and closing rapidly. He will be within your firing range in less than a minute.”

“Understood. He may be trying to do a hit-and-run, as if that will work against me. I might as well show him the error of his ways.”

Janice pushed the right control which operated her engines and thrusters forward, engaging the fighter’s engines at full speed. While she was in a simulation cockpit, the amount of gravitational force as well as momentum can still be felt as the system can simulate the real effects it has to flying a real fighter. She began to spot Panther Two’s fighter against the black star-filled background as it began to get larger. She was soon within the forty kilometers for optimal gun range. The missiles the fighters have on board have a further range, but Panther Two had not fired his yet. He could be waiting until he was closer to deploy them. However, once Janice was in optimal gun range and the gap continued to close, the reaction time needed to evade was soon outside the realm of what a Natural Human could do.

Her fighter soon locked onto Panther Two and she pulled the trigger. The twin Gatling guns on either side of the cockpit fired several rounds at Panther Two and they were on target. While she began to feel confident once she pulled the trigger, it just as quickly went away when his fighter had suddenly and surprisingly quickly evaded to its right, causing all the rounds she fired to miss their target!

Janice was suddenly in shock wondering how he could have evaded that she forgot that Panther Two was still approaching. An alert indicating a target lock brought her back to her senses, but it was too late. Panther Two’s fighter had closed to point-blank range as he began to fire his own guns. There was no time for her to evade at that range, nor could any Enhance. She rotated her fighter to the right as the rounds from Panther One hit her fighter along the left side and underbelly to avoid a direct hit to the cockpit. The fighter’s nano-laminate armor held, but the computer recorded the hit.

Janice was suddenly enraged as she tried to gain some distance from Panther Two before he could come around for another pass at her.

“Tristan!” Janice yelled into her helmet’s headset. “I thought you said there was a life sign on board that fighter!”

“There is!” Tristan yelled back. *“There are no modifications to the program when I checked the system!”*

“Then explain how Panther Two just evaded all of my shots while I took a hit?!”

“I do not know! I can confirm he is in the cockpit and the cockpit is active, but there is no way he could have improved his reflexes that much in such a short amount of time!”

Another alert soon rang out in Janice’s cockpit as a missile was coming in from behind her. Janice cut her forward thrust and flipped the fighter around to face the missile that was approaching from behind, but she could not see Panther Two’s fighter. She aimed her guns at the incoming missile and fired a few rounds at it. The missile was quickly destroyed as Janice looked around the canopy for Panther Two’s fighter, unable to see where he went after firing his missile at her.

“Where is he?!” Janice yelled.

“Above you!” Tristan yelled back.

Janice looked up as Panther Two's fighter came at her at full speed. She looked ahead as she engaged her fighter's engines to evade his approach. Another lock-on alert rang in her canopy only a second before bullets hit the top rear section of her fighter, marking more hits against her. She had yet to score a direct hit to Panther Two's fighter.

She was now enraged that she flipped her fighter around to bring her guns to bear on Panther Two. She would fire as he passed downward in front of him and he was already too close to react. As his fighter came close to passing in front of hers, he quickly veered out of the way to her left, completely evading the front of her fighter and her guns.

Janice was now enraged and dumbfounded. There should be no way for a Natural to have reaction speeds like this or react in this manner. However, her anger and confusion caused her to not notice that she killed her fighter's momentum as Panther Two spun his fighter around to bring the front of his fighter to bear on her fighter.

"Move, Cobra One!" Tristan yelled through Janice's earpiece.

Janice was snapped out of her confusion as she brought her fighter's front towards Panther Two's fighter. This was her best opportunity to strike some hits while he was lining up his guns to fire on her. She did not wait for a lock-on tone from her fighter. She would fire a sweeping shot at him making it difficult for him to evade at close range. She pulled the trigger and her guns opened fire, sweeping from her right to left.

Panther Two suddenly evaded by using his thrusters to move his fighter above the bullets with only centimeters to spare!

Janice was suddenly in shock. There was no way a Natural or even an Enhance could react at that close range! Not even an AI could react as she made sure she was not locked onto the target which usually alerts such machines! Janice did not know what to do and she was so far deep in shock and thought that she did not react to Panther Two's fighter firing a missile at her in close range.

"Move, Janice, move!!" Tristan yelled, but it was not enough to snap her out of her shock to react to the inbound missile.

As the missile quickly approached, Janice's perception of time appeared to slow down for her. The only thought in her mind was the fact that she was going to lose, and she did not know why that was about to happen. How was Panther Two able to react the way he did? She needed to know, since she knew what it meant for her to lose to him.

When the missile was within a meter of her fighter, the canopy suddenly went dark. She believed her fighter was hit and the simulation was over. However, she realized that simulated battles did not end in such a way, causing her to come out of her shock. When the killing blow connects, the fighter rocks violently, and a message would appear saying "Destroyed" on the screen which normally indicates that you "died."

That did not happen. The entire cockpit was dark, and she could hear some commotion coming from outside the cockpit. She pressed the button to open the canopy, but it would not open. She wondered if the cockpit or the entire simulator room lost power. She reached for the manual release handles above her where the canopy securely latches closed. She pulled the handles which manually unlocked the canopy and pulled it forward.

The room was just as dark with only the light from the operator's room behind them flooding the room. She was surprised to see an armed security detail of SAGNATs in the room, but also the CAL who was Panther One and even Commander Alto in the room. Jake who managed to open his canopy too looked around and was easily puzzled by what he was seeing. That was when she noticed the cables attached to his helmet. She was not sure what that meant

or what he used but it had to be the reason that she practically lost the fight with him just now. The question though was why the power was out in the room when it would be just as easy to shut down the simulation from the operator's room. That did not require the entire room to be powered down.

She quickly noticed that everyone in the room was looking towards the operator's room. It looked like Jake took notice too after he took off his helmet. The two of them stood up in their cockpits and turned to look towards the control room to see why everyone was staring that direction, and hopefully for a possible explanation from either Tristan or Billy as to what just happened to the power.

What they saw instead were Tristan and Billy turned around and looking at the back wall. Against the back wall stood Renee, Tiffany, and Julana who Janice saw earlier in the day. Janice also noticed Julana's hand was on the simulator room's power cutoff switch.

Before Janice could say anything, she heard Commander Alto clapping his hands twice. "SAGNATs," Alto said, "clear the room of Cobra Squadron except for Cobra One and Two. I want to speak with everyone else here in private."

"Yes, sir," one of the SAGNATs said. "Cobra Squadron except for One and Two, clear the room!"

The six pilots from that squadron begrudgingly left the room along with the SAGNATs. Janice and Jake began to climb out of their cockpits onto the padded floor.

"Lieutenant Commander Michel," Alto said, addressing the CAL, "I want you, Panther Two, and Cobra One to follow me to the operator room."

"Yes, sir," the Centauri pilot said as he followed Alto towards the room Tristan, Billy, Renee, Julana, and Tiffany were in.

Janice and Jake followed behind Alto and Michel as they entered the room using the door to their right. Billy and Tristan looked at the door to see who entered before realizing who it was. They got up at attention as Michel, Jake, and Janice entered the room as well. Once the door closed, Alto took a deep breath.

"As you were," Alto said, allowing everyone to relax if they could. "First thing I want to address is what do you think you are doing, Julana?"

Julana took her hand off the power cutoff switch. A look of anger filled her face as she stared at Alto.

"I am ending this pointless competition," Julana said. "That is what I am doing."

Alto looked at Renee with a look of disapproval on his face.

"Lieutenant Commander Renee," Alto said, "this area is off-limits to non-military personnel. Please explain why you have allowed these two civilian VIPs into this room?"

"I asked her to let us in," Julana said, "to stop this pointless competition."

"Senator Julana, your actions along with those of Senator Tiffany and Renee would give me grounds to throw you in the brig. However, I would like you to please define what you mean by 'pointless competition?'"

"This whole debate about how these so-called 'Enhanced' are so much better than 'Natural' Humans. I hate to be the one to point this out with myself, a Minion, and a Centauri present, but to other races such as ours, every Human is the same in the eyes of others."

Tristan was infuriated at Julana's words

"How dare you mix us in with those underlings!" Tristan yelled.

Alto looked over at Tristan with an angry look on his face.

"Mind your tongue, Lieutenant!" Alto said.

Tristan came to attention again.

“Sorry, sir!” Tristan said.

“In case you did not know,” Alto said, “I am also getting fed up with these types of competitions between two different subgroups of Humans. That was why the system that Lieutenant Jake used was developed in the first place! It was to help bridge the performance gap between such pilots!”

Janice looked at Jake with a puzzled expression on her face before looking at Alto.

“What system was he using, sir?” Janice asked.

Alto looked over at Janice.

“The system is called CRIPS,” Alto said. “It is an acronym meaning Cerebral Reading Interactive Piloting System. It is the first step towards the use of cybernetics in pilots to link their minds to their machines. What he used scans the brain and bases its actions on the pilot’s mental actions. In other words, the moment the pilot thinks of an action, the system reacts immediately.”

“Then,” Janice said, looking over at Jake, “you were cheating in that dogfight?”

“Not really,” Alto said. “Imagine giving a command from your brain to your hands on the controls to make the fighter do what you want. In an Enhanced, that reaction time has been reduced by half or so, allowing the fighter to do what you want more quickly. However, what if you remove the need to use your arms to relay your commands to the fighter. Your reaction time is significantly improved further still. The fight you two had in the simulator was authentic. The reactions you saw in Jake’s piloting were his own, his thoughts made into actions and reactions.”

Janice looked at Alto with a look of shock on her face before looking back at Jake.

“You mean to say that those were your piloting skills I just witnessed?” Janice asked.

“They were,” Jake said. “It was me the whole time. I wish I could do the same thing in a real fight, but this system has drawbacks that limit it to simulations.”

“Drawbacks that should have been kept to a minimum,” Alto said as he looked at Billy. “I thought I told you to limit the use of this system to test reactions against computer-controlled opponents, Billy. You put Jake at serious risk of brain instability to have him fight against a living opponent, and an Enhanced at that.”

“My apologies, sir,” Billy said, not sounding overly sincere which Alto picked up on.

“There will be a formal inquiry about this matter and the CRIPS’ continued use on board this ship once we return to port. The data including the dogfight will be submitted for research, but it will not be used going forward, do I make myself clear?”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

“Hey, leader,” Tristan said as he looked up over at Janice with a look of revelation on his face. “Do you not see what has happened? Because Senator Julana cut off the power to the simulator before that missile connected, it did not record the results. In other words, you are still undefeated, and you do not have to waste any more time with this loser, Jake!”

Janice took her flight helmet and threw it with such force at Tristan’s face that he fell to the ground unconscious by the hit.

“That is not the point, you moron!” Janice said in a pissed off tone of voice.

Janice looked over at Alto who in turn was surprised by Janice’s act of violence towards her now unconscious subordinate.

“I am sorry, sir,” Janice said. “I have a lot to think about. Was there anything further?”

“No,” Alto said, drawing his answer out. “You may go. I will call for a medical team to address your subordinate.”

Janice saluted Alto before she looked over at Jake.

“We will discuss this matter at a later time,” Janice said

Jake nodded in agreement to discussing things later. Right now, the time and the situation were not right and was too tense to talk calmly about it with others around.

Janice looked over at Julana.

“While I appreciate the fact that I avoided complete embarrassment by your actions,” Janice said, “I would rather you did not throw that switch. I understand your reasons for wanting to stop such a fight that you consider to be ridiculous, but it was still a fight between pilots. To fight one who was as resourceful as Lieutenant Jake here offered a challenge and a learning experience for when or even if they decide to deploy this cybernetic system to other pilots.”

Janice looked down, looking disappointed.

“At this point,” she said, “I concede my defeat, not just in combat but also in my dignity as a squadron leader. I should be setting an example for my pilots rather than let matters such as this get out of hand. I will teach my squadron to be humbler in their interactions with fellow pilots and officers, Senator. I only ask that you forgive us for our misplaced attitudes, and for both myself and Lieutenant Jake for our foolhardiness in basing our competition for something as trivial as whether our genetics were enhanced or not.”

Jake also looked down, feeling ashamed for issuing the challenge to begin with against considering Janice’s words. Julana sighed, trying to calm herself down.

“I must apologize, too,” Julana said. “My conduct was unprofessional and not appropriate for one who is in the position of senator as I. I should not have interfered in your match.”

Janice looked up at Julana, then laughed.

“Do not worry,” she said. “If you did not do so, then I am sure Commander Alto would have, but not before Jake connected with the missile. That would have ended the competition anyway. You may have saved my record, but I know when I must concede defeat in both this competition and in my responsibility to my squad. On that note...”

Janice looked with a serious expression on her face at Tristan who was knocked out on the floor of the room.

“He will be the first I try to drill that message into their heads,” Janice said. “I am going to take him to Sickbay.”

Janice then looked over at Jake.

“You and I will come back into this room in a couple of hours,” Janice said to Jake who had a surprised expression on his face. “You and I need to have a talk about this match between us. Is that understood, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jake said.

Janice looked at Michel.

“Is that alright with you as well?” Janice asked.

“That is fine with me,” Michel said.

“Before we continue,” Alto said, “whose idea was it to broadcast this match to the entire ship for everyone to see?”

“That would be me, sir,” Billy said. “I take responsibility for that action.”

“Wait,” Janice said, “did the whole ship see that match?!”

“We caught it before coming down here,” Alto said. “We stopped the transmission after realizing the implications of the match and the system being used by Jake. Billy, you are to report to the brig immediately for breaching the code of conduct and misuse of military gear and equipment. Failure to do so will result in me sending the SAGNATs after you, and that is the last thing you need me to do.”

“Understood, sir,” Billy said, visibly upset to others but knowing he could not argue about his actions.

Once Billy left the room through the back doors of the control room, Alto directed his attention to the senators and Renee.

“Julana and Tiffany,” Alto said as he put his arms behind him, “for entering an area that you are not authorized to enter, you are hereby confined to your quarters until we reach our destination. I will inform the Admiral of this infringement, but we will have the Galley forward the meal that was prepared to your quarters. I do not feel that the food they will prepare needs to be wasted. You should already know your way back. This is not up for debate.”

Tiffany looked like she was about to say something, but Julana noticed it and put her right hand on Tiffany’s left shoulder. Tiffany turned to look at Julana with a puzzled expression on her face, but Julana shook her head to discourage her from speaking against her husband.

“Lieutenant Commander Renee,” Alto continued, “you will assist in helping Cobra One with taking Cobra Two to Sickbay. While the senators will be taking responsibility for their actions, your infringement of protocol cannot be overlooked either. You are also confined to quarters until your next shift. Your dinner will also be brought to you since we do not want to waste it as well. I will be returning to the CCC to inform the Admiral of what has occurred here and what the punishments were. Until tomorrow.”

Alto left through the back door of the operations room. Once the door closed, Janice headed over to Tristan to hoist him over her left shoulder with his right arm. Renee went over to get the other arm, though her short stature only allowed her to lift him up so much.

“Maybe we should help you,” Jake said as he approached.

Michel approached as well when he realized Jake included the CAL.

“I will take that arm instead, Renee,” Michel said as he approached her. “You can take one of his legs so that we are not dragging him.”

“Understood,” Renee said as she traded off with Michel.

“Do you want to trade as well?” Jake asked.

“I am good,” Janice said. “Go ahead and grab his other leg. This will be quicker if we are not dragging any dead weight.”

Jake nodded in agreement and went to grab Tristan’s right leg while Renee grabbed the left. Julana and Tiffany headed for the door to open it as they needed to leave as well.

“Come on through,” Julana said. “We needed to leave, too.”

“Thanks,” Janice said as she, Jake, Michel, and Renee picked Tristan off the ground and walked through the door.

After they walked through and proceeded down the hallway heading aft, Julana closed the door after she and Tiffany exited the room. Julana sighed.

“I really messed things up,” she said. “Here we had an opportunity to be able to sit and speak with our husbands during dinner, even give Renee an opportunity to sit at Deandre’s table in his quarters, and I let my personal feelings on this feud get in the way. Now, we and Renee are confined to our quarters until we reach the border tomorrow or until Renee begins her shift. I really screwed things up.”

Tiffany took a deep breath.

“This is not entirely your fault,” Tiffany said. “Let us talk as we make our way back to our quarters before my husband decides to send the SAGNATs on us for not returning, muck like his threat towards that technician should he not go to the brig.”

“Would Alto really do that to us?” Julana asked.

“In his current state of mind and if he were following protocol, you can bet that he would seriously do so. We better go.

As the two of them began to walk down the hallway towards the aft section of the ship, Julana did not raise her head up, staring at the floor but watching where she was going. She never felt so ashamed of her actions or for the trouble she caused.

All she could think about was how Deandre was going to take the news.

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*Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
5:27pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“Julana did what?”

Deandre was provided the report of what transpired in the flight simulator room that involved the match between Cobra One and Panther Two, but the last thing he expected was for Julana and Tiffany to get involved with the help of Renee who granted them access. If it were not for the soundproof barrier being up at Alto’s request, the entire CCC would have heard Deandre’s shock about his wife’s actions in that room. Daniel was already in the Command Pit with Deandre when Alto came to give his report so that he was brought up-to-date as well.

“Because of their actions,” Alto said, “the senators along with Renee are confined to quarters. The senators will be in the observation room just prior to arrival while Renee will report to her station at her usual start time. Dinner will be sent to them so that the chefs in the Galley did not waste their time preparing the food. I already informed them to bring it to us as well in our own quarters after our shift has concluded.”

“I see,” Deandre said as he sat back down after standing from the shock of the news Alto gave first. “This mission is definitely not how I would have expected it to go. Hopefully, our wives do not try to pull this stunt again.”

“I must ask,” Daniel said, “but what about the technician Billy who supplied the CRIPS unit to Panther Two?”

“He is confined to the brig until further notice,” Alto said. “He took a big risk in having Panther Two use it in this fashion, but he also tampered with the internal ship communications to send that broadcast for the entire ship to see. There are already people asking about the results of that simulated battle which is starting to cause some division between Natural and Enhanced Humans. Cobra One has said that she admits defeat as she would have lost had it not been for Julana’s actions in shutting down the power in that room. However, word of her defeat will cause a lot of inquiries among the crew and the higher-ups if it reaches them.”

“I will have a word with the CAL once I retire to my quarters and see how he wants to handle this matter,” Deandre said. “Any idea what Cobra One is doing right now?”

“I do not. She was assisting with taking Cobra Two to Sickbay after she knocked him out personally after a comment he made. I ordered Renee to help her before she was confined to her quarters. I do not know where her opponent Panther Two is either at this time.”

“I wonder if she will hold true to her promise?” Daniel asked.

Deandre looked over at Daniel wondering what he was referring to. He soon remembered what Daniel said prior to Alto going to the flight simulator room to end that contest.

“You are talking about Cobra One’s decree about relationships, correct?” Deandre asked.

“I am, yes,” Daniel said. “I am already aware of the standing rules concerning the pursuit of relationships, but this is more than that. She is also a superior officer.”

“While on this vessel, I agree with you,” Deande said. “However, when they are not on board, they are free to pursue such a relationship if they wish. I am more concerned on the matter of ‘if’ they decide to pursue it, though.”

“I have a concern that may be greater than that,” Alto said.

“What would that be?” Deandre asked with a puzzled expression on his face.

“In the event that she does pursue this relationship, what happens when their subordinates find out that an Enhanced is dating a Natural and how that happened?”

Deandre pondered Alto’s question and began to shudder about the possible answers that were coming to his head. He could only hope that Cobra One and Panther Two do not pursue a relationship, or if they do, none of their subordinates find out about it. The results if both happen would be disastrous if news of it were to occur and spread.

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*Recreation Center, Deck 10-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
7:47pm, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“Where on this ship is she?”

Tristan was stumbling around a little looking for Janice, still feeling the effects of being hit in the head by Janice’s flight helmet. He woke up in Sickbay less than an hour ago, and despite the Chief Medical officer’s protest of him getting up and walking out of Sickbay with a possible concussion, he began his search for his squadron leader who put him in Sickbay to begin with. However, according to his fellow Cobra Squadron teammates when he found them in their quarters, no one had seen their leader since the fiasco in the flight simulator’s control room almost two hours ago that lead to the SAGNATs removing his teammates from the room.

Tristan thought he would be able to find Janice in the Recreational Center, but despite more people being present, he did not see her anywhere in the room. He sat down for a moment at one of the tables in the middle of the room that was not occupied. He wanted to know what her problem was earlier that forced her to throw her helmet at his head, knocking him to the floor and lose consciousness. The last thing he remembered was the fact that the Celestian senator onboard had powered down the simulator room at a crucial moment in the match where Janice would have lost to Panther Two. That allowed her to remain undefeated, but she was upset about the fact Tristan brought that up. Did she want to lose that match because she was unable to beat him with that system he was using? Regardless, the cheater did not win, and she was safe. Why was she upset about that?

As he pondered his thoughts, he was oblivious of everyone around him. However, everyone also left him alone because of the patch on his suit indicated what he was and the fact he would not socialize with them anyway.

“Hey,” a male voice to Tristan’s left said. You are Lieutenant Tristan of Cobra Squadron, am I correct?”

Tristan looked to his left to see who was speaking to him. A rather large man with glasses sat at the next table. The glasses were a clear indication that he was a Natural as there are no Enhanced with glasses since eyesight was one of the more common traits that are altered. His uniform showed he was part of the ship’s CCC officers.

“Who wants to know?” Tristan asked.

“I am Lieutenant Bryan, this ship’s secondary helmsman.”

“Well, Bryan, I am deep in thought and I have no interest in speaking to you.”

“I know a few Enhanced on this ship, but they are far more sociable than you from the sounds of it. Besides, you looked to be troubled about something or someone.”

“What if I am? What is it to you?”

“Well, you are looking for your squadron leader, are you not?”

Tristan looked at him with a surprised and puzzled look on his face.

“How did you know I was looking for her?” Tristan asked.

“Word gets around fast on this ship,” Bryan said. “You have been asking a lot of people where she was for the past half hour.”

“And you just happen to hear about these inquiries of mine when they come here, right?”

“That is correct.”

“Sounds like you are in the wrong profession. Maybe you have signed up to work in the Intelligence department instead of being a Helmsman.”

“Maybe, but they tend to keep too much to themselves and I like to be sociable. The point is that thanks to those people talking about your inquiries, they also mentioned where they saw her last after they talked to you. I can tell you where she is. Hopefully, she might still be there.”

Tristan’s attention was peaked as he suddenly stood up.

“Where is she?” Tristan asked.

“Hold it there, pal,” Bryan said. “Before I tell you that information, why are you so desperate to find her? She may be your commanding officer and I heard that she knocked you out after her match with Lieutenant Jake, but there has to be more to this than wanting to speak with her about her actions.”

“I want to know why she knocked me out. Her actions were not how she normally acts.”

“Are you sure that is it? It does not have anything to do with her stating that she accepted defeat in the match?”

“She did what?!”

Tristan’s yell got the attention of everyone in the room. Tristan and Bryan looked around at everyone looking in their direction.

“I got this, everyone,” Bryan said. “Sorry about my compatriot’s outburst. Go back to your games.”

Everyone in the room were slow to get back to their activities. Once everyone was focused on their distractions again, Bryan turned back to Tristan.

“I guess you had not heard that little bit of news based on your reaction,” Bryan said.

“All that did was give me another reason to find her before she makes a terrible mistake,” Tristan said.

“And what mistake would that be?”

“Do not worry yourself about it. Now, where was she last seen?”

“Very well. Since you caused enough of a distraction as you did, I will tell you where she was last seen. She was heading for the flight simulator room and from what I was told, she was not alone heading that way, either.”

“Was the other person Lieutenant Jake?”

“From what those sources have said, yes.”

“I knew it. I will leave you alone.”

“Do me two favors, though. One, do not mention who your source was. Second, do not do anything that you will regret later. Remember, she is your superior officer and your fighter squadron’s leader. Do not get on her bad side again unless you want to return to Sickbay.”

“Understood. Thank you, Bryan.”

Tristan turned and walked out of the Recreational Room's door. He quickly made his way to the elevators, called them, and got on an empty one. He pressed the button to get to Deck Eight where the flight simulator room would be, but he would have to run down more than half length of the ship to get to the simulator room. Once the elevator doors opened, he began to jog in that direction, making it look like he was working out rather than someone who was in a hurry. He did not want anyone to warn Janice he was coming that way.

It took him several minutes to jog that length from the aft section to just barely in the bow section. He went down the starboard hallway towards the flight simulator door but stopped to look down the adjacent hallway wondering about entering through the operator room. He walked down the adjacent hallway towards the operator room door, but he noticed that the door was showing it was "locked." He began to grow concerned as there should be no reason for the door to be locked unless it was during a simulation, and none were scheduled for the rest of the day.

Tristan decided to walk back to the starboard side corridor and head towards the flight simulator door, hoping that the door was unlocked. As he approached the door, he could see that this door was unlocked. As he reached for the door handle, he took a deep breath, hoping he was not about to see something he would regret. He opened the door slowly and saw there was light on inside again. He did not know whether power was restored while he was knocked out for almost two hours or if someone was in the room already. Since the operator room access door was locked, someone had to be inside.

He peeked inside and saw no one was in the main room itself. He looked back towards the operator room, expecting to see someone there. He only saw a technician inside who looked to be doing some work on the system. It was possible that the technician saw something, but the technician was focusing on their work and may not have seen anything at all. That may explain why the door to the operator room was locked so that the technician would not be disturbed.

Tristan stuck his head out of the room and closed the door just as quietly as he opened it. If Janice was not here, where else could she be? Either Bryan had lied about where she and Jake were last seen, or they were heading this direction without going into this room. The only rooms further down the corridors on both port and starboard sides are the ammo storage areas, the cargo holds, and the shuttle bay along with shuttle and fighter access sections. If they went to those areas, it was a lot of area to cover and investigate. He decided to investigate the best possible location they could be where they could be alone right now, which is the Cobra Squadron fighter access room and airlock.

Tristan walked towards the bow down the corridor. Right now, the other pilots of Cobra Squadron were in their room, so the starboard fighter access room should be empty and not in use. Now would be the best time if someone wanted some privacy away from the rest of the squadron. After several minutes, he came up on the door to the starboard fighter access room and to his surprise, it was marked as "locked." He did not know the door could be locked and there were no windows to look inside.

He heard something coming from inside the room, though it was very faint due to the thickness of the door. He put his left ear up to the door, hoping that he would be able to hear a conversation. He listened intently for any words, but he noticed that the sounds he was hearing were the sounds of moans and groans. It was soon made evident who he was hearing from inside the room were the voices of Janice and Jake, but what they were doing was a mystery. They were either making out or doing more than that, a thought he was hoping not to entertain. He was hoping that they were doing some private exercise training inside, but the more he listened, the more he knew that it was not the kind of exercise he was hoping it would be. He continued to

listen for a few minutes while trying to figure out what they were doing and what to do next about this situation. He also kept an eye out to make sure no one was coming down the hall seeing him listening to the door like a pervert or an eavesdropper.

He finally stepped away from the door in disbelief. He was not sure what to do or what to think. Regardless what Janice and Jake sound like they were doing, they were violating not only military protocol, but the ethics of Naturals engaging in relationships with Enhanced. He did not know how this progressed as fast as it did unless Janice was that desperate. He would not have considered her as such, but there was the chance she hid the way she felt from her squad to avoid any drama that such information may cause.

He turned and began walking slowly back towards the aft section of the ship. He did not know how to address this matter later to either Janice, the rest of his squad, or with the CAL. Word about Janice accepting defeat at the hands of a Natural was already making the rounds, but if word of their “activity” in that room got out, there would be a lot of problems on multiple levels with the military higher-ups and with fellow Enhanced being involved with a Natural.

There was one thing that was going to be worse than that and it would be the biggest issue of them all among the Enhanced: A Natural won both against and over an Enhanced. News of this would possibly cause another war with Naturals, possibly breaking the Federation apart at its core. The Federation’s enemies would love for that to happen and exact their revenge. Tristan began to imagine the headlines at that moment: “Federation defeated by its enemies as Natural and Enhanced Humans fight each other over a love affair.” The thought of that possibility began to make him shutter.

For now, it was in everyone’s best interest that he remained quiet about it. It was an issue that needed to be addressed at a more discrete time and setting. Now he needed to find some way to get his mind off what Janice and Jake were possibly doing in that room, and it was going to be a long night because of it.

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