Midnight Blue
by Amelia_E_Adler

Summary

Alice has joined the Air Force because she wanted to follow into her father's footsteps. She did not expect to wind up as a space fighter pilot aboard a battlecruiser, traveling all over the galaxy. Special in many ways, she now has to overcome her own insecurities if she wants to keep pace with the demands of the job...

Original Character story with no AU (should fit it in with the canon).

Notes

A/N: This is less of a short story and more of a life story. I used to tell it to myself in my head, over and over again, with different characters and circumstances, the essentials always remaining the same: a bright young woman gets entangled in a world of space travels, adventure and danger, where she has to navigate between impossible odds, unexplained science mysteries, terrible foes, and… her own insecurities and shortcomings. In the course of the story, she discovers the power of friendship, love, betrayal, hatred, jealousy, and many more emotions she’s always underestimated.

I don’t know where this story will lead me. I know how it looked like before, but it’s different each time I tell it to myself, and this version will probably guide me to unexpected places, too. It is as much an unknown to me as it is to you. Which is what makes it fun to write.

Please feel free to comment; in particular, please do offer any corrections to the style and language. I am not a native English speaker and I will welcome any and all suggestions. Any mistakes are my own fault, not my beta’s. And on that note:

Big big big THANK YOU to my amazing beta, cacei. You rock my world, girl.

Disclaimer: I do not own any part of the Stargate universe or franchise and I derive no
financial profit from writing and publishing this story. This is purely for entertainment.

Warning: this will be long. It’s already almost 50 thousand words and counting, and I’m only on the fourth chapter.

Enjoy! (I hope.)
She was laughing, her bright green eyes scintillating with pure joy, her orange pigtails bobbing this way and that as she ran across the backyard, trying to catch up with the boys. She was small, looked like a two-and-a-half year old at the most, but her third birthday had passed some weeks ago. Her light blue dress had a big pocket on the front, where she had stored her little treasures of the day: a black, glossy pebble she picked up near the southernmost side of the hedge; a dead fly she “rescued” from the cat; an ice cream stick; and a dark red bead she found under the sofa in the living room. All of this clattered inside the pocket as she sped through the lawn in white tights and navy blue bar shoes, tripping and swaying a bit as the ground proved tricky for her little feet. All of her clothes were already dirty from the repeated falling over.

The two boys were older, already long past the awkward toddler phase. Their running was swift and intentional, as they pretended to be a policeman chasing a gangster. The little girl tried – unsuccessfully – to keep up with them, never really understanding the purpose. One of the boys, the chaser, was taller and leaner than the other one, his hair and eyes both almost the same shade of dark brown. He was wearing blue jeans and a black T-shirt that read “Smells like teen spirit.” The other boy, the chasee, was smaller but rounder, especially on the cheeks. He had the same shade of orange hair as the girl, but his eyes were grey, not green. He was wearing dark green shorts and a grey T-shirt with an outline of a hawk on it. They both carried plastic guns and pretended to shoot at each other, every so often feigning a fatal shot and dropping to the ground dramatically, arms and legs spread out every which way. The little girl would then finally be able to catch up, and would stoop over the boy currently on the ground and pretend to shoot him with her two fingers, mirroring their game without understanding what it meant. The boys would laugh at her with a mixture of annoyance and kindness, a combination known perhaps only to children, and she’d join them, not knowing why. Their pure voices carried across the backyard to the verandah, where the adults sat, drinking cool drinks in tall crystal glasses and observing the children with warmth in their eyes. The boys had met at school and quickly became fast friends, bringing the two families together for the first time on this sunny, warm Saturday in late September.

Her bike was blue, with multicolored ribbons hanging from the handles. She pedaled hard, trying to keep up with the boys already way ahead of her, as they sped up along the street. There were three of them now, the orange-haired boy, the brown-haired and another one, a bulky black-haired and hazel-eyed twelve-year-old, leading the pack. He was a year older than the other two, and automatically and naturally assumed the position of the boss of their little group. He didn’t like having a snotnose girl following them around at all times, but it was just impossible to get rid of her, especially that her brother was rather protective of the annoying tot.

They halted briefly as they arrived at the entrance to the park, panting like dogs. The girl just managed to catch up with them as they started off again, riding their bikes in a slalom between the trees. At last they came to their destination, a small skatepark, now deserted as it was already getting dark and there were no lamps. The boys hooted wildly and started to brag about who would pull the most impressive stunt.

“I don’t think you should do that now,” ventured the girl when she finally regained some breath, after catching up with them again. “It’s dark and you can’t really see the ramp.”
“Shut up, tootsie,” the older boy told her with an angry expression on his face. “We can do whatever we want. We’re grown up and you’re just a child!”

This sentence was welcomed by the other two with another burst of hoots, but they didn’t sound just as wild as before.

“Well I think it’s stupid to risk broken bones like that!” She said, crossing her arms and looking at him challengingly. “You can do whatever you want, but Aaron and Jake won’t be so stupid to follow you!”

The boy stuck out his tongue at her, got back on his bike and rode out onto the ramp, yelling “Child! You’re just a small child!” all the way there. The other boys looked at each other uncertainly, but eventually followed their leader. The girl screwed up her face and sat down on the ground by her bike, her arms still crossed, throwing furious glances at the boys who seemed to be having the time of their life. That is, until one of them misjudged the length of the ramp in the growing darkness and fell rather spectacularly, with one wheel of his bike lopsided and twisted. The girl was on her feet instantly and ran to him, as the other boys stopped in their tracks and watched wide-eyed as their friend’s forearm bent in a weird way. Immediately, the brown-haired boy started crying.

The girl rushed to his side, pushed the bike off him and kneeled down. He tried to scramble up, but she put her hand firmly on his chest, making him lie on the ground.

“Don’t move, Aaron,” she said in a quivering voice, trying not to look at his weirdly positioned hand. “I think you should stay down. And don’t move your hand! I’ll get help, but don’t move your hand!” She turned her head around to look at her brother. “Jake, you stay here and make sure he’s not moving, okay?”

The ginger boy nodded his head frantically, finally breaking the spell, getting off his bike and coming to sit by his crying friend. The girl leaped up to her feet, jumped on her blue bike with ribbons at the handles, and more flew than rode away, as the twelve-year-old leader of the group stood and gaped in horror.

After that day they were banned from seeing the black-haired boy again by their parents. They didn’t mind. Aaron had to wear a cast for a few weeks, and he let his friends draw pictures on it with sharpies. The eight-year-old heroine drew him a huge red heart and a smiley cat-face.

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There was a large couch in Aaron’s basement, two old, ragged armchairs, and a tiny coffee table. A single exposed light bulb was emitting strong, yellow light, too bright for them, so they covered it with a dark red piece of cloth, bathing the room in a bloody shade. There was a narrow window on the wall, high up, which they always kept open. It was the only reason why they did not suffocate there, five sixteen year old boys and one thirteen year old girl, as much time as they spent in the cramped room.

They had changed. Aaron’s hair and eyes were still dark brown, and he was still tall and lean, but he looked more gangly, as if he had too many limbs and not enough coordination. There was a shadow of facial hair on his chin too, proudly worn. Jake’s orange hair was neatly trimmed and it darkened to a deep maroon, almost auburn, although his eyes remained light grey, with spots of
pale blue. He got taller and bulkier, with broad shoulders and sturdy frame; there was not a faint memory of his previous chubbiness in him. His sister was still smaller than usually girls her age, skinny and flat, more a child than a teenager yet. Her orange-coppery hair was pulled in a ponytail, and her green eyes were bright as always, though barely visible in the dimmed light of the room.

The three other boys were Aaron and Jake’s age, their classmates and close friends. Two of them were blonde, and one had light brown hair; all three of them had blue eyes. Aaron and Jake were sitting on the couch with guitars in hands, one of the blonde boys sat in one armchair with a bass guitar; the other armchair was occupied by the light-brown haired boy, a small keyboard sitting across his lap. The fifth teenager sat on a stool behind a drum set in the back of the room. There was a lot of laughing and jokings around, interloped with music they were trying to learn. The only girl in the room sat cross-legged on the floor with her back to the wall, a book in her hand, as she tried to split her attention between the text and the playful rehearsal in front of her. She was failing.

Finally, she sighed, put down the book and glanced at the boys with a smile. They weren’t looking at her, the irreverent and dirty jokes flowing between them as if they were in male-only environment. They grew so used to her, they hardly ever noticed that she was, in fact, a girl. She rose to her feet and quietly exited the room, never knowing that both Jake and Aaron took notice of her leaving, thinking she didn’t really belong, but at the same time not minding the feeling of inadequacy. It wasn’t the only place where she felt like an outsider.

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The light of the day was growing dim, a slight chill permeating the air. Evening was drawing near. Seconds ticked by as they stood on the verandah, leaning against the railing, quiet, watchful, waiting. Jake’s hair was even shorter than before, and his sister was finally starting to look less like a child and more like a teenager.

Suddenly from inside the house came a ringing, a shrill sound that cut through the silence like a knife. They both shuddered, but didn’t move from their spot. The ringing ended, and a muffled voice reached them through the open door, though they couldn’t recognize the words. Then silence returned for a moment, before they heard the footsteps coming. Their mother appeared in the doorway. They turned around to look at her. Her grey-blue eyes were full of tears. She didn’t have to say anything. They jumped up to her and embraced each other, and cried together, each drawing strength from the others’ presence, even at this dark, dark hour.

Away back, at the far side of their backyard, where there was a small gate in the fence, stood Aaron, motionless, half-hidden behind the hedge. He just watched them, not wanting to interrupt, not wanting to interfere, but determined to be there for them, even if they would never know. But just as they were entering the house again, the girl turned around and glimpsed the silhouette of their best friend. He saw her looking at him and waved his hand tentatively. He then placed it on his heart and lowered his head. She disappeared inside with her brother and mother, but he was sure she knew what he meant.

And she did.

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The three of them were standing on a viewing platform, overlooking the city, rays of sunshine penetrating the clouds and illuminating entire districts. A thick, though barely perceptible layer of smog was floating above. Patches of green down below indicated parks enclosed by the suburbia, and farther along the horizon higher buildings rose like towers of an enormous castle. It was a warm afternoon in early June.

“Our last summer together,” Jake broke the silence. “I can’t believe it’s over.”

“It’s not over,” Aaron resisted to the idea. “We’re still gonna see each other.”

“Yeah, but how much?” The young man shook his auburn head. “It’s gonna be hard to keep in touch when we’re in three different parts of the country.”

“We will try, though, won’t we?” The coppery-orange haired teenager said in a small voice, resonating with hope. “And we’ll see each other every time we get back here.”

“Sure, Allie.” Aaron smiled at her warmly. “That’s a given.”

She returned his smile. Jake, standing in the middle, extended his arms and hugged them both to his sides.

“A new path awaits each of us,” he said in a serious tone. “But we shall never forget the miles we’ve already walked together.”

“Well said, bro.” Aaron nodded his head appreciatively. “Promise me you’ll both write a lot of letters! I will be insatiable for news from San Diego and Pasadena.”

“And us, from New York!” Added Jake, squeezing his friend a bit closer. “At least me and Allie are staying on the same coast. You’re really going far away!”

“Same coast for now.” Aaron raised his eyebrow. “You never know where you’ll end up after Sand Diego!”

“True,” Jake acquiesced. “Well, friends… real life is awaiting, full of work and tough choices. But for now, let’s enjoy this last summer of freedom! Let’s be reckless and inconsiderate and let’s have all the fun we can!”

The other two hooted agreement, but as they were turning back from the cityscape, each of them shot one last longing glance to where their childhood had passed in relative happiness and peace.

Like it or not, they were growing up.

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The recruiter sized her up and down and smiled somewhat ironically, as if right from the start he didn’t believe she would make a good candidate.

“So you’d like to join the Air Force,” he said. It wasn’t a question, so she didn’t respond, instead maintaining eye contact. “What’s your name, miss?”
“Alice Boyd,” she answered calmly, though inside she was trembling, intimidated by the man in the uniform who had the power to determine her entire future at that moment. “I want to be a pilot.”

“Of course you do. Who doesn’t?” His smirk wouldn’t go away. “How old are you?”

“I’m nineteen.”

The recruiter’s eyebrows went up.

“You don’t look nineteen.”

“I get that a lot.” Alice smiled mildly. “I’ve always been small for my age, sir.”

“Uh-huh. So you want to be a pilot… Are you in college already, or would you like to apply to the Air Force Academy?”

“Neither, sir. I’ve completed my higher education already. I’d like to attend the Officer Training School.”

The Technical Sergeant raised his eyebrows even higher.

“Impossible. You just told me you’re nineteen. That would make you fifteen when you graduated high school.”

“Yes, sir, that’s when I went to college. I have a BS from California Institute of Technology, with double Major in Electrical Engineering and Applied Physics and a minor in Computer Science.”

The recruiters eyebrows went down and his smirk disappeared, replaced by an expression of shock and disbelief.

“You’re some kind of genius child or what?”

Alice smiled politely, shaking her head.

“I believe the term you were looking for is wonder child, sir, but yes, basically I am. I was admitted to CalTech at the age of 15. I was one of the few early entrants on the campus, but not the only one, sir.”

He kept staring at her for a few more seconds. Then he shook his head, as if resurfacing from water after deep plunge.

“Right,” he said curtly. “Before we go any further, I would like to stress that it is very important for you to be completely honest with me. If you lie or hide the truth, we will find out about it sooner or later, and you’ll be disqualified from the recruitment process.”

“Understood, sir.” Alice nodded, finally moving her eyes off him and taking a look around the office. It was very cluttered, though clean, creating an ambiance of diligent busyness.

“I will give you a questionnaire that you will fill in, there’ll be some detailed questions about your family and medical history, your education and work experience, if any, criminal record, that sort of stuff, but for now I need you to answer me a few general questions.”

She looked up at him expectantly, not interrupting with any unnecessary “yes, sirs.”

“First of all, do you have any medical conditions that might preclude you from service in the Air
“Force?”

“No, sir, not to my knowledge.”

“Good. Have you ever taken any prescription drugs recreationally?”

She raised her eyebrow.

“No, sir, I’ve never taken any prescription drugs outside of the method and frequency prescribed by a doctor.”

“Any soft drugs? Meth? Let me remind you to be honest. Recreational soft drug use in the past will not necessarily disqualify you.”

“No, sir, I’ve never done any drugs, soft or hard, and I’ve never used methamphetamine. I did get a few morphine shots after an accident a few years ago, but that was prescribed and controlled by my doctor.”

“What accident?”

She smiled fondly at the memory, which may have been an odd thing to do when talking about an accident.

“I fell from a ladder, sir, and broke a few ribs pretty nastily. They all healed up well, though.”

“No lingering pains?” The recruiter was serious, leaning in a little bit, as if that was a truly important question, though Alice could not conceive why.

“No, sir.”

“Good. What about mental health? Have you ever seen a psychiatrist or a therapist in the past?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve had a few appointments with a therapist a few years ago, after my dad died. My mother insisted on it for both me and my brother.”

“How did your father die?” The Sergeant apparently didn’t feel the need to say anything so polite as “I’m sorry for your loss” or something. It rubbed her the wrong way.

“He crashed his plane into a flight deck of a Navy carrier,” Alice replied a bit too harshly. She closed her eyes for just a moment and took a deep breath to control herself. “He was a Navy pilot, there were some pretty bad weather conditions. They were in the middle of the ocean and he was running low on fuel. He tried to land in that storm, but… well, he crashed. He was still alive when they got him out of the cockpit, but despite all their efforts, he died after two days in a coma.” A flow of emotions colored her voice as she recounted the event. The recruiter’s eyes grew a bit softer.

“Well, that’s unfortunate. But if your father was in the Navy… didn’t you want to follow in his footsteps?”

“I am. I want to be a fighter pilot, sir, and I have more chance to achieve that in the Air Force than in the Navy. Plus, my family is scattered all over the other branches of the military, the Air Force is the only one we don’t have a representation in yet.”

“You have other family members in the service?”

“Yes, sir. My uncle, that is my father’s brother, is in the Army. My own brother is in the Marine
Corps. I even have a second cousin in the Coast Guard. So you see, it’s a family business.” Alice smiled at the recruiter and he had to return the smile. He was warming up to her pretty fast.

“What does your mother do?”

“She’s a graphic artist here in LA.” She made an indeterminate gesture with her hand, encompassing the city around them.

The Sergeant nodded and smiled.

“Just one more question. But a serious one. Do you have any criminal record, or a juvenile record?”

Alice shook her head.

“No, sir. Regrettably, my life has been pretty dull so far. I haven’t even gotten any speeding tickets.”

“Well, that’s good. Okay, I’ll give you a break now. Here,” he took a binder with a couple sheets of paper from his desk and handed it to her. “This is a questionnaire I told you about before. Please fill it out with as many details as possible. Then we will review it, make some preliminary calls to check the info out, and schedule a longer meeting when we can chat about other stuff. This entire process will take some time,” he warned her. “But don’t be put off by that. That’s always the case. Nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you, sir. Would you like me to fill this in now?”

“Yes, if you can. There’s a desk… well, a chair with a folding desk, really, outside, in the hall. I have another meeting now, but it shouldn’t take long and you should be finished before it’s over.”

“Ok, thank you, sir.” Alice smiled politely again, took the binder and left the office. As she sat down in the chair he spoke of, she let out a long breath. Well, it wasn’t as bad as she thought it would. People could be really prejudiced against her. A small redheaded girl, so easily dismissible, it was all too easy to look down at her and patronize her, but the moment they found out just how well-educated and, frankly, how smart she was, they felt like they’ve been cheated, which led them to dislike her, most of the time. But maybe she was a bit too quick to judge, too; that recruiter seemed at first like a pompous ass, but turned out to be quite nice in the end.

It was so hard for her to read people. Not for the first time, she hesitated. Being in the service meant dealing with other people, focusing on teamwork. Could she do this? She’d always been a loner and an outsider. But then again, that was a challenge, and she never backed out of a challenge before in her life. She wasn’t going to start now.
Chapter 1

It had been a close call. The machine shook like a trembling child as she was taxiing down the strip. Part of it was the unstable engine, part the terrible weather, and part – the sheer force of her landing. Merciless gusts of wind and waves of violent rain were beating the cockpit’s canopy. She could hardly see five yards ahead of the nose, even the blinking lights of the landing strip were dim and barely perceptible. Slowly they grew brighter and more visible as she approached the hangar. Then, suddenly, she was inside, bright light dazzling her eyes, wind and rain no longer whipping the hull of her Falcon. The plane came to a standstill and she breathed deeply, the adrenaline rush still washing all over her body. Such a close call.

There were people approaching the aircraft now. Alice checked her controls and flicked the switches. Then she hit the button and the canopy went up. She took off the helmet and the mask, taking another deep breath, smelling the rain in the air despite the heavy scent of fuel, always surrounding planes. Her heart was still beating too fast, her cheeks were flushed from exertion and stress, her neck stiff after sitting in the cockpit for a long time. She stretched, hearing satisfying cracks in her joints. Then she scrambled out of the cockpit and dropped to the ground. The flight crew was already at work with the craft. Good. This baby needed some tender loving care after what they’ve just been through.

“Good job, Lieutenant.” A familiar voice resonated loudly in the wide space of the hangar. Alice turned on her heel and stood to attention, saluting.

“Thank you, Captain.” She beamed at her superior officer. He smiled, returned the salute and nodded for her to relax.

“It was a close one,” he said. “What happened with the engine?”

She shook her head.

“I am not sure, sir. It might just be that it was soaking wet.”

“You think?” The captain frowned. “That wouldn’t be a bad thing. The alternatives might cost more to fix. Anyway, that was some good flying you did, Boyd.”

She smiled a bit mischievously.

“I thought that was some mighty fine landing, sir!” She exclaimed, coming to attention again, playing with him. He rolled his eyes, but looked amused, too.

“Fine it was, LT. When you’re ready, there’s someone here to see you. You’ll want to change in your blues. Come to the CO’s office.”

She raised her eyebrow. Who this might be? She couldn’t think of any reason she might have a visitor, except for family or friends, but that would not merit blues, or, for that matter, a mention from the good captain.

“Yes, sir,” she replied and saluted again. The captain lazily saluted back and turned on his heel, leaving her to wonder. Who could this visitor be? She barely made it to the base a couple weeks ago; it was only her fifth real flight there. Surely, she was doing well, wasn’t she? She racked her brain, searching for some transgression she might have made, but there was nothing. And then, even if there was, her own superior would be the first to talk to her, and not some visitor from god knows where.
It was pointless to speculate, she decided as she entered the locker room half an hour later, wrapped up in a towel, her hair still damp from the shower, though she tried to dry it. She changed in her skirt and pale blue blouse with a tie tab, then braided her orange hair and put it up with a pin. She looked in the mirror and smiled at her own reflection. *You did good, today, girl*, she thought to herself. *Daddy would be proud.* It was time. Whomever this mysterious visitor might be, it was rude to make him wait, right?

Standing outside her squadron commander’s office, she removed her side cap and knocked on the door. A muffled voice from inside told her to come in. She did, then approached the desk, stood at attention and saluted. Major Tarrick returned the salute, watching her intently from his chair. Alice relaxed her stance, but there was something in her CO’s face that made her uneasy. She glanced quickly at the other person present in the room. It was another officer, a woman with short blond hair and soft blue - almost grey - eyes. She was in her mid-thirties and wore the insignia of a Lieutenant Colonel. Alice snapped at attention again, more out of habit than because of any conscious thought.

“Lieutenant Alice Boyd reporting as ordered, sir!” Alice turned back to her CO.

“Lieutenant, this is Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter,” Major Tarrick said, nodding his head to the blond officer. She was looking at Alice with searching, serious eyes, as if trying to assess her.

“Ma’am.” Alice nodded to her and got a nod in return.

“Hello, Lieutenant,” the woman greeted her without a smile, but her voice was soft and warm, and if you looked closer, you could see a sparkle deep in her pale blue eyes. She raised a thick binder she was holding in her hand. “You wrote this.”

Even though Alice didn’t know what to expect coming in, it was definitely not this. She raised an eyebrow and spied the inscription on the binder. *Theoretical assessment of energy requirements for creating an Einstein-Rosen Bridge*, it read. Alice felt her cheeks flush a bit.

“Yes, ma’am, I’m afraid I did.”

Colonel Carter finally smiled.

“I have a friend at CalTech who gave me this to read.” She said by way of explanation. “It was very interesting.”

Alice raised both her eyebrows.

“Oh?” She still remembered the embarrassment that paper has brought upon her. That was the only assignment in college that she didn’t pass.

“Oh yes,” the officer smiled even more broadly. “Although I imagine it did not garner you much appreciation from your teacher.”

“No, ma’am.” Her face was burning now. She must look ridiculous, deep red cheeks against her otherwise pale complexion.

The lieutenant colonel’s eyes flicked to Major Tarrick. He cleared his throat and Alice shifted her attention to him.

“Colonel Carter came here yesterday evening,” he announced. Oh? That was news. “She came especially to assess your personal file and skills in the field. Your today’s mission was tailored so as to give her a feeling of what you can do.”
Oh, fuck, Alice thought to herself, blanching for a change now. She was being assessed? What for? She almost asked this out loud.

“You handled yourself exceptionally well in these difficult circumstances, Lieutenant,” the colonel said softly. It sounded almost like they wanted the circumstances to be difficult, just so they could see her pushed to the edge. But that was impossible. The storm was unexpected, Alice had checked the weather forecast before going up. But the engine… they couldn’t sabotage it, could they? No, that was a ludicrous idea. No matter how much they wanted to test her abilities under stress, they wouldn’t go so far. What if she failed, what if she crashed? And yet some instinct deep inside told Alice that it was exactly what happened. She banished that thought from her head.

“Thank you, ma’am. It was a close call.”

“How long have you been in the Air Force, Lieutenant? Two years?”

“Almost, ma’am. Twenty-two months to be exact, since my commission.”

“And this is your first real assignment, with no training wheels?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Why is she asking these questions? If she read her personal file, she should know all this stuff. Alice felt the woman’s gaze boring into her face, as if she was trying to peel off the outer layers and see the soft inside, her heart and soul.

There was a pause, awkward silence filling the room. Alice stood, feeling uncomfortable as both her CO and the other officer watched her intently.

“The colonel is here to present you with an offer,” Major Tarrick finally said, breaking the spell. Alice turned his head to him. Offer? That didn’t sound very military. “I do not know what is it, but I’ve been informed that this is a volunteer-only assignment. Top secret. Apparently it’s so highly classified that you have to give her your preliminary consent before you even know what it’s about.”

Alice gaped at him. A special assignment? Volunteer-only? Top secret? Why would I consent to something I have no earthly idea about? She thought a little panicky. But there was another voice in her head, admonishing her, pushing her to throw herself into whatever this was, challenging her. She made an effort to silence that voice for the moment.

“As your squadron commander, I am responsible for you and your well-being,” the major continued, holding his eyes level with hers, not looking at the colonel. “And although I do not know what this is about, I’ve got enough experience with these kinds of hush-hush assignments to know that they tend to be on the dangerous side. You’re barely twenty-one, Boyd,” he added in a softer voice. “Most of your fellow officers were still in college at that age. I was. I know how smart and skilled you are –” his eyes flicked to the other officer for a split second “– but you have no combat experience, zero, zilch. I’m advising against taking the good colonel’s offer.”

Alice didn’t say anything. She didn’t know what to say. This was the first time that her CO said anything that nice about her – he wasn’t big on compliments, usually. Granted, she only knew him a couple of weeks, but in that time he came off as a demanding boss, almost unfair.

“Lieutenant,” Carter spoke in a low voice. “I won’t lie to you, what I am proposing is dangerous. Very dangerous. But if you do it, you will never want to go back. This will be the single best thing to ever happen to you. I promise.”

Alice looked at her. The ranking officer was watching her, all serious and solemn.
“Was it for you? Was it the best thing?” The girl asked resolutely.

“Yes.” There was no pause, no hesitation in her answer.

Alice kept silent for a moment. Carter was holding her gaze all this time.

“Is it a flying assignment?” The young lieutenant finally asked. It was all so strange. Why did Carter start with showing her the old paper? Why did she come yesterday, why did she need so many assurances? Did she really do something to arrange Alice’s hard landing today? What was going on?

The woman didn’t reply, but lowered her eyelids, looking at Alice in a way that in itself was answer enough.

“Why me?”

“You don’t know?” The colonel sounded sincerely surprised. Alice shook her head. “Well, Lieutenant, we’re looking for a specific type of people for this assignment. Skilled, of course, but smart most of all.” She waved the binder with the unfortunate paper. “You’re brilliant, that’s evident. And from the display we’ve seen today, I can already tell you’re gonna be one heck of a pilot.”

“I already am a pilot.”

Carter smiled crookedly and looked down, but didn’t say anything to that dictum. Alice didn’t know what to make of her response. Sure, you needed a brain to be a good pilot, but there was a certain set of skills that were far more important, like reflex, the ability to make quick decisions and think on your feet, and many, many others.

“Are you a pilot, ma’am?” She ventured, aghast with her own impudence.

The lieutenant colonel smiled again, showing teeth this time, no doubt enjoying some private joke.

“Not anymore. But I still do pilot stuff from time to time.”

Stuff? What was that supposed to mean? Alice frowned. So what was she supposed to do? How do you make a decision based on some vague promises and warnings? Go get it, girl, her inner champion encouraged her. You’ve never backed down from a challenge before. That was true. But she only just started her actual piloting career, and she didn’t even have time to enjoy it properly. She was torn. And as usual when this happened, in her mind she went back in time. What would dad do? Preliminary consent, Major Tarrick said. So she could rescind that consent after she hears more? Surely, they wouldn’t make her do anything she didn’t want to do, especially that it was volunteer-only, right? So where’s the harm in consenting? Quitter. That was the danger. If she consented and then backed down, she would be labeled a quitter. And frankly, she would feel ill at ease with it herself, too. Then don’t quit. See it through. She wasn’t sure if it was that inner voice who was always goading her to do bold things, like a damned cheerleader; or maybe it was a memory of her father, saying these exact words to her on one of many occasions when she came to him seeking advice?

She raised her gaze to meet Carter’s eyes.

“Ok. I’m volunteering.”
They were sitting in one of the empty offices in the main building, just down the hall from Major Tarrick’s. They occupied two comfortable armchairs separated by a small coffee table. A smiling airman – Alice didn’t remember his name, though she saw him on the base regularly – brought them coffee and some cookies, and then retreated from the room, closing the door behind him. Well, a lieutenant colonel deserved such pampering for sure.

“You don’t talk much, Lieutenant,” the older officer observed casually as they sat, sipping their coffee and nibbling on biscuits. Alice smiled a bit shyly.

“No, ma’am. Listening is more interesting. Allows me to learn something new. I already know the things I could say.”

Carter threw her an incredulous look.

“That’s very… mature. And commendable.” She put down her mug. “But I would like to hear what you think, too.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The colonel shook her head slightly at that.

“So. The assignment.”

Alice looked at her expectantly.

“I need to stress first that the information I am going to give you now is strictly classified, beyond any measure of classification you’ve ever heard about. In fact, what I intend to tell you now is the best kept secret in the whole world.”

The young lieutenant raised an eyebrow, her disbelief evident on her face.

“It is,” Carter reaffirmed. “It is also a bit difficult to process at first, so let me start with something easier. You were handpicked for this assignment, Lieutenant, and there are many expectations for you. The bar is set up way high. I trust that you will not fail those expectations.”

She paused, and Alice felt like she was expected to say something like “I won’t, ma’am,” but instead she just raised her other brow, so both of them were up now.

“You asked me if it’s a flying assignment. It is, in more ways than just one. But to dispel any misgivings you might have about leaving the base just as you’ve began your regular flights in a Falcon: we want you to fly a fighter. It will be a bit different than flying an F-16, though. The fighters we have in mind are much more advanced. Waaay more advanced.” She smiled, stressing the word “way.”

Alice felt a rush of excitement. Was she talking about Raptors? She’s never flown one, but that would be very exciting. Or what if it was an F-35 Lightning? Wouldn’t that be just… awesome?

“The fighter’s designation is F-302. Even that is classified. You may never tell anyone this designation.”

Oh, my. A completely new, advanced and secret fighter? And she, Alice Boyd, was handpicked to
“An F-302 is a two-seat, multi-role air and space superiority attack fighter capable of short, intra-system hyperspace hops.”

A moment of silence followed that statement. Alice frowned, as she tried to decipher Colonel Carter’s words. Air and space? Hyperspace? Suddenly she remembered her paper that Carter brought with her. Einstein-Rosen Bridge. Hyperspace. No, impossible. She dismissed the idea.

“I don’t understand,” she managed eventually.

Carter smiled sympathetically.

“I don’t blame you. It sounds like science-fiction, doesn’t it? But I assure you it is true. The F-302 is capable of flight in space. It can leave our orbit on its own or can be deployed from a battlecruiser anywhere.” She noticed Alice’s blank stare. “Yes, we’ve got a battlecruiser too. A spaceship, Alice.”

It was the first time she used her name; it startled the young lieutenant. She shook her head. Was it some kind of an elaborate joke?

“I am serious, Lieutenant,” Carter said, guessing her train of thoughts. “We’ve been traveling all over the galaxy for the last eight years.” She paused again, allowing this news to sink in. “Prometheus, our battlecruiser, and F-302s are a direct consequence of our travels.”

“Consequence? How did you travel without a spaceship?” Alice said, her voice level, not showing any of the emotions washing over her at the moment. Incredulity, mostly, but also fascination, excitement and, yes, fear. Am I going nuts? Is this really happening now?

“I’m glad you asked.” The colonel smiled. “See, in 1928, on a dig in Giza, we unearthed a device we now call a Stargate. The people who discovered it then didn’t know what it was for, taking it for an archeological artifact. However, there were some who thought it was a weapon. As such, it was studied closely during the 1940s, but it was later stored and forgotten, until early 90s. Finally, nine years ago, we were able to make it work and discovered that it was, actually, a means of transportation.” Carter tapped her finger on Alice’s paper, which was sitting on the coffee table where she had put it.

“Einstein-Rosen Bridge,” Alice whispered, her mouth dry. If it was a joke, it was a very intricate one. But she didn’t believe it was a joke anymore. It was too convincing. It had to be true… or maybe she was really slipping away and losing grip on reality. She restrained a shudder.

“Yes. The device allows to create a stable wormhole between two points in space. Entering a Stargate on Earth, the matter is broken down to a molecular level, transported through the wormhole to the identical Stargate somewhere on another planet, and put together again. You can literally take one step and find yourself thousands of light years away.”

Alice looked down at her paper on the table.

“You were actually pretty close in your calculations,” said Carter, watching her intently. “There were a few inaccuracies, but of course you didn’t have any of the knowledge we now possess about wormhole physics. Still, to come so close in a theoretical paper like that… it’s impressive.”

Alice kept her eyes down, not looking up. There was a balloon inside her chest, swelling with pride. She willed it to stop expanding, telling herself that ego was a very dangerous thing.
“You know, I don’t usually make these trips myself,” the colonel offered in a lower voice. “But a friend of mine gave me your paper to read, and when I heard you were one of ours, and that you qualified to our program, I couldn’t resist meeting you. You’re brilliant.”

Alice looked up suddenly, meeting her gaze. How is one supposed to stay humble when a lieutenant colonel is saying things like that about them?

“You’re exactly the kind of person we need. Smart, skilled, well-educated in science. You are very young and inexperienced, but we cannot afford to wait now.”

Uh huh. That didn’t sound very well. Sounded… ominous.

“I will not lie to you, Lieutenant. This assignment, this job that I am offering you… it will be dangerous. We’ve lost many good people to this program.” Her eyes were sad as she said it. “But there is no doubt that if there is anything worth risking your life for, it’s this. There’s a war out there.” She added in a low voice, almost a whisper. “The space is far from empty, Lieutenant, and not everyone there is friendly.”

Fuck. Aliens. There were aliens! Living intelligent creatures in space! It was impossible. She must be going nuts right now. Alice blinked quickly.

“Fighting for our country is a noble cause.” Carter continued, her eyes never leaving Alice’s. “But defending our planet… traveling far and wide… meeting new cultures… new technologies… it’s incomparable to anything.” She went silent for a moment. “But there are downsides to this, too. It takes a toll on a person.”

Alice wondered briefly what kind of toll it took on Colonel Carter. There was something about her, the way she talked, a spark in the eye. Like she’s seen too much.

“The Earth is in no way safe,” Carter resumed after a few heartbeats. “Prometheus, our first battlecruiser, is supposed to help us fix this. Up till now, Stargate was our only way of travelling around the galaxy. That restricted our movements and possibilities greatly. Our enemies have ships capable of interstellar travel.”

Hyperspace, Alice thought. She shifted uncomfortably. There was another paper of hers, locked somewhere in her desk drawer back at home. She never turned it in, mindful of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge fiasco. But it was there: a theoretical essay on the energy outputs required to open a hyperspace window.

“Prometheus, and other spacecraft of its class if we manage to build them, will be an attempt to tip the scale of the war to our side. Give us an edge. Or at the very least, help us keep the Earth safe.”

Alice nodded slowly. All these years and she never had an idea there was any greater danger other than another nuclear country deciding they were fed up with America.

“Prometheus is capable of transporting a squadron of F-302s,” Carter added and smiled suddenly. “That’s where you come in. We want you to become an F-302 pilot, or a co-pilot at first.”

Alice frowned. A co-pilot? She was piloting Falcons all by herself, why would she want to change that to the second best?

“Wherever Prometheus goes, you’ll go with it. All over the galaxy.”

Oh, that’s why.
“Of course when you’re not currently flying yourself, there’ll be a ton other interesting things to do, like getting to know all the systems aboard the Prometheus. Much like the F-302, it was retro-engineered from the technology we gathered during our travels through the Stargate. Some very cool toys there, Lieutenant.” The colonel grinned wide, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

Oh, this woman could be her older sister. She understood Alice perfectly, it seemed.

The silence stretched out as the two women sat looking at each other.

“How big the crew?” The girl asked out of the blue, not really knowing what else to say.

“About one hundred fifteen. Why?”

“No reason.”

Carter arched her eyebrow, but didn’t comment on that.

“So how does it sound to you?”

Alice frowned. She didn’t really know. There was chaos in her mind, and she didn’t know what to think or feel.

“I think I’m confused, ma’am.”

“Understandable.” Carter nodded with a warm smile. “Everything will be much clearer once you hear it all. I’ve only given you a rough rundown, and we’ve already been sitting here for almost an hour.”

Well, Alice was looking forward to hearing more, but for now she needed some time to process all that she’s already heard. There was still a part of her that didn’t believe any of it. And another, very small, but very vicious part, too, whispering to her you’re going crazy, you’re turning into your mom, it finally happened. She shook her head to clear her thoughts. It didn’t work.

“I need to know now, Lieutenant.”

Alice looked down at her hands. She was clasping them together tightly in her lap. She made an effort to relax her fingers and took a deep breath. Here goes nothing.

“I haven’t changed my mind, ma’am.” Her voice was small and uneven, but when she raised her gaze to look at the lieutenant colonel, her eyes were calm. “I’m volunteering.”

* 

Compared to her previous assignment, Nellis Air Force Base was huge. Alice has been there before on training, of course, but the sheer size of the place still intimidated her. She actually liked the more private and cozy feel of the smaller base, which housed only one squadron of aircraft and allowed for the residents to feel somehow connected. At Nellis the crowd blended into one bland, unrecognizable mass. Thankfully, that was only supposed to be one stop on the way to… where? Alice wasn’t sure. Prometheus was no doubt housed in some remote top-secret facility, not in the middle of the biggest Air Force installation, wasn’t it?

She was one of the first to arrive. They have been assigned living quarters on the base, nothing
fancy like officer housing, more like the enlisted personnel’s barracks. Alice didn’t mind, but the few other officers who arrived with her were a bit grumbly about that. They didn’t really speak to her at all that much, except a few words at meal times, but she could hear them complaining to each other.

It took full seven days for everybody to assemble, presumably because of all the additional formalities that were required for this assignment. Everyone’s clearance levels had to be seriously upgraded, their performance on duty reassessed yet again, their mental health and predispositions examined dutifully by three separate head doctors, and a thorough physical performed at the Air Force hospital in Colorado Springs. Why not here, at Nellis – Alice didn’t know, but she suspected the physicians examining her there were familiar with the entire Stargate Program and thus better qualified for the job. After all the Stargate Command wasn’t all that far away, was it? They probably received patients from under the Cheyenne Mountain all the time.

It was still hard to wrap her head around all this. Alice had been thoroughly briefed before arriving here, as promised by Lieutenant Colonel Carter. She was even allowed to read through some of their mission reports, which she did with wide eyes and cheeks burning with excitement and fascination. Already at Nellis, they were each issued a tablet containing a lot of additional information, mainly on wormhole and hyperspace physics, as well as all technical specifications of both the F-302s and the *Prometheus*. This Alice swallowed within a day, determined to learn as much as was possible in the time allotted. She then was left to wander, with nothing to do but wait when the others were arriving, through the base library. Of course nothing of direct connection to the Stargate or the BC-303 was to be found there, but she figured she could deepen her understanding of astrophysics in the meantime. So she buried herself in books once more, something she hadn’t had a chance to do since graduating college.

On the seventh day since she arrived at the base, they were all asked to come to a briefing room. When Alice got there, she was struck by the sheer number of the people attending. It was hard to estimate before, as not everyone attended meals at the same time, and at other times they were wandering about. But now at least twenty people were already seated in the room. Alice knew that *Prometheus* could hold only eight F-302s, so there would be sixteen pilots and co-pilots in all. Why so many people here, then?

She took a seat at the back of the room, scanning the crowd with her eyes. There were only five other women there, but what made her uneasy was the realization that everybody in the room was older than her, and that they all outranked her as well. She thought she saw one or two lieutenants, but they were first class. She still had a couple of weeks of service to go to achieve that rank. All others were captains or majors. She suddenly felt very young, inexperienced and frankly, intimidated by this crowd. What was she even doing here? Maybe Major Tarrick’s been right. Maybe she should have waited. But would she get another shot at *this*? Highly unlikely. Once you shoot down a volunteer-only assignment, you’re not going to get it offered to you again.

The low murmur of the people talking died away when someone entered the room through the door behind the speaker’s pulpit. It was a rather short man with dark blond hair and hazel eyes, wearing the insignia of a full-bird colonel. Everybody leaped to their feet to stand at attention.

“At ease,” the colonel gestured them to sit down. “Good morning, everybody. I am Colonel Matthew Cox. For the time being, you will be reporting directly to me.”

He paused to look at them, his assessing, cool eyes sweeping the rows.

“You were offered this assignment because you constitute the elite of the Air Force pilots. You have been handpicked by a special board at the Office of Homeworld Security, who went through
thousands of applications submitted by your former Commanding Officers. Of course your COs didn’t know what they were volunteering you for, but they were asked to choose the best of the best.”

They volunteered us, huh? Alice thought, trying to suppress a smile. Isn’t that an oxymoron, Colonel?

“You were all thoroughly briefed about the entire program. I don’t need to stress the importance of this assignment. Not only our own world is at stake here, gentlemen, but the entire galaxy’s fate may be on our shoulders, as well.”

That’s a little grandiose, she mused. I know the Goa’uld are threatening everyone, but we cannot take responsibility for the entire galaxy, can we? She frowned slightly. Maybe they could. Maybe they should. The galaxy was full of humans once taken off the Earth. Humans who for the most part were slaves for so long, they didn’t even know how to defy their supposed gods. Weren’t the people of Earth, by the sole fact of being of the same species, bound to help them, now that they finally might have the ability to do so?

“You were told that you will be assigned to the Prometheus as she performs her tasks, either patrolling our solar system, or performing other tasks in outer space. That is correct. Each of you will take at least two tours on the BC-303. However, those of you deemed best fit to fulfill it, will get an additional assignment later on.”

Everybody shifted, leaning over, drinking in the colonel’s words. What else was in store for them?

“There is another deep space carrier under construction at the moment. Its designation is, for now, X-304. It is a second generation of interstellar capital ship developed by the United States and its allies. It is expected to take its first flight sometime in the beginning of the next year. The X-304 is going to be more advanced than anything we’ve ever built on Earth. It is designed to house anything between eight to sixteen F-302s. Additionally, we are installing F-302 outposts in various locations on the planet, as well as in several of our offworld bases. After your initial duties aboard the Prometheus are finished, you may get assigned to any of these places.”

Alice glanced quickly on the only two people sitting in her row, a captain and a major. They were both frowning, not entirely pleased with the news, it seemed.

“Each of these postings is of vital importance to the defense of our planet, as well as our military effort in the ongoing war with the Goa’uld.” The colonel continued, reading the room’s reactions well. “And each of them requires specific set of skills. You will be assigned according to your performance and predispositions for these tasks. I should also warn you that ultimately, the decision of who joins the crews of the BC-303 and X-304 lies with their commanders.” He looked at them impassively, keeping silent for almost full ten seconds. “As you already know, the F-302 design differs from the standard-issue fighter. No matter what you were flying until now, you will have to take additional training on these machines to acquaint yourselves with how they operate. That will be done out of the McMurdo base, to limit any possible exposure of the F-302s existence to the public.”

Oh, joy. McMurdo was in Antarctica. And although here in the U.S. it was still high summer, it was the middle of the winter in the South Pole. That will be hell on ice, Alice was sure.

“Before you go to the actual pilot training there, you will be required to attend a special training at the Marine Corps installation in the Spring Mountains, as well as the Air Force Academy’s training facilities in Colorado Springs.”
“This will be a complex physical condition and marksmanship training with elements of offworld mission drills.” Colonel Cox narrowed his eyes as the attendees’ frowns deepened and a few of them shook their heads. “You will be pilots, gentlemen, but the nature of your mission is such that it is impossible to predict in what situation you might find yourselves. Suppose you crash on a Goa’uld-occupied territory and you have to make your way back to the Gate through enemy encampments on foot? Whether you’ll need this Special Ops training or not, it is better to be prepared.”

Well, that actually made sense. Although anyone who thought that she, Alice Boyd, five feet four inches tall and weighing a hundred and five pounds, would do well on a Special Ops training, must certainly be mental. Surely Lieutenant Colonel Carter knew this? Why didn’t she say anything? Now it was too late to back out of this whole deal. God help me, Alice thought, cold panic sweeping through her, although her face remained impassive. This is bad. This is really bad. Either I’m gonna embarrass myself in front of all these people, or my system will shut down and I’ll die. She was not prepared for anything like this. She was a pilot, dammit! She wasn’t cut out for running around with a gun. Of course, as an Air Force member, she had to stay fit, but this was a whole new level of physical condition, one that she surely couldn’t achieve. It was just impossible.

“Do not be alarmed, though,” the colonel added, probably responding to the incredulous looks thrown at him from the audience. “This will not be a standard Special Ops training, nothing that intense. We are well aware of what you can and cannot do. This training is especially tailored for all military personnel going through the Gate, and conducted as a joint operation by the Marine Corps and the Air Force. The marines will go easy on you.” He smiled crookedly.

Okay, that didn’t actually sound all that bad. Surely all sorts of people went offworld, right? Not all were SG teams. There were military scientists, support personnel, EMTs and such. Alice took a slow, deep breath, trying not to reveal the level of disarray her emotions were in. You can do this! Her inner cheerleader told her in an overconfident tone. It’s a challenge. Take up the gauntlet. Well, if you put it that way…

“Oh, that’s just the beginning,” the colonel said, his eyes lighting up. “Once you’ve completed the trainings on a satisfactory performance level, you will be assigned to the Prometheus, or another temporary duty until a spot on the battlecruiser is freed. You then will be assessed and given your permanent assignment.”

The colonel paused. The silence in the room was almost palpable. All eyes were locked on the short silhouette standing in front of the pulpit.

“We will travel to the marine training facility this afternoon. I will act as your CO all the way until you are assigned to the Prometheus. You are to report with your personal belongings outside the barracks at sixteen hundred, where you will be picked up. And this is all for now. Dismissed.”

He nodded to them and stepped off the platform, disappearing inside the door behind the pulpit. On cue, everybody in the room started talking at the same time. Alice sat in her chair and mulled over all they’ve heard. That was some serious game-changer. Not only the training, but the variety of the assignments. With her youth and lack of combat experience, she was sure to lose to everybody else in the room. She would not get a permanent spot on the Prometheus, let alone the new battlecruiser. The best she could hope for then would be an offworld outpost, and even that was unlikely. Okay, so you’re gonna be flying an F-302 on Earth. Is that such a bad thing? Certainly not. Less than three weeks ago she was quite happy to pilot an F-16 in a small and remote base with no real tactical or strategic significance whatsoever. Now she was supposed to get to pilot – or rather co-pilot – the most advanced fighter ever constructed. And staying on Earth meant
staying in touch with her family and friends. That was important, too, wasn’t it?

Shit, family. Where was Jake at the moment? Didn’t he say he was being transferred somewhere last time they spoke? He didn’t yet know where to and what for, but surely he found out by now. What was she supposed to tell him? **Hey, bro, I am being directed for some additional training so I can fly a space-worthy fighter-interceptor and possibly help protect Earth from aliens.** She’s never lied to him before, but she would have to start now. Dammit, she would have to lie to everyone in her life. That would be fun.

The room emptied slowly. People were still deep in conversation, but nobody really gave any notice to her. Despite her orange hair, she was quite invisible. Good. She liked it that way.

She followed the group back into the barracks where they were housed. Most of them walked straight to the dining hall, but Alice skipped over to her room, which she shared with the other five women on the assignment. They were six in total. Six women and about twenty-five men. Well, she was used to that. Frankly, she was always in the minority, ever since she was a little girl, she was usually surrounded by boys. First her brother and his friends, then at CalTech there weren’t all that many girls as well, although definitely more than female pilots in the Air Force. Being called a “gentleman” along with her fellow assignees was not something she dwelt on.

She fished out her cell phone from the drawer by her bunk. She dialed her brother and waited several rings, until his voicemail came on. It was only one in the afternoon; no doubt he was still working.

“Hey, Jake, it’s me. Listen, I don’t know where you are right now, since you told me you were being reassigned but not where, but I just wanted to let you know I’ve got a new assignment as well. I’m being directed for some additional training now, so I’m not sure when I’ll be available, but try to call me tomorrow evening, if you can, ok? I’d like to speak to you in real time, you know? I miss you, bro. Take care.” She pressed the button to end the call. There. She managed not to lie and yet she didn’t divulge any classified information. Now if only that would be so easy every time… She dialed a different number.

There were only two rings before someone picked up.

“Hallaway Treatment Center, how can I help you?” A woman’s clear voice answered.

“Hi, Marcy, it’s Alice Boyd. Could I speak to my mom?”

“Certainly, Miss Boyd, please hold for a moment.”

A soothing, ambient-like music followed for a few minutes. Alice knew they needed to get her mother from wherever she was to the phone calls room. This usually took time. She waited patiently.

“Hello!”

“Hey, mom!” She said enthusiastically. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, Alice, darling!” Her mother’s voice was sober and bright. She was doing so well lately. “I am great, honey. How about you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, mommy. Just calling to check up on you. What have you been up to?”

“Oh, you won’t believe this – Chris Cormack visited me yesterday. Remember Chris? We used to work together on that cartoon about the funny moose, way back.”
“I remember! The cartoon never aired, though.”

“That’s because it was ridiculous. Who the hell would watch a cartoon about a moose, no matter how funny?” Her mother laughed. “Anyway, Chris came and I got to show him some of my recent work. He was pretty impressed, I might say!”

“As well he should be! If it’s anything like what I’ve seen the last time I’ve been in your den, then it’s amazing.”

“Oh, thank you, honey. Anyway… what was I saying?” She became confused all of a sudden.

“Chris Cormack came to see you yesterday. You showed him your latest pieces.” Alice said patiently.

“Oh, right. So he asked if I could make him some commissions! Can you believe this! After all these years, finally I will get some real work!”

“Oh, mommy, that’s amazing!” Alice gushed. She never gushed, except when talking to her mom.

“I know, right? He will send over the specifications. They’re developing a video game and they want me to make them some concept art for it. I can barely contain my excitement! It’s so good to feel useful and needed again.”

“Oh, mommy, you’re always needed. I need you.”

“I know, baby. But you’re a grown-up now, and anyway it’s different with work.”

“Maybe you’re right. I have some news, too, you know.”

“What news? Tell me!”

“I’ve got a new assignment. I’m going away for a few weeks for some additional training, but then I’m gonna be posted somewhere else. I’m not sure where yet. But it’s a very exciting new opportunity.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Allie! I do hope you’re taking proper care of yourself, though.”

“Yes, mom.” Alice sighed. Moms will be moms, no matter the circumstances, she supposed. “Listen, I gotta go to lunch, but I’ll call you again soon.”

“Sure, baby. I love it when you call. Makes me feel less alone.”

Alice’s heart contracted with a sudden surge of pain and guilt. Oh, mom. If I knew a way to help you, I’d keep you with me at all times. The truth was, she should be there for her mother. Any other good daughter would settle somewhere nearby, got a normal job, and visited her sick mother every week, or more. Or took her to live with her altogether, driving her to therapy every day.

“You sure you’re alright, mom?” She asked in a smaller voice, trying not to give way to tears welling up her eyes.

“Yes, honey, I’m quite well. Do not worry. Go eat your lunch. I need to get back to my painting anyway. I don’t want to lose too much of the daylight.”

“Alright. Talk to you soon, mommy.”

“Bye, baby. Love you.”
“Love you too, mom.”

She hung up. Staring with unseeing eyes at a point in space, she wondered if she ever will come to terms with what happened to her mom and the way Alice handled it. Could she do more? Should she? She made sure mom was in the best mental health facility in the SoCal. But shouldn’t Alice just stay with her? Shouldn’t she abandon her career and take care of her mother the way she took care of her daughter when she was little? How could Alice not repay this? But at the same time, could she sacrifice her whole career and all her ambitions? Should she?

That was old news, of course. She led the same exact battle with herself every time she phoned her mom. Would it ever stop, this feeling of guilt, like she’d betrayed the woman who brought her into this world and gave her all her care and love? Alice doubted that. But it didn’t make it any less difficult. Whatever decision she made, she would be unhappy with it, that at least was quite clear.

She finally sighed deeply and got up from her bunk. It was high time to go get that lunch.

* 

The room was dark. It was almost always dark here, the sun actually rising above the horizon only for a few hours around noon. However, if the sky was clear, with stars and moon it was not all complete darkness, the slightest light reflecting off the snow and ice. And it was cold, constantly too cold. Other people didn’t seem to have such a problem with this, but Alice was constantly shivering. The doctor on the base told her it was because of the way she was built: small and slim, most of the energy her body was producing went to operating all her systems, and not to produce heat. She didn’t have any fat or muscle layer to insulate the cold, either, which also contributed to her feeling worse in this climate.

Although she admittedly gained some muscle and mass during their two weeks of intense physical training, she was still the smallest and the weakest of the training participants. Surprisingly though, this did not have a direct impact on her performance, as she had feared it would. In fact, even though she wasn’t top of the class, she completed the training with more than satisfactory performance assessment. She marveled about it, laying on her bed in the dark. She woke up too early, the alarm clock on the stand was showing five in the morning. Her body had a different idea. It’s been three days since they arrived at the McMurdo Air Force Base, but her internal clock was still set on Colorado Springs time. There was nineteen hours difference, so in central America it was eleven in the morning the moment, previous day. How odd. Anyway, there was no way she could sleep at eleven in the morning, even though it was actually five am. How confusing. The jet lag would soon pass, she knew, but for now she just lay restless in her bed, remembering the harsh training they were all subjugated to.

They were airlifted from Nellis to the Mountain Warfare Training Center in Spring Mountains, California. That day they were left alone, they could make themselves comfortable in their living quarters – another barrack for enlisted personnel, it seemed. That must have been done by design. Maybe to let them savor the hardships they could potentially encounter offworld? Or just to prepare them for what was coming aboard the Prometheus? For sure there wasn’t enough space for much more than a barrack-like living quarters on the ship. Was there? Alice didn’t remember any mention of that in the specs she’s read while at Nellis.

The actual training began the next morning, bright and early, by a three-mile run on the mountain paths, which left all of them breathless and swaggering at the end of it. Surprisingly for herself,
Alice found that while the exertion itself was just as debilitating for her as everyone else, she seemed to tolerate high altitude better than others. In fact it seemed that the bigger the person was, the more problems they were having just breathing in the thin air of the mountains. Something to do with lung capacity, no doubt. She would have to read up on that – it might prove useful one day.

What followed then was a rigorous regime of conditioning exercise, back-to-basics physical fitness and hand-to-hand combat training, capped with weapons qualification program. It was at the same time familiar to what they’ve all been through during their initial Air Force training – no matter if they went through Officer Training School, like Alice, or ROTC or the Academy. However, there were plenty of differences to keep them on their toes. For starters, it was much harder – physically – than their basic training. And then, there were quirks like learning how to best combat a Jaffa without risking their symbiote finding its way to your spine, using staff weapons and zats, or defending oneself against a Goa’uld hand device. That part, Alice had to admit, was fun, even though she kept failing the hand-to-hand trainings. She was just too small and weak. But she managed to offset her less-than-satisfactory combat skills demonstration with a stellar performance on the shooting range. Her daddy would be proud; it was him who first taught her to shoot. On the other hand, her mom would be disturbed. She never liked guns all that much.

After two weeks of such intense training, they were all deemed ready to go on, and transferred to a facility located in the remote part of the Air Force Academy grounds near Colorado Springs. They spent another week there, practicing drills that were supposed to imitate real offworld combat situations. Each of them got a chance to lead a team – and that was probably the hardest part of the entire training, Alice admitted to herself, turning to the other side on her bed. She didn’t know if it was deliberate or not, but her team consisted of her - a second lieutenant - and three majors. Ordering them around went against the grain, and a simple task of issuing an order grew to an almost insurmountable encumbrance. But eventually she completed the assignment, which was to free an SG team trapped in a Goa’uld mothership, and not too bad at that. All in all, throughout the entire three weeks of training, she managed to keep somewhere in the middle, never really shining – except perhaps on the shooting range – but never really failing as well – that is, with exception of the hand-to-hand combat. For someone who never expected to do such things, she thought she did quite well. Could have been better… but could have been worse, too.

She glanced at the alarm clock. It was barely five thirty. She sighed and shifted on her bed. She could get up and do something productive with her time, but her bed was the only place on the base where she was not cold, so she decided to stay. No wonder that during the winter months the number of residents on the base dwindled to less than two hundred, while in the summer there was more than one thousand people living and working here. Alice was guessing this was actually why they started the program now; fewer people meant less possibility of any security leaks. Although the base’s squadron of F-302s operated all year round, so then again maybe that was not the reason. Maybe they just wanted to make them as uncomfortable as possible. After all, it’s cold in space, too.

She thought back to three, or actually four days before, as they arrived very late in the evening. The time difference was so big, and they were all so tired after the long travel, that nobody had problems falling asleep that night. In the morning they started their actual pilot training. First day was only theory – hours and hours of endless talk about the performance and specifications of the F-302 model. Then the next day they had a chance to try it themselves in a simulator – a state-of-the-art machine the likes of which Alice had never seen before. She was convinced it was alien technology, or maybe something retro-engineered from an alien piece of equipment some SG team had encountered on their travels. Either way, it allowed for a full immersion, giving the semblance of an actual flight, more like a virtual reality than a simulator, really. It was impressive.

And then, finally, yesterday, they got to go on a real flight in an F-302. They each rode the second
seat for now, having an instructor or another seasoned 302 pilot accompany them, but it was nevertheless the most exhilarating feeling Alice has ever experienced. An F-302 was not a plane: it was a piece of art. It sailed through the sky with grace and ease, accelerating to almost impossible velocity in one blink of an eye, making narrow loops and twists mid-air that no other man-manned machine was ever capable of, and all this with only slight g-force registering. Inertial dampeners was what made all the difference; with the speed and maneuverability superior to every other Earth-made plane in existence, they guaranteed a ride as smooth as aboard a 747. Of course the four engines – one of them a hyperdrive, no less – didn’t hurt as well.

The 302 actually proved quite easy to handle. There were many more controls on the pilot’s dashboard, and the heads-up display was like something out of a sci-fi movie, but once Alice got a grasp on what did what, making the plane do whatever she wanted it to do wasn’t all that hard. Well, at least so far. They were still doing some pretty basic stuff for now. Yesterday was more of a joyride than an actual training. But it was about to start for real now.

The alarm went off. It was six in the morning. Alice extended her arm and turned it off, feeling the cool breeze creeping up her hand as soon as she got it out from under the duvet. God, it was cold here.

Gingerly, she got up, peeling off the layers of duvets and blankets from herself, as the other women in the room started to move as well. The usual morning grumbles followed, until they all were up, showered and ready to face the day. They didn’t talk much on their way to the dining room. Despite sharing a living space all throughout the training, they didn’t develop any kind of camaraderie that usually happened over time between people working closely together. In fact, Alice was still pretty much left to her own devices whenever there was a bit of free time. It felt somehow right – which was kind of natural, considering her age and rank as opposed to her current colleagues’.

“Morning, Boyd,” one of them had the good manners to say when she sat down at a table with two first lieutenants and three captains. “How are you today?”

“Good morning, sir,” she replied politely. “I am fine, thank you, if a bit sleepy. I don’t think my body knows we’re in a different time zone yet. How about you, sir?”

“Oh, same. Woke up before the alarm again,” Captain Archer sighed deeply. He was a young man, no more than twenty seven or twenty eight years old, with a brownish hair, interspersed with a few gray strings, visible despite his short buzz cut. His hazel eyes were more lively and warmer than those of his fellow officers. He was the only one who talked to Alice quite willingly, without patronizing or looking down at her. “Wonder what we’re going to be doing today. Suppose they let us fly the first seat?”

Alice shrugged.

“No idea, sir. But I guess we will get another day of second seat training before they decide to hand their precious fighters over to us.”

“You’re probably right,” he acquiesced. “I feel like a butter bar again… uh, pardon me, Lieutenant.” He became flustered for a moment.

Alice smiled.

“I don’t mind, sir,” she said in a low voice, looking at her plate. “Frankly I feel a bit like an intruder here. Like a child in a room full of grownups.”
She didn’t raise her gaze, but she heard the murmur of ascent from another captain sitting across the table. Her smile faded.

“Well, Boyd, you may be young, but I’ve seen you fly yesterday, and let me tell you, I don’t think you have anything to be worried about.”

That made her look up. Everybody at the table was staring at Archer with various looks of incredulity or outright disapproval. His gaze remained calm and level.

“Besides, you’re not that far away from a promotion to the first lieutenant, are you?” He continued and swallowed a spoonful of oatmeal.

“No, sir. Actually, I’m about to hit the two-years mark in a couple of weeks.”

“See? Besides, it’s not all about the rank. What you do is what matters the most. My uncle is a colonel in Pentagon, a staffer, you know,” he offered with a shrug. “I say my job beats his any day.”

Alice smiled again. She decided she liked the young captain. He seemed to have a very liberating, no-nonsense kind of attitude. It was refreshing.

One of the other captains offered an unrelated remark at that point and the others followed. Alice dropped off the conversation, concentrating on eating her breakfast and listening to what others had to say.

They spent the entire day – that is, after it got bright enough to take off - riding the second seat again, performing ever more complicated maneuvers and getting the feel of the machine ingrained in their brains and hands. That was perhaps the most important thing about flying: every plane was different, and you had to learn its every quirk, every slight imbalance, every single switch and control. You had to become one with the machine: doing before thinking, reacting before realizing. That was what this training was really about.

The instructors weren’t stopping their training for any lunch, trying to use the daylight as much as possible. The sun was rising earlier and setting later every day, but they still had only some four or five hours of daylight. Of course they could fly longer than that, but landing on an ice runway in complete darkness was no fun, despite the F-302’s state-of-the art navigational systems. They also had to share the machines, as there were only fifteen of them on the base. That meant that half of the trainees started their flights in the morning, the other half after noon.

About two hours into her flight, Alice was cruising on an altitude of barely three kilometers over the vast ice plains of Antarctica. It was beautiful, the pure white snow reflecting the sunrays permeating the cloud cover. It was so bright, in fact, that it could damage her eyes, should Alice remove her goggles.

“I’m bored,” a disconnected voice announced over the internal intercom. “Let’s see what you can do. Get us up, Lieutenant, way up.”

She was currently flying with their main instructor. He was a seasoned pilot and seemed to know everything there was to know about the 302. He also had a twisted sense of humor she found rather hard to appreciate.

“Yes, sir,” she responded gladly, pulling the stick. “How high?”

“I wanna see forty kilometers on my altimeter,” he said. “Go full-force on this baby, Boyd. Just don’t touch the aerospike engines yet.”
“Yes, sir!” She couldn’t hide the excitement from her voice. She pulled the stick even more, pointing the nose of the aircraft to the sky, and punched the controls with overeager enthusiasm. They started climbing, the angle of ascent so steep it was almost vertical, picking up speed as they went.

“Altitude ten kilometers and rising, reaching Mach 3,” she reported, reveling in the fact that she felt almost no pull. If she could ever achieve this speed in her F-16, she would be crushed by the pressure of multiple atmospheres, and not even a g-suit would change much. Whoa. She was now going faster than ever before in her life. They weren’t just supersonic now; they were hypersonic. Holy fuck. “We’ve reached Mach 6, altitude nearing thirty thousand meters.”

There was a few seconds of silence as they hit the forty kilometers mark on the altimeter.

“Nose-dive, Boyd, now!” The instructor ordered suddenly through the intercom and Alice reacted instinctively, pushing the stick. Even with the inertial dampeners, the sudden change of direction at this speed pinned her to her seat with crushing weight, but it lasted only a heartbeat and then the plane was going down at a steep angle, almost vertical again.

Alice felt lightheaded and giddy, more out of pure joy of doing this than anything else. And in that precise moment, her controls blinked and went out completely, the HUD fading away. Alice felt her face drain out of all blood, heart lurching into her throat. She reflexively pulled the stick to level their flight, but it was stuck. She tried to flick the switches, but nothing was happening.

The controls were unresponsive. The plane was falling to the ground.
Chapter 2

Adrenaline shot through her body.

“Sir, I have lost control over the aircraft!” She shouted over the internal intercom, but it was dead silent. Oh fuck. “Colonel, please respond.” Nothing. Fuck, fuck, fuck! She tried to switch the intercom for outgoing communication, but the dial didn’t react. Fuck.

Perhaps five seconds had passed. The altimeter showed thirty kilometers. Too high to eject. Eject? Would it even work? She thought so; ejection seat was rigged independently from all other systems, and triggered manually. But they weren’t just falling, they were still dropping to the ground at two thousand meters per second. She didn’t think she could survive ejection at that speed. And what about the instructor in the front seat?

That was a good question. What about him? She could see the tip of his helmet moving, so he was definitely conscious. Did he lose control as well? If he didn’t he’d surely pull up by now. So he must have been locked out too. Locked out? Or maybe she was the one locked out? Could he be testing her? She remembered the veiled allusions of Colonel Carter at their first meeting. She was now reasonably sure that they did sabotage her engine back then in order to see how she’d perform under pressure. Could this be the same situation? It was possible. Alice knew that the first pilot had the ability to take over the controls and lock the co-pilot out completely; it was a built-in security measure in case of alien takeover. Is this what happened now? It would be more logical than a sudden mechanical or electronic failure. After all, this aircraft – well, spacecraft, actually – had been built to withstand much greater strain that anything she’s put it through just now. She couldn’t exclude a malfunction, though. It was an incredibly complex piece of technology, and complex things tended to break more easily than simpler ones.

Another five or ten seconds were gone as she sat, her breathing rapid and shallow, her heartbeat raised as if she’s just ran a marathon, her body sweating under the flight suit. Her fight or flight instinct has set in, but she was unsure what to do. Eject? Do nothing? Try something?

But what could she do? She glanced at the altimeter. Eighteen kilometers. If she doesn’t do something soon and it turns out that it was not a test, they’re going to have to scrape them off the surface of a glacier. Fuck! Think, Boyd! She shot a panicky look at the switches and controls in front of her. They were all connected to the same central system, and it didn’t matter whether she was locked out by the instructor, or by an electronic failure, they were all unusable anyway. Except the ejection lever, which was a manual trigger. And another thing. The emergency engine start-up button. The central system drew power from a battery when the engine was off, but to prevent draining it too much, it switched to using the engine’s power itself when it was on. The battery was then disconnected and only came on again when the engine was switched off for whatever reason. An additional safeguard was in place to prevent any temporary loss of control or memory during the switch, but couldn’t that be avoided? If she created a short circuit of sorts, allowing for just a fraction of a second of delay between the battery going off, the safeguard kicking in and the engine starting… That was extremely dangerous, she had no idea if the engine would even start again, but what choice did she have?


She looked at the altimeter again. They’ve just passed ten kilometers. Fuck. Now or never –they were going so fast that anything below five thousand meters and she might not be able to pull up even if this does work.
Here goes nothing. She pushed the jumpstart button three times in a quick succession. The engine coughed, the sound vibrating throughout all of her body, and suddenly the thrust propelling them downwards was gone. They were still dropping out of the sky, but at least they were actually falling now – and slowing down, too, as the aircraft’s terminal velocity was much lower than its maximum speed, even with only the standard propulsion engaged.

Alice pushed the button again. The engine roared to life, the indicator lights flashed in the dashboard and the heads-up-display appeared before her. Oh thank god. She grasped the stick and pulled it up a little too violently, causing them to experience the gravity load. They missed crashing into the ice platitude beneath them by less than a thousand meters. She leveled the plane and checked her controls. All good. She had the plane again.

“What the fuck was that!” The angry voice of her instructor startled her, coming off her intercom. “What did you do?!”

“Sir, I’d lost the control over the aircraft and there was no communication…” She said in a trembling voice. Holy fuck, I’m screwed.

“I know you lost control, Boyd, I locked you out on purpose! For fuck’s sake!” Whoa, he was really angry. Yup, she was done in. “I’m taking the plane, we’re going back!”

“Yes, sir.” She looked at the dial which told her the first seat took control, without locking her out completely this time. She checked her navigational system; they were steering in the direction of McMurdo station. Dammit. Was it the end of her career as an F-302 pilot? But what did she do wrong, actually? Didn’t she manage to get out of this difficult situation? What was she supposed to do? Eject? Do nothing? Was there some other way she hadn’t thought about? Maybe that was it. Maybe it was something so obvious, she still couldn’t see it. That wouldn’t be the first time. She had a tendency to overthink things.

Half an hour later they landed on the airstrip at the Pegasus Field, the instructor never saying another word to her, only communicating with the tower. As they touched down and taxied to the hangar, she thought she heard him muttering to himself and swearing under his breath, but the engine noise was still too loud to be sure. That didn’t bode well in any case.

They both scrambled out of the craft. They’ve barely had the time to exchange few words with the ground crew when Colonel Cox appeared, his ears red with apparent anger.

“What the fuck was that?!” He shouted in their direction as he approached. “What happened?!”

“Sir,” the instructor said, his face flushed as well. “We’ve had an incident… I wanted to see how Lieutenant Boyd would fare in a high-pressure situation, so I locked her out of control, but only for a moment and…”

“You did what?” Cox didn’t look impressed.

“I was about to give the controls back when suddenly the engine went dead, sir.” The lieutenant colonel shot Alice a wild look. “I think she did it, though I don’t know how. She then restarted the engine and we…”

“The fuck, Hart!” Cox interrupted him. “What were you thinking, locking her out?! What if she decided to eject?!”

“Sir, I was reasonably sure she wouldn’t do that, we were going too fast to safely eject and I…”

“Reasonably sure!” The colonel looked like he had an ulcer or something. His face was all
contorted with barely restrained fury. “My office, now! You too, Boyd!” He almost yelled at Alice, then turned on his heel and stomped away, followed closely by Lieutenant Colonel Hart.

Alice exhaled deeply. She wasn’t aware she had been holding her breath. She looked around and saw that her ground crew was watching her impassively. She turned to one of them, gave him her helmet, shrugged into a fleece jacket and a thick parka someone had passed her, supplemented that with a knit watch cap, earmuffs, scarf and a pair of gloves, and only then turned to follow the two superior officers who were already almost out of sight, similarly attired. The temperature here was not something to be taken lightly.

The hangar at the edge of the Pegasus Field – the southernmost of the three airports serving McMurdo and Scott Base, and the only one operating year-round – was built specifically to house the Antarctic F-302 squadron, but all offices and living quarters were back at the station, some fifteen kilometers away. That meant that Alice had to endure additional half an hour drive in the same van with fuming Cox and Hart, neither of whom spoke a word during all that time. As they arrived at the base, they both strode directly to the office building, and like it or not, Alice had to follow them, still wearing her flight suit and harness beneath all the cold weather outerwear.

“Stay here!” The colonel ordered her as they entered a narrow corridor leading to his office. Cox and Hart both disappeared inside, closing the door rather violently, and instantly Alice heard their raised voices, though she didn’t recognize the words. She looked around. The corridor only led to the CO’s door, but on its one side there stood a big stainless steel desk with a wooden top, where the commander’s assistant was seated. On the other side, by the wall, there was a small sofa, or rather a loveseat, really. Alice glanced at the CO’s assistant, a freckled young man, not much older than herself. She noted his epaulets, though, and the single silver bar of a first lieutenant. He was looking at her, a bit disconcerted, from over a stack of papers on his desk. He was dressed in a service dress uniform and a cardigan sweater. She felt overdressed, although at least she was warm, for a change.

She turned around and strode to the sofa, taking off the outer layer of her clothing, though she left the fleece jacket on. Then she sank down on the couch, listening to the muffled voices coming through the colonel’s door. They weren’t screaming anymore. That must have been a good sign, right?

Suddenly she felt tired, so completely exhausted that keeping her eyes open has proved to be a challenge. The abrupt passage from movement to inaction has finally allowed her body to relax a bit. The earlier surge of adrenaline that was now gone has left her feeling utterly spent. She was warm and comfortable on the sofa, and it was… so… difficult… to… stay… Awake. She shook her head, trying to pull herself out of the lethargy. Here she was, her fate being decided in the adjacent room, and she was about to fall asleep! No way. She willed herself to get up from the couch and started pacing the corridor under the piercing stare of the first lieutenant. He was shuffling papers on his desk, but she was quite sure he was just pretending to work, probably overly curious as to what was actually going on. Well, she’d tell him if she knew it herself.

The door to the squadron commander’s office opened and Lieutenant Colonel Hart stepped out.

“Come in,” he told her, ushering her through. She entered the room, stood at attention and saluted. Colonel Cox was sitting at his desk, propped up on his elbows, his fingertips touching. He gestured with his right hand in a manner that looked more like an impatient wave than a proper salute. Hart entered back and closed the door behind them.

“At ease,” Cox told her and she relaxed her stand infinitesimally, too tense to really let go.
“Colonel Hart told me a funny story about what you’ve done, Lieutenant.”

Alice blinked quickly, trying to read his mood. He wasn’t angry anymore? Well, he looked stern, that’s for sure, but the pure fury she’d seen before was gone. Thank god.

“Do you know what you’ve done?” The colonel asked, his eyes gazing steadily at her.

“Yes, sir, I do,” she replied in a small voice and then cleared her throat in an effort to sound braver. “I am just not sure of the ramifications of what I did.”

The corner of his mouth twitched as if he was suppressing a smile. Or maybe that was an expression of sarcasm, she couldn’t tell.

“Tell me what happened and what you did, in your own words,” he ordered, shooting a warning look at the instructor, who was standing a step or two behind Alice, on her left.

“Well, sir, from what I can gather, Colonel Hart has...”

“No.” Cox raised his hand palm-up to indicate that she should stop. “I want to hear what happened, step by step. Forget what you’ve figured out later. Tell me what went through your head then and there.”

She frowned. Okay. So he wanted to know her side of the story. Was that it? Would he make a decision about any disciplinary action based on what she’s told him?

“Start at the beginning.”

Alice nodded, still frowning, and related her flight – at first uneventful, then suddenly turned too exciting. She finished with the instructor taking the charge over the 302 and landing on the airfield.

For a moment, there was silence. Cox was looking at her, his gaze level and impassive. Then his eyes flicked to Hart and he nodded.

“How did you know what to do?” The instructor asked from behind her. She turned slightly to see both him and Cox at the same time. “How did you know this would work?”

“I didn’t, sir,” she answered honestly. “But I had to do something, and that was the only thing except ejecting that came to mind.”

“But how? What made you try this?”

Alice shrugged, but then decided that it wasn’t enough. Obviously, these men wanted answers, and frankly she couldn’t blame them for that.

“Well, sir, the 302 central system is basically a huge computer. A very complex one, of course, but still – just a computer. And what do you do when your computer freezes?” She arched an eyebrow.

“You reboot it.” Hart shook his head. “Of course. But how did you know how to do that?”

“There are only two manual controls in the F-302, sir.” Alice resisted the urge to shrug again. “Ejecting while dropping out of the sky with speed exceeding Mach 6 was out of the question, so I figured I had only one thing to work with. I remembered the safeguard built in to prevent disconnection of the system while switching from battery to engine and vice-versa. I figured if I could disrupt that buffer just for a second, it should reset the current memory banks and give me back the controls.”
Neither of the superior officers said anything for a while. She started feeling uncomfortable under their scrutinizing stares.

“Why?” Cox finally spoke up. “Why did you do that at all? By your own account, you suspected it was a test on Colonel Hart’s part. Why risk it?”

She looked up at him, surprised with the question.

“Sir, there was no communication. I had no way of knowing what was going on. I had to take all possibilities into account. Although the version with a test seemed the most probable, I couldn’t just assume it was true… I mean, I had to operate based on the worst case scenario.”

“So you did.” Cox nodded and stretched on his chair, extending another period of silence in the room. Alice could hear his joints creaking. “You said you didn’t know the ramifications of what you’ve done.” He straightened up and cast her another queer, impassive look. “You might be interested to hear, then, that we’ve never thought such a thing possible. Nobody knew there was a way to manually turn off and jumpstart the 302 when the engine was on.”

“Oh.” Alice didn’t know what to say. She hasn’t seen that information anywhere on the technical specifications she’s studied either, but she assumed that it was left out on purpose. So she actually discovered something about the plane? Cool.

“Of course we will forward that bit of knowledge to the eggheads at Groom Lake facility, let them figure out the details,” Cox continued. The corner of his mouth twitched again. “It will also go a long way to boosting your final performance review.” He paused for a moment. “Remind me, Boyd, how old are you?”

What? She was confused. She came in expecting disciplinary action, and here she was standing being… commended? People. I will never ever understand them.

“Twenty-one, sir.”

“Twenty-one,” he repeated, looking at Hart intently.

“Yes, sir. Though I feel like I should mention… my birthday is actually in two weeks.”

“So you’ll be twenty-two in two weeks,” Cox said, for the first time that day a real smile appearing on his face, reaching his eyes, too. “And you have two years Time-In-Service soon, too, right?”

“Yes, sir. September the seventh.”

“Right.” He nodded. “Well, Boyd, you certainly gave us some thrill today. I can see you’re tired now. Go get some rest, report back for training tomorrow morning.”

Alice stood at attention again and saluted. Cox nodded and returned the salute.

“Good job, Lieutenant. Dismissed.”

Alice turned on her heel, catching a weird glance shot by the instructor in her direction, but she couldn’t exactly say why it seemed so odd. At any rate, she was glad this little conversation with her superiors was over. She was still a bit confused as to what just happened, though it started to dawn on her that she was actually commended. Appreciated. Recognized. Whoa. Hold your horses, Boyd. Yes, she may have done something well for a change, but it was just one small thing. And it was mostly luck, anyway.
Out in the corridor, she put her outwear back on, feeling the CO’s assistant’s curious gaze on herself. She said a polite goodbye to him – after all, he outranked her, even though he seemed still like a boy, with his freckled face and wandering eyes. For the first time Alice felt relieved going out into the freezing cold. She took a cautious lungful of the frosty air and exhaled deeply, feeling the precious oxygen chase away the drowsiness and confusion. Oh, she needed just that. There was so much to think about.

* 

The next four days were uneventful by comparison. They kept using every bit of daylight they got for actual flying practice, and during the dark hours they either continued the training on the simulators, or attended theoretical classes focusing on tactics, technical capabilities, and overall procedures and ways of working aboard a battlecruiser. Alice mused that her father would feel very comfortable with that – it was more like serving on a carrier as a Navy aviator than being in the Air Force, really.

The next day after Alice’s little stunt, they started flying in tandems, without instructors. Everybody had a chance to ride the first seat, and they changed their partner every day in order to acquaint themselves with different styles of two-seated pilotage – most of them, like Alice, had only ever flown one-seated fighters before.

Somehow, the news of Alice’s feat had spread over the squadron, which elicited various reactions. Some people seemed to warm up to her, actually chatting her up at mealtimes or during shared tasks, praising her for her levelheaded quick thinking. Others snubbed her even more than before, sometimes putting in a remark about dumb luck when the conversation turned back to what Alice did. And the conversations were not dying away – especially at mealtimes, when they were all gathered together, they liked to dissect everything that’s happened during the training, and Alice’s stunt was the wildest one and the most interesting to analyze. She felt very uncomfortable with it, especially that there seemed to be no consensus. She couldn’t exactly shy away from the discussions, though; after all, she was supposed to be a part of this community, and like it or not, she had to socialize with people.

In the morning after the training was completed, they were all asked into a meeting room again, much like in the beginning, back at Nellis. The room was smaller, but other than that, not much changed; they were all equally tense and excited to hear from Colonel Cox.

“He’ll probably tell us how we’re gonna be divided for the next couple of weeks,” Captain Archer said to Alice as they took their seats at the back of the room. “There are only five machines for trainees aboard Prometheus, so two thirds of us will have to wait.”

Alice raised her eyebrow. How did he know that? She looked at him questioningly.

“I have a buddy in the right place,” he explained with a mischievous smile. “Don’t tell anybody. I know what a tattletale you are.”

She rolled her eyes. She was probably the most unforthcoming person on the entire base and Archer knew it well. He was just teasing her, as usual, a trait she actually came to enjoy in him. He treated her like a little sister, and that was something she felt very comfortable with, having the same kind of relationship with her real brother.
Cox entered the room. There was no pulpit, just a desk in the corner, so he stood before them and gestured for them not to get up.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Finally we come to the moment when all your training is done, and you are now ready to take on a real challenge. I know that some of you were less than happy to go through all this after all that you’d already done and experienced. Believe me, if you hadn’t, you wouldn’t be here at all.”

Alice looked down at her hands. She was the only one in the room who didn’t have any combat experience. She flew a plane alright, but there was more to being a good pilot than that. She felt Archer’s gaze on her, but he didn’t offer any remarks.

“But the Office of the Homeworld Security feels very strongly about providing proper training to anyone who goes out there and risks their life. Nobody is prepared or qualified enough to deal with everything that can happen in the course of duty offworld. But someone has to do it. And that someone is you. We are determined to equip you with as much knowledge and training as possible, and the truth is: you will need it, if you want to survive.”

Uh oh.

“You may not fully realize it yet, but what you’ve volunteered for is a very dangerous mission. You might not come back home. Every hour you spend on proper training and preparation increases your survival odds. Be grateful for that. Those who came before you, your instructors and colleagues who’ve been flying the F-302s until now, didn’t have that luxury. And many others like them didn’t come back home.”

The silence in the room was almost palpable. Of course, they knew this would be dangerous, but to hear it put so bluntly was disconcerting.

“The groups are as follows: the first, which will board the Prometheus: Captain Mark Dougherty, Captain Anthony Bennet....” The list went on. Alice was starting to feel antsy that they’d left her off it completely, but eventually her name came up, too. Third group, last one to get to the core assignment. Well, she had to learn to be patient.

Cox stopped talking for a moment. Everybody in the room was shifting, restless, wanting to find out where they go first.

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That meant she’d stay in McMurdo for another two weeks. Damn. She had hoped to get back somewhere warm. Nevada! What wouldn’t she do to be there. Or home, in SoCal, basking in the summer sun… she shook her head. These thoughts only made her feel even colder. The nice part about that was that apparently she was the only female placed in the third group. She’d have the room to herself. How nice.
“The first and second group will prepare for leaving and gather outside at ten hundred hours today,” Cox said after he finished with the list. “A transport will be arranged for your there. On Prometheus, you will fall under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Bolton. At Groom Lake, your commander will be Lieutenant Colonel Espinoza. The third group will stay here under my command. That is all for now. Dismissed.”

Cox left and animated conversations filled the room.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to say goodbye,” Archer broke the silence between them. “I have to say I’m a bit saddened. I enjoyed our little camaraderie.”

Alice smiled wistfully.

“Yeah, me too.” She sighed. “I will miss your teasing me, sir.”

The captain laughed heartily at that. “Yes, well, I’m sure you’ll be alright without my silliness. But, who knows? Maybe we will meet on the permanent assignment later on.”

“Maybe,” she acquiesced, feeling it unlikely. She was probably going to end up back here, or in the Groom Lake squadron, and Captain Archer would surely score a better posting. She’s quite accepted that state of affairs.

They went back to their barrack chatting all the way (which mostly meant that Archer was talking and Alice asked questions or looked at him pointedly at the right moments), but soon enough they had to part. The captain needed to pack what few personal belongings he’d brought to the southernmost continent, and Alice had to begin her new duties on the base, too.

That day, the whole squadron was reorganized. During their week-long training, fifteen F-302s were housed in the base; seven of them took off and flew away that morning. Someone told Alice they were actually on loan from the Groom Lake base. That meant that eight aircrafts stayed at McMurdo; sixteen pilots in all, and ten of them fresh out of the training. Of course that didn’t mean all that much: it was a very peculiar squadron, the mean variance of age spreading from twenty six to thirty five years old, and ranks ranging from second lieutenant to major. It wasn’t unheard of, but it was rare to have so many higher-ranks and older pilots in the same squadron. On the other hand, in this environment, Alice, with her twenty one years old and the lowest commissioned rank possible, stood out like a sparrow in a flock of pigeons. Or hawks, rather.

Over the next few days, the squadron has worked out a new routine. Each of them had a sortie three to four times per week. They weren’t scoring any actual missions, of course, but they were doing training flights, drills and combat exercises. They were divided into four ships, each with a more experienced pilot taking the flight lead position and others serving either as his backseater or wingman. Alice, appropriately in her own opinion, ended up as a second-seat of a wing craft.

Finally, the life on the base started to take on a more proper Air Force rhythm. They were still limited by the length of daylight, but it was growing very quickly. Three weeks earlier the sun wasn’t rising at all – and now it was on the sky for seven hours at a time. Because every day the sun rose fifteen minutes earlier, their schedule had to shift as well, which only added to the inconsistency of their already very unpredictable lives.

Other than flying, the pilots had a myriad of other tasks, of course. Each member was assigned an additional duty, from scheduling to weapons to security and safety. Alice was given the last one: safety. Her job was to make sure all aircrafts were properly maintained and ready to go at all times, that life support and other gear was properly stowed, and that the airstrip was constantly ready for use, even in heavy snow. It was a vital job, of course, but actually quite boring, as it required a
great deal of minutiae. It was also a pacing exercise: she had to move about the base quite a lot to be sure that everything was in order. And then, at the end of each day, there was a report to be made for the squadron commander, and additional briefs after any incident, no matter how small.

For Alice, each day started around five in the morning; she took her time to shower, eat breakfast and get at least a half-hour workout done before she reported for duty at six-thirty. Then there was a mass brief and a flight brief, which lasted around an hour and a half, sometimes a bit more or less. At nine-fifteen they stepped into their aircrafts and prepared for takeoff at ten am. They usually spent two or three hours in the air, mostly in one sortie. There was a thorough debriefing after that, a mission planning session for the next day, and time allotted to other tasks. Alice had to finish everything before six-thirty pm to ensure that she would get the twelve hours of mandatory crew rest if she was to fly the next day, too. So even though the schedule was constantly shifting and changing at the last minute, a degree of monotonous routine crept into their daily lives nevertheless.

That routine was broken twice. First, on 3rd September, the squadron surprised Alice with an impromptu birthday party in the evening. There was even cake. Of course, not everybody was happy to be there, but they couldn’t just shun her. Even Colonel Cox made an appearance (and in a proper military fashion, secured a large portion of the cake for himself).

And then, a few days later, her twenty-four months of Time-In-Service passed, which meant almost an automatic promotion. Usually, even the advancement from second to first lieutenant merited some kind of celebration with family and friends present, but of course Alice couldn’t exactly invite them to Antarctica. Even so, the ceremony was nice: not only her entire squadron attended, but some of the civilian station personnel also. Colonel Cox didn’t waste too many words on the usual speech.

“Second Lieutenant Alice Boyd is here for a very good reason,” he said to the group assembled in the meeting room. “Despite her youth and low rank, she has demonstrated a great ability to be an equal member of her elite squadron. Some of you, perhaps, did not know this, but these pilots, Second Lieutenant Boyd included, are some of the very best in the entire Air Force, and, by extension, in the entire world. Second Lieutenant Boyd has already proven that the trust and faith her superiors have placed on her is not without foundation. She works very hard to achieve her goals and wears her uniform proudly, and justly so. Second Lieutenant Boyd, please step forward now.”

Alice, who had been standing in the back, did as she was told and stood there, tense and excited at once.

“Attention to orders,” Cox said sharply and every serviceman in the room snapped to attention. “The President of the United States, acting upon the recommendation of the Secretary of the Air Force, has placed special trust and confidence in the patriotism, integrity, and abilities of Second Lieutenant Alice Boyd. In view of these special qualities, and her demonstrated potential to serve in a higher grade, Second Lieutenant Boyd is promoted to the grade of First Lieutenant, United States Air Force, effective the 8th day of September, Two Thousand and Four, by order of the Secretary of the Air Force.”

Alice stood still as Colonel Cox scrupulously unpinned her single gold bar from her left epaulet and replaced it with a single silver one and then repeated the process with her other shoulder. As he stepped back, there was a wave of polite, though not especially cheerful applause. The colonel faced her and raised his right hand. Alice mimicked the gesture. Then Cox started the oath, which Alice repeated after him.
“I, Alice Boyd, having been appointed a First Lieutenant in the United States Air Force, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same, that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office which I am about to enter.”

As she was saying this, Alice mused offhandedly about the words of the oath. It was all about the allegiance to her country, and that was fine. But what about the allegiance to her planet? Or to the entire human race? That wasn’t something they’ve predicted while drafting the oath. Not to mention the kind of enemies they were all facing now.

The ceremony ended with an open buffet and some drinks for all attendees. Most people in Alice’s squadron had the good manners to approach her and congratulate her on the promotion – some did so quite genuinely, too. It was funny, but the pilots who were at McMurdo before the trainees arrived actually treated Alice better than her fellow newcomers. They seemed to be less prejudiced and warmer towards her. Perhaps it was because they didn’t have to compete with her. Alice tried to put herself in the position of one of the majors, looking at herself from outside. So young and so inexperienced, and yet here, treated by their superiors on equal terms with them. It was quite understandable that they’d be irked. Well, they’d have to survive because she was determined that she wasn’t going anywhere but up from there.

The rest of their two weeks of duty at McMurdo went by in a blur of routine flights and ground duties. Whenever she got any spare time – which wasn’t something they had a lot of anyway – Alice tried to slip into the labs and workshops placed all over the base. After all, its primary function was research. There still weren’t many people there, but the numbers were steadily growing as the weather got warmer – or rather: less cold – and the day longer. The civilians were actually very nice to Alice: they let her in almost everywhere she had a mind to go, and offered the information she asked for freely. Their areas of interest weren’t perhaps entirely compatible with Alice’s, but she figured it was better than sitting in her room doing nothing. Besides, who knew when some knowledge about biology or geology could be of use?

Their last day at McMurdo was a Tuesday. The sun rose above the horizon at six forty in the morning; what a change in just three weeks! When they had arrived, the dawn broke just before eleven am. The temperature was higher, too – just by a few degrees, so it shouldn’t make much difference, but Alice felt like it was more. Or perhaps her body has finally started to get used to the cold? She didn’t know. Either way, she was glad they were leaving the polar area. Of course, going from minus thirty degrees Celsius at night at McMurdo to plus thirty during the day at Groom Lake would constitute a shock, but she preferred a few days of uneasiness there to the constant shivering here.

The ten of them boarded a C-17 which had landed on the Pegasus Field the day before, bringing cargo and three dozen passengers or so, scientists, support personnel and airmen beginning their deployment at McMurdo. The plane was not going to Christchurch, New Zealand, empty, too. Beside the ten of them, there were about twenty people going back home after their long winter stay in Antarctica. The flight was long and noisy, though Alice thought of the machine buzz as something familiar and comfortable. And then they landed on the airfield in Christchurch and even though it was late, and still winter in New Zealand, as they left the plane they felt as if they stepped into a different world. It was around five degrees Celsius at night at McMurdo to plus thirty during the day at Groom Lake would constitute a shock, but she preferred a few days of uneasiness there to the constant shivering here.

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They arrived in Los Angeles after sixteen hours in all, counting the layovers in Auckland. The bizarre part, of course, was that technically, they arrived before they left – they crossed the International Date Line, which meant that even though they took off from Auckland at seven pm on fifteenth of September and flew for twelve hours, they landed at LAX at eleven am that same day. That, of course, completely destroyed Alice’s natural body clock yet again.

From Los Angeles airport, they were airlifted by a military craft and deposited an hour later on the airstrip at Edwards Air Force Base. There, they climbed in a van and were taken to the Groom Lake facility, where they finally arrived late afternoon and were left to rest from the long travel.

In the last few years, the R&D part of the Stargate program has grown so much that the Air Force had to build an entire additional living district nearby. And because most of the personnel working at the facility were civilians – and only the best and brightest, no less - the available accommodation was of much higher standard than the one usually found on Air Force bases. By some fluke of chance, that also included the military quarters. So for the first time since arriving at Nellis seven weeks earlier, Alice had been assigned a residence adequate to her actual grade. Of course, since she just barely made first lieutenant, it wasn’t much, but it was still better than the shared-rooms barracks they were housed at during the training and previous deployment. At least the room was spacious, comfortable, and modern, which wasn’t always the case with Temporary Lodging Facilities.

The next morning they were given a tour of the place. The squadron of F-302s – there were eight, which meant that since seven of them had been lent to the McMurdo station for their training, only one had stayed at the base during that time – was housed in an underground hangar, where taxiing to the tarmac meant taking a ride on a movable platform that rose above the surface, straight onto the airstrip. But what was much, much more interesting was in the second, bigger hangar: an immense structure, like a hull of a huge ship in a dry dock. And in fact, that was exactly what it was: the X-304, the first of the next generation battlecruisers the Earth was building. Standing at a rail on a balcony high above the floor, level with the ship’s bridge, Alice had troubles to see the whole construction without moving her head this way and that. It must have been at least two hundred meters long, one hundred meters wide, and almost as high. And though Alice had known about the Stargate and everything for weeks now, and she’s been flying the F-302 for almost a month, that sight was what made it all feel real for the first time. Holy shit. That thing was traveling in space. More than that: it was supposed to be able to cross the unimaginable distance between the Earth and another galaxy.

She threw a quick glance at her fellow pilots. They were all gaping at the ship with much the same expression as she must have had on her face: impressed disbelief, like what they were seeing couldn’t be real. She looked at the cruiser again. Oh yeah, it was very real.

Suddenly she felt more excited than ever before. To go traveling beyond then stars! Was there anything that could ever measure up to that? She honestly doubted it. But would she be able to get that assignment? After all is said and done, no matter how much effort she’d put into her performance over the next few months, she would still be the youngest and the least experienced of them all. Was there anything she could do to offset that? She didn’t know. But looking at that giant of a ship, knowing it could hold up to sixteen F-302s, she decided firmly that she would do everything in her power to get it.

“What do you think, gentlemen?” An unfamiliar voice came from behind them. Alice turned on her heel to see a tall, balding man, with white hair covering only his temples. “Oh, I’m sorry, and lady,” he added, spotting her. She noticed his insignia and snapped to attention, saluting reflexively, as all her colleagues did the same a second or two later. The man returned the salute and waved at them to relax.
"I’m Colonel Steven Caldwell. This baby is mine. Well, will be, as soon as she’s spaceworthy,” he said, gesturing to the battlecruiser. “I assume you’re here to help us fill the vacancies on the 302s? Good. We need good pilots, and from what I’ve seen with the other group, you’re the best in the Force.” His gaze slithered for a moment from shoulder to shoulder, as he was assessing their ranks. He was about to say something else when an airman entered the balcony and whispered something to his ear. The colonel grimaced. “Duty calls. I’ll see you around.” He nodded to them and walked away, talking quietly to the airman. Alice let out a long breath.

“Well, that was fun,” a major standing next to her commented. The airman giving them the tour cleared his throat and they followed him out.

The rest of the walk around the facility was quick, too quick for Alice’s taste. Too many rooms and labs were off-limits, they only got a few glimpses of some of the less interesting stuff that was being studied there. Even that was utterly fascinating in Alice’s opinion. Her companions didn’t seem to think so, though; they were reasonably interested, but they were much more eager to start flying again. Of course, Alice wanted that, too, but she couldn’t deny that there was a side of her who always wished she had chosen the science path. If she had, she’d be writing her doctoral thesis by now. Well, it might have been too late for that, but there was no harm in wanting to learn some new things, was there?

They met with the rest of their new squadron after lunch. Six men, all captains and majors, except the leader, Lieutenant Colonel Espinoza. He was a very tall, quiet man, very unlike the usual A-type personality pilot. He looked at them searchingly, always wore a thoughtful expression on his face, and spoke with weird little cadences that made Alice think he was struggling with some minor speech impairment, like stutter perhaps. Within the first two days of their stay at Groom Lake, some of the new squadron members tried to challenge him in a quite obvious way – questioning his words and orders without actually backing their claims up with any substantial arguments or evidence. He wouldn’t exactly say anything to those, but he would stare them down, subduing them with the sheer force of his charisma. Soon enough it was obvious to everyone that he was a leader for a very good reason: he was probably one of the smartest pilots in the entire Air Force. Alice felt an immediate connection to the man, what with her reticence and quiet resolve, so different from the overbearing aggressive behavior of other pilots.

The military routine at the Groom Lake F-302 base was much the same as everywhere else, comprised of regular sorties, ground work, and crew rest time. However, this was a new squadron, sort of, so their duties were assigned anew. This time, Alice got the job in mission planning support. That meant she had to cooperate with all members of the squadron, especially the flight leaders. It was a challenging task for her: her new duty required her to make suggestions and take decisions that would affect superior officers. It was a common understanding that she was too young for the job. Nevertheless, she had to do everything in her power to fulfill it well. It was hard; she was never good at diplomacy, and this required some careful people-handling. She wasn’t doing very well in that department.

The fourth day of her stay at Groom Lake, after she had finished her shift for the day, Alice headed over to the X-304 hangar. She spent all her free time in there, just walking around the ship and asking questions of anybody who would speak to her. She wasn’t allowed to go inside the cruiser; apparently, after some previous security breaches, the Groom Lake facility upped their procedures and now required additional clearances for the most sensitive projects – and that was certainly one of them. Alice figured it was some bureaucrat who devised this: after all, it didn’t make much sense to keep the F-302 fighters out, since they would board the ship anyway sooner or later. Institutional paranoia has reached even here.

Alice was standing right outside the door to the 302 bay on the ship. The fighters would be housed
inside and launched through that door, but its construction seemed somehow wrong to her. Like there was something missing, though she couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Like the view?” Someone said behind her, startling her. She turned on her heel and stood face to face with Colonel Caldwell, the ship’s future commander. She came to attention and saluted dutifully. He returned the gesture. “She’s pretty, ain’t she?”

“Yes, sir,” Alice admitted, though she thought “pretty” wasn’t exactly the word she’d use. “Very impressive. I can’t believe the sheer size of it, sir.”

“Yes, well, she needs to be that size in order to do everything we want her to do,” the colonel nodded. “You must be Lieutenant Boyd. I remember because you’re the only female pilot in this group.”

Alice half-smiled, but she didn’t think stating the obvious merited a comment.

“My men are telling me you’re here every day, going ‘round and asking questions,” he continued after a moment. “While I appreciate your enthusiasm, Lieutenant, I would like you to stop doing that. You are distracting them from their work. And time is of the essence here.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, disappointed. “I’m sorry, sir. It wasn’t my intention.”

He nodded. “Good. I suggest you use your spare time for something more productive than roaming the hangar anyway.”

“Yes, sir.” She tried to hide her discontent. Colonel Caldwell nodded again and walked away. Alice looked at the bay door wistfully again and suddenly it hit her: the door shouldn’t be there at all. It was completely redundant and only increased the spacecraft’s overall weight and lengthened the response time. F-302s in space needed to be launched within seconds from the go order, and retracting those doors would eat a few precious moments. The *Prometheus* didn’t have a bay door like that. Why would they install one on the X-304? She frowned.

That was a very good question, but she didn’t have a chance to ask it of anyone for another three days. She was explicitly banned from the X-304 hangar. She had to quench her burning thirst for knowledge and find something else to do. So instead of roaming the hangar, she wandered the corridors in the main facility, trying to find places where she would be allowed to enter. There were only a few minor projects open to her security clearance level, and by the third day, she’d seen them all, and they didn’t appear very interesting to her. She grew a bit frustrated.

At least the life on the base was easier than at McMurdo. For starters, it was warm here – or hot, actually. Most days, the temperature reached ninety degrees, even though it was already late September. There was no rain or cloud cover, and the relentless sun basked everything in its light, sometimes making it seem like the desert in the distance was lit on fire. But all the buildings on the compound had air conditioning and they rarely had cause to step out for any extended period of time.

The other thing was that the new (or old, depending on how you looked at it) members of her squadron were treating Alice with much more respect and kindness than she had learned to expect. Perhaps it was because they actually met her when she was already first lieutenant. Or maybe it was the way Colonel Espinoza taught them to act; he seemed to have some civilizing effect on her old squadron members as well. She hasn’t found another Archer, but she didn’t feel quite so cut off from everybody else anymore, even though clearly they still weren’t happy with her planning support job.
One day, a week after arriving at Groom Lake, Alice was sitting alone in the dining hall, having just come back from a sortie. She was the backseater to Captain Spinner, which mostly meant watching over navigation and weapons systems. Compared to McMurdo, it was far more complex here, where there were many commercial and private planes flying to and fro. The very existence of F-302s was heavily classified and so her job on those flights concentrated on manning the radars and making sure they avoided all aircrafts, except other 302s, of course. It wasn’t even half as much fun as actually piloting the fighter, but at least it gave her something to do.

She was picking at her meal, not especially hungry, when someone sat down on the other side of her table, facing her. She looked up to see Colonel Espinoza with a tray full of different kinds of food. He smiled at her and waved a hand for her not to get up.

“Hi, Boyd,” he said warmly. “How you doing?”

“Quite well, thank you, sir,” she answered, returning the smile. She liked him. “And you?”

“Well enough.” He sank his teeth into a morsel of grilled chicken. For a while, they both ate quietly, each in their own thoughts. Alice was actually musing about him. He seemed like a direct contradiction of a stereotypical Air Force pilot. He was quiet, laid-back, patient and calm. Obviously, he shared some traits with other fighter pilots as well: he was well-organized, determined, focused and ambitious, but he wasn’t aggressive or cocky in any way. Nevertheless, he had an air of superiority about him. Or maybe that was just pure charisma.

She wondered what he thought of her. That was an interesting question; one she would never ask, though. Even if she had a nerve to do that, people tended to hide their real feelings about others when asked up front. She may have not been able to read people as well as she did machines, but that she knew.

“How do you like it here, on the base?” The colonel broke the silence after a few minutes of diligent chewing.

“I think it’s rad,” she answered, smiling again. “The whole underground system is amazingly designed.”

“It’s based on some alien bases the SG teams have seen offworld,” Espinoza explained. “I guess we were too stupid to make something like that work ourselves.”

“I think adapting the technologies that are far more advanced than our own and making them work already proves we’re not as stupid as some would have us believe.” Alice countered. “Take the F-302. It was based on the Goa’uld Death Glider, but it is entirely man-made. Someone had to study the Glider very carefully to be able to understand the technology and adapt it to our purposes. And I daresay the final product is even better than the original.”

“You got that right,” Espinoza agreed. “Between us, I can’t wait till the X-304 is ready and we can go face some real challenges.”

Alice nodded.

“So you will be assigned to the ship?” She asked. “Is the base here gonna be scrubbed?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Someone else will get to lead the squadron here. I presume they will want to train more pilots. You’re just the first batch here. And if the X-304 performs as well as we hope, surely we’re gonna build more ships, which means additional F-302s too.”

Alice frowned slightly. The mention of other battlecruisers to be built in the future made her think
again of the bay door on the X-304 which she couldn’t explain.

“What is it?” The colonel asked. He was looking at her intently, as if he guessed her thoughts.

“Nothing, sir.” She shook her head, but then decided to voice her doubts. “Something I noticed about the X-304 has been bugging me.”

“What?”

“The 302 external bay door. I think it’s superfluous.”

Espinoza raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“I just don’t see any use for them, only potential drawbacks. See, sir, any external part of the hull must be very sturdy and heavy in case they are struck with a weapon or something, if the ship loses its shields, that is. The extra door also means additional time for the 302 launch. The whole design of the bay is such that when we get the standby, everything needs to be prepared for immediate action. When we get the go order, we are supposed to launch within seconds. Opening the external door will extend that time. It could also be opened after we go on standby, before the go, but why have it in the first place? The shields and the overall construction of the ship are quite enough to protect the fighters and crews inside. There’s just no downside in having the slingrails out in the open. There is no air in space, so they wouldn’t produce any drag. The Prometheus doesn’t have the external door. Why would X-304 have it?”

The colonel didn’t say anything, but frowned, thinking deeply.

“I don’t know,” he admitted finally. “But I intend to find out.”

“Yes, sir.”

They continued the meal in silence after that.

*

Alice wasn’t flying the next day. She spent the morning at a desk, making rough drafts for missions for the next couple of days. That was what she was doing when she was interrupted by an airman, who told her she was wanted in the X-304 hangar. That was a surprise. The airman waited for her patiently as she shuffled all the papers into a drawer and locked it – clean desk policy was just one of many security measures observed in the facility.

The airman didn’t know or wouldn’t say who and why summoned her. He just led her into the hangar through one of its many doors and steered her towards the main airlock of the ship. There were a few people standing and chatting there. As she closed in, she recognized some of them.

Lieutenant Colonel Espinoza, Master Sergeant O’Connel (whom she had approached several times for explanations before she was banned from the hangar), Colonel Caldwell and one more she didn’t know: a civilian woman with graying hair and piercing hazel eyes.

“Lieutenant Boyd reporting as ordered, sir.” Alice stood at attention and saluted, facing Colonel Caldwell, who was the highest rank present. He returned the salute.
“At ease, Lieutenant,” he said. “Colonel Espinoza told me you had some doubts about the X-304 design?”

Alice raised an eyebrow. Did he, now? Wow, he was a man of his word. She had assumed when he said “I intend to find out” that he would ask around and nothing would come of it. “Yes, sir.”

“This is Doctor Decker, our chief engineer, and Master Sergeant O’Connel, who is responsible for the construction of the hull of the craft. Tell them what your concern is,” Caldwell ordered.

Alice’s eyebrow shot up even higher. Oh, wow. They wanted her opinion? Did Espinoza make them hear her out? She couldn’t think of any other reason for this gathering. She repeated her doubts about the bay door.

When she finished, Espinoza nodded at Decker and O’Connel. They exchanged a look.

“Well,” O’Connel began and then stopped. He was frowning. “The purpose of the outer door is to strengthen the overall hull resistance, and to reduce drag while leaving the atmosphere.”

“The X-304’s sublight thrusters are so powerful that no drag created while leaving the atmosphere should have any significance for the ship’s performance,” Alice countered. “Essentially, its aerodynamic profile has little to no impact on the energy input required for movement and maneuvering inside the atmosphere, let alone in space. And seeing as the slingrail arms of the ship are extended beyond the main hull, I fail to see how an additional door could possibly strengthen its overall resistance.”

O’Connel stared at her for a moment.

“That’s what I was talking about, sir,” Espinoza told Caldwell. The colonel nodded, but didn’t reply.

The silence stretched over almost a minute. Alice felt uncomfortable under their stares.

“I am pretty sure that what you think are the advantages of that part of the design are actually unnecessary redundancies,” she said when she could bear it no more. “And worse than that, they will have an adverse effect on the 302s’ performance, resulting in longer launch time and potential defects. I can easily imagine a scenario where the ship’s shields fail and a blast from a weapon discharge jams the outer door, disallowing the squadron from launching or returning safely.”

O’Connel opened his mouth as if to say something, but then he closed it without a word.

“Well, I think that calls for some additional discussion,” Caldwell pointed to him sternly. “I want to see a report on that by tomorrow noon.”

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant replied, flustered. “I’ll get on that right away.”

“You do that.” The colonel nodded. The sergeant left quickly, glancing behind him to shoot an incredulous look at Alice.

She felt her cheeks burning. Did she just get him into trouble? That was never her intention. O’Connel had been very nice to her and always answered all of her queries. Granted, that might have been because she outranked him – something she still hasn’t gotten used to when it came to enlisted people who were older than her. Still, if she really contributed to bettering the X-304 design… did that actually just happen? Wasn’t she imagining things?

“Boyd, I’m granting you access to the X-304.” Caldwell’s voice pulled her down from the cloud
she was on. *What?* “Espinoza, make sure the formal clearance is done as well.”

He then gave her an appraising look and turned on his heel, leaving Alice and her squadron commander with doctor Decker.

“I think he likes you,” Espinoza commented quietly, smiling at Alice. “Good job, Lieutenant. Props for sticking to your opinion. I hope you’ll find the opportunity to study the ship to your liking.”

She looked at him, wide-eyed. “Are you kidding, sir? That’s the best news I’ve heard since I’ve been recruited for this program.”

He laughed. “Well, I’ll leave you to it, then. You’ll get your clearance by tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, sir,” she answered and saluted him before he left.

“Good call on that door,” Doctor Decker spoke up for the first time. She had a very warm voice and an aunt-like attitude. “When you get your official clearance, come visit me in the engine room of the ship. I’ll give you a tour.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Alice replied, beaming at her. Decker returned the smile and then left as well.

The young lieutenant stayed for a couple of minutes, just looking at the X-304, trying to contain her pride and joy. She was *right*. No matter what Colonel Caldwell said about discussing that matter, the argument was already over. She’s won. She convinced the colonel, and what more, she convinced O’Connel, he just didn’t want to admit it yet. And now she could get into the X-304! She could see everything! How **rad** was that?!

It took her almost ten minutes to remember that she hadn’t actually finished her work for the day. She scuttled back to her desk, but she had a hard time concentrating. Nevertheless, she willed herself to focus; she *had to* finish before six thirty in the afternoon if she wanted to be able to fly the next day, and she had a sortie planned already.

For the next week, Alice spent all of her free time roaming the X-304’s corridors. Decker made good on her promise and gave her the initial tour; then Alice wandered the ship alone, asking questions of anyone she could find. The cruiser was less than fifty percent ready. Basically, the hull was completed, and the engines were being fitted in. Wires, cords and conduits were hanging from ceilings and piling up in great coils on the floor everywhere, doors and airlocks were only half-installed, computers – if they even were brought aboard already – disconnected and dead. The busiest place was the engine room, so naturally Alice was drawn there the most. That’s where she met an alien for the first time: an Asgard named Hermiod, who oversaw the installation of the hyperdrive, shields and beaming technology, gifts from his race to the humans of Earth. Alice thought he was a peculiar little fellow, and easily annoyed at that, but his knowledge and understanding were so great that she couldn’t help but use every chance she had to ask him for explanations about… well, everything. She only saw him a couple of times, he wasn’t there all the time, but she was really glad that she had the opportunity to meet him. It was absolutely fascinating, the things he said.

She had been glad to leave McMurdo, but though she was excited to finally get aboard the *Prometheus*, she was saddened to have to move on from Groom Lake. She felt like there was still so much she could have learned there. For the first time, she regretted the decision not to pursue a career in science. Of course, if she had, she’d have no guarantee that she could join the Stargate program, so that regret was rather limited. Plus, she really did enjoy flying fighters immensely.
The *Prometheus* has returned from its less-than-uneventful cruise on time. Most of the crew was beamed down for a two-days long shore leave, while the engineers made the necessary checkup and repairs. The group of fighter pilots-in-training who just finished their first tour on the ship boarded a plane to go back to Antarctica. The rest of the squadron – six people – mostly left to visit their families for the two days. The only person who stayed behind was Lieutenant Colonel Bolton, the squadron commander. He made a trip to the Stargate Command, under Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs, for a debriefing on their last mission, but he spent most of his time at Groom Lake, talking to Espinoza, Caldwell and Colonel Lionel Pendergast, the commander of the *Prometheus*.

Although officially nothing was said to them, somehow the rumors of the BC-303’s adventures have reached the squadron at the Groom Lake base. Alice’s frontseater, Captain Spinner, told her himself of what he heard: they had a run-in with a Goa’uld cargo ship left over by Osiris and operated by the Trust who had attempted to steal the Earth’s Stargate. Supposedly it was SG-1 who saved the day. Of course, all that was merely unsubstantiated rumor, but Alice was inclined to believe it. She remembered there was a commotion a couple of days after their arrival at Groom Lake, people talking about important visitors, and then doctor Bricksdale disappeared. She noticed only because he was overseeing a project she was allowed to see back when she didn’t have the clearance for the X-304. Someone told her he took a leave of absence, but he didn’t return, and nobody would say much about the whole thing. However, the timing coincided with the *Prometheus*’s supposed mission.

The second day after BC-303’s return, Espinoza gathered his squadron and thanked them for their exemplary work while at Groom Lake. He wished them luck and presented Lieutenant Colonel Bolton to them, their new squadron commander aboard the *Prometheus*. He was a complete opposite of Espinoza: a short black man with thick buzz-cut hair, he fidgeted a lot, gestured wildly and talked emphatically. He welcomed them and told them they’d be beamed aboard the *Prometheus* the next morning, alongside the rest of the crew. It sounded very *Beam me up, Scotty* to Alice. Which is to say: unreal.

It turned out to be very real, though, when they gathered in a room with locator beacons attached to their arms and a flash of light later they found themselves in the cargo hold of the ship. It was huge; not as big as the X-304’s, obviously, but could easily fit a C-5 Galaxy… maybe without the wings. They were led first to the crew quarters. The squadron had five rooms, each with two bunk beds installed in the walls. Only four rooms would be enough for the sixteen of them; the fifth one was for the female members. Meaning Alice, as she was still the only woman in this group. She wasn’t going to complain about having the place to herself, though.

The layout of the *Prometheus* was different from the one Alice had gotten to know aboard the X-304. There was less space, everything was crammed. There was only one squadron of fighters, housed in a bay in the middle of the ship, with access to the slingrail arms on both sides of the battlecruiser. Alice was assigned to work with Captain Vasquez, one of the more experienced pilots in her squadron. However, things aboard the ship were different than on the ground. Most importantly, they had 12-hours shifts. That meant that she wasn’t actually flying with Captain Vasquez routinely; they were only supposed to fly together in a real combat situation, and only if the backseater could make it to the fighter in time. The F-302 was constantly kept ready for launch and a pilot needed to be close-by at all times. For twelve hours, that was Vasquez; for the rest of the day, it was Alice. If there happened to be a drill – and they were many and frequent – the pilot on duty would make the sortie alone. In the event of an actual attack, the pilot was supposed to be ready for launch within a few minutes; if the co-pilot could join in that time, they would take the back seat. But that wasn’t always possible. The second pilot could be sleeping, eating, exercising, or doing half a dozen other things when a standby was sounded. They wouldn’t necessarily manage to get to the bay and get prepped before the go order. In that event, the pilot on duty would leave
alone, without waiting for the backseater.

That also meant that for the first time since the training has ended, Alice got to pilot the F-302. Both at McMurdo and at Groom Lake, she was merely a backseater all the time. Here, for twelve hours when she was the pilot on duty, she was actually the front seat – and the only seat, most of the time. Colonel Pendergast was fond of drills, and Bolton took every opportunity to test his pilots and deck crews, too. There was, however, one time when they launched and it was not a drill.

The *Prometheus*’s main mission was to patrol the Solar System in order to defend Earth from any possible attackers. However, they also provided ground support and executed rescue operations when an SG team was in trouble somewhere in the galaxy.

About ten days into Alice’s first tour aboard the BC-303, she was in the engine room with the head engineer, Doctor Lindsay Novak, and a few other crewmen. Alice had been assigned a scheduling job this time, a task that was rather easy in this environment. There was just no way to schedule much, since they did not have any planned sorties; all of their drills were unannounced and unexpected. She helped the other squadron members to schedule their other tasks, but it never took much of her time, so she spent the long hours waiting for another drill in the engine room or the F-302 bay, talking to the engineers and deck crews, looking at schematics and trying to learn something on the systems of the ship. Characteristically for her, Alice spent a lot of her free time doing that as well. That day, she wasn’t going on duty for another two hours, so she found herself in the engine room again. Doctor Novak was in the middle of explaining her some particularities of the control crystals technology, when the room’s intercom came alive.

“This is Colonel Pendergast,” a disconnected voice boomed out of the ship’s speakers. “We have just received new orders. One of our teams, the SG-10, is stranded offworld, cut off from the Gate and surrounded by enemies. We are going to provide assistance. We are now jumping into hyperspace and will travel for about six hours before we arrive there. You will be called for duty just before that. I suggest you take the time left to rest and prepare.” The intercom clicked and in the silence that followed, Doctor Novak’s outburst of hiccups sounded loud and clear.

Paradoxically, the usual commotion associated with entering hyperspace seemed somehow more subdued now. During a drill, everyone was chatting and joking around; now people worked in a concentrated silence. Alice watched with unconcealed fascination as the engine crew prepared for the jump, and then went on to monitor the input and output energy levels at the reactor core, junctions and the hyperdrive, as well as other parameters.

She left the engine room before her shift began to prepare herself and make sure her fighter was ready to go as well, but then returned. She felt more and more comfortable discussing complex technologies and science she had had no idea existed before she’d joined the 302 program. She knew she only barely scraped the surface, but it was nonetheless very satisfying to be able to converse on the same level with people like Doctor Novak, who, despite her unfortunate affliction with stress-induced hiccups, was a brilliant engineer and a leader in her field. Well, not that there were that many engineers who even knew her field existed, but it was still impressive.

Alice went back to the F-302 bay about half an hour before the planned drop-out from the hyperspace, only to find Captain Vasquez already suited up and installed comfortably in the front seat of their fighter. *Front seat.* What the fuck he was doing in her seat?! She felt her blood pressure go up.

A crewman opened his mouth to tell her something, but she didn’t even look at him as she strode by, heading for the fighter. Vasquez was chatting amicably with another airman who was leaning over the hull of the spacecraft. Alice stood at the feet of the ramp, tilted her head back and shot
them a furious look.

“Sergeant, down!” She barked curtly, startling the poor crewman. He glanced at her, assessed her expression and descended quickly and without a word. Alice hopped onto the ramp. Vasquez greeted her with a narrow smile. “Captain, why are you in my seat?”

He raised his eyebrows, bewildered at her directness. She was usually so quiet and self-effacing that to see her angry like that must have come as a big surprise.

“Easy, LT.” He lifted both his hands in a mild gesture so as to stop her in her tracks. She narrowed her eyes at him. “We’re going into real combat now. I think it will be better for the people on the ground if someone more experienced holds the stick.”

“You think wrong,” Alice almost hissed. He frowned and was about to discipline her, but she interrupted. “This is my shift, sir, and I am supposed to take the stick this time. How can I gain combat experience if I never fly the damn plane?”

“Lieutenant!” He snapped. “This is not about you!”

She looked him in the eye.

“On the contrary, sir, I think it is. But that is beside the point. Colonel Bolton’s orders about the shift schedule were quite clear. Or are you contesting them, sir?” She emphasized the last word. There was a moment of tensed silence. He was the first to break the eye contact.

“Have it your way!” He scoffed, undoing the buckle on his harness. “But don’t come crying to me when you’ve crashed the damn plane!” He unhooked the helmet and rose from the seat. Alice moved to make way for him. He descended down the ramp with his back straight, not looking around, but Alice knew she just made herself an enemy. You don’t go ‘round hurting superior officers’ pride without paying for it later on. But for now, it was her victory. She glanced around triumphantly, making sure the crew deck saw and heard everything. Very macho of you, she thought to herself dryly. Her adrenaline was already high up and they haven’t even launched yet. She has never attacked a ranking officer like that. Actually, she’s never attacked anyone like that, period. But she wasn’t about to give up her one and only chance to actually fly in a combat situation, especially when she knew this could influence her future assignments – for better or worse.

Of course, flying in combat meant also risking her life for real for the first time. Being actively hunted and shot at for the first time. But this was what she joined the service for. The adrenaline rush, the danger, the chance to prove to herself – and to everybody else – just how good she was.

But there were other reasons, equally as important. Doing something good, protecting people, fighting evil, being a part of something meaningful – all that was implicit in the job. She would never say this aloud for fear of sounding like a naïve schoolgirl, but she actually deeply cared about the intrinsic values propagated and protected by the armed forces. In this day and age, when it seemed like war was just a means to a financial or political end, Alice Boyd believed that the military was – or could be, anyway – still and ultimately a force of good: those who came to aid, and not kill; those who wanted to protect, and not attack; those who saw the human before the enemy. There was death and killing involved, of course, and that was unfortunate, but inevitable. Alice admired people who had the strength and courage to oppose unfairness with peaceful protests; but they were doomed to fail if the other side used tanks and machine guns to disperse crowds. She saw the military’s role as an instrument to level the chances. Of course, that was all before she found out about the Stargate and everything that went on in the galaxy. With Goa’ulds enslaving humans and Replicators working to end all organic life, she thought that role of a
protector and defender was even more important now. Not only Earth’s survival was at stake; the entire human race’s in the whole galaxy was.

She snapped out of her reverie when a crewman mounted the ramp and handed her a helmet and a breathing mask. She smiled at him a bit challengingly, but he kept his face expressionless and professional. He was almost old enough to be her father, with a long track record in the service. Obviously he was leaning towards Vasquez. Everybody was. Alice was sure that in their eyes, she was just a snotnose girl. Suddenly she flashed back to when she was eight and her brother and Aaron had formed a pack with an older boy who kept trying to impress them and lead them astray, which culminated in Aaron breaking his arm nastily. That boy – what was his name? She didn’t remember – was equally arrogant and self-confident, and he underestimated her just as Vasquez did. Well, she would have to show them all what she was made of.

She climbed into the front seat of the F-302, put on her gear and buckled the harness. Don’t show off, she reminded herself just as her inner cheerleader was making somersaults to goad her into action. You have the stick now. Time to focus. It’s not about you. There are our people down there and they need assistance. Concentrate on that.

And don’t crash the damn plane.

She smiled to herself at that thought as she switched the computer on to perform the preliminary checks. The battleship’s speakers came alive once again.

“This is Colonel Pendergast,” the Prometheus’s commander’s voice came through the intercom. “We are about fifteen minutes away from our target. We do not know what we will find once we’re out of hyperspace. It is possible there might be an enemy ship lying in wait over the planet. I need everybody not currently on duty to prepare for their assigned damage control and support tasks. The minute we’re in range, we will try to make contact with the team on the ground and beam them aboard, so hopefully this will be a quick drop-in and drop-out. But be ready for any eventuality.”

Alice looked into the ceiling. It would be just peachy if it turned out the 302s would not launch and therefore the whole front-seat drama was a waste of time and breath. Well, there was nothing to be done about it now.

The crew hauled away the ramp. Alice closed the canopy and turned on the engine. She looked at the clock; ten minutes to the planned drop-out. A small dial next to the clock turned yellow, indicating an official standby order was just issued. She continued with her preflight.

“Everybody in?” The now-familiar voice of Lieutenant Colonel Bolton sounded in her intercom. For a moment six confirmations blocked the frequency.

“Sir, Boyd reporting all ready,” she confirmed, switching her last dial.

“All right, squadron, let’s split into two finger-fours,” Bolton continued. “Fowles, you’ll be the Blue leader with Spinner, Jones and Munoz. Attenborough, Kravic, Boyd, you’re Red with me. We don’t know what we’re gonna find there, so let’s do it this way: we’re going straight to the planet to get our people’s backs, Blue are going to stay behind and cover our six, engage the enemy and don’t let them get a drop on us from space. Got it, Fowles?”

“Yes, sir.” Major Fowles’ voice crackled through the intercom.

There was perhaps a minute or two of silence. They all felt it when the ship dropped out of hyperspace.
“Battle stations!” The ship’s speakers roared, but their combat dials were still yellow. It took almost three minutes of expectant waiting. They turned red.

“Let’s go, squadron,” Bolton said calmly to the intercom, as their hands performed the learned tasks automatically, without engaging the conscious mind. “Good luck.”

Alice acted like a machine, in perfect synch with her deck crew. The F-302, so far only idling quietly, roared to life and she started moving along the slingrail, gaining up speed. She revved up the engine to reach the required velocity as she passed through the battlecruiser’s extended arms. The nose of the fighter gleamed with a spark as it sliced through the internal shield and suddenly she was in space, moving away from the *Prometheus*, with Bolton’s machine in front of her and their two Red companions on their right, in perfect finger-four formation. *This never gets old.*

It was always tricky to get your bearings immediately after launch, when there could be a bogey in any direction. That’s why having a backseater who handled navigation and assisted with target-tracking and weapons was so useful, and preferred in a combat situation. Well, she would have to do without this time.

She followed the Red leader, looking at her Heads-Up Display with searching eyes, trying to assess the situation. There was a big green dot on the scanner, indicating the *Prometheus*, and several smaller ones labeled R1, B1 and so on, which stood for the fighters. But there was another reading on her eight o’clock, a jumbled mess of dots hard to decipher. The electromagnetic field of the planet below was registering on the lower level. There was movement there as well.

“Red leader, this is Pendergast, be advised we’ve been unable to make contact with our people and their locator beacons are not operational.” The colonel’s voice came on the intercom. “We’re reading multiple bogies inside the atmosphere. Engage and draw them as far away from the Gate as possible, I’m guessing wherever our people are, they’ll be close-by trying to get off the planet. Get some visual surveillance too, see if you can assess the situation on the ground.”

“Yes, sir,” Bolton replied. “Red flight, you’ve heard the man. Red one and two, you’re with me, we’ll kick some Goa’uld butt. Red three, try to get close to the Gate and see what’s going on there.”

“Yes, sir,” Alice acknowledged, wondering if he was giving her that task to keep her away from trouble, or because she had the best eyesight of them all and could potentially spot more than the others. They entered the atmosphere; it was like breaking the surface of water, the sudden gravity pull and air resistance jolting them into several Gs despite the inertial dampeners. The scanner on Alice’s HUD switched automatically to the intra-atmospheric radar. She counted at least six bandits, four of them going straight for them.

“Boyd, break left and go for the ground look, I’ll cover you,” Bolton ordered. Alice shifted the stick only ever so slightly and the plane moved smoothly, doing exactly what she wanted it to do, as if it was somehow connected to her brain. She was taking deliberately slow, deep breaths, trying to calm her heart beating like a crazed bird in a cage, the adrenaline pumping through her body. She swerved away from the rest, going diagonally in the direction of the Gate, marked on her radar as a bright orange spot. Two of the oncoming hostiles – she could now see through the canopy glass that they were Goa’uld Death Gliders – broke away from their pack to meet her. Red leader was on her tail.

“Steady, Boyd, wait until you’re in range,” Bolton said in a calm, almost comforting manner. It was in stark contrast to his usual, emphatic and hyper-energetic way of speaking.

Alice didn’t respond, focusing on the Gliders before her. They were coming straight onto her. She
recalled all the knowledge on the tactics of the Goa’uld that they learned in the years since opening the Gate for the first time and decided that they would break away at the last possible moment, one left and the other right. She targeted the one on her side, leaving the other to Bolton. They came in range and still neither of them shot; milliseconds ticked by as they were approaching each other at a combined speed thirteen times greater than that necessary to break the sonic barrier. Then the targeting system locked on the Glider, Alice shifted the stick a millimeter to compensate manually and pressed the red button. There was a satisfying jolt as the missile disconnected and flew free. Alice pushed the stick violently to the right and down, feeling a slight G-force again as she changed the direction so suddenly. At the same moment, the Glider’s staff canons lit up and two seconds later the aircraft broke left, exactly where Alice predicted it would go. Her missile homed on the target and a heartbeat later the enemy fighter went up in a shower of sparks and smoke, almost like a firecracker. A second later the one on the right burst into flames as well as Bolton’s projectile found its mark. Red leader broke left and up, in perfect unison with Alice, so that they were flying in parallel, him above her.

“Good job, Boyd,” he said through the intercom. The way his voice was rendered made it harder than usual to read, but did she hear an impressed undertone there?

Well, take that! My first kill! It was probably a Jaffa piloting the fighter, a slave of Goa’uld just like countless humans among the galaxy. It was a pity that he had to die, but there was just nothing they could do about it. They needed their priorities to be their own people, always.

Alice nosedived, reducing her speed as she sank down towards the ground. Above her, Bolton was rejoining the other Red group members as they engaged the remaining four Gliders, and she could hear their chatter over the radio.

The area around the Gate was covered in trees, all except the immediate circle of grubbed forest. Alice realized she’d have to drop even lower and go much slower if she was going to see anything useful. Which, of course, presented its own risks, not the least of which was that if she reduced the speed too much, she could stall and, in consequence, crash. Funnily enough, she’s never tested the F-302’s maneuverability at extremely low velocity; except that she wasn’t laughing now. She used to go into controlled stalls when she was in flight school, but each aircraft behaved differently at different speeds and altitudes, and an F-302 was not made to be slow. Well, it was too late now for second thoughts.

She did the first fly-by at just above three thousand meters and six hundred meters per second. She could barely see the plain surrounding the Gate at all. She quickly spiraled to less than a thousand meters and again reduced the speed. There was definitely movement in the circle between trees, but she was still too high and too fast to see clearly. Alice pressed her lips in a tight line. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears and she sweated like a pig underneath her jumpsuit, harness, helmet and breathing mask.

She shot an eye on the radar. There were still two enemies airborne, and was that… yes, there were more entering the atmosphere, most likely coming from the mothership above the planet. Did that mean that the Blue team was all gone, or just engaged and overrun? For operational efficiency, they didn’t hear the other group intercom chatter that could distract them. But it was worrying.

“Red leader, be advised, multiple bandits are entering atmosphere on your seven o’clock,” she reported. “Looks like three… no, four bandits coming your way.”

“I see them,” Bolton replied. “Anything on your end?”

“It’s hard to see. I’m gonna try to get lower.”
“Okay, be careful, but be quick, Boyd.” Bolton’s voice sounded worried. She wondered if he had any news from the Blue leader.

“Yes, sir.”

Alice frowned and then in one quick, smooth move she unhooked and removed the breathing mask from her face. The sudden rush of air on her skin prickled and felt like a fresh breeze. She took a deep breath, pushed the stick down and further reduced the speed. If she were driving a car, this would be an equivalent of slamming on the breaks.

She was at fifty meters, going barely thirty meters per second, when she passed the clearing around the Gate again. Anything less and she would lose any lift under her wings and go to a stall. Anything lower, and she could brush over the treetops surrounding the clearing. But there, finally, she could see the situation. She flew by, turned and risked going by the same path again. A flash of light from the ground alerted her that they were shooting at her. A staff canon shot missed the tip of her left wing by mere centimeters. She pulled up and revved up the engine to get out of their range.

“Red leader, it’s Boyd. I’ve spotted our team, they are trying to break for the Gate, I repeat, I have the SG-10, they are armed with what looks like staff weapons and going for the Gate, but there is a platoon of Jaffa on their way.”

The intercom crackled when Bolton’s curse came through. Alice looked at the radar. The three of them were up against four Gliders still.

“Red leader, I’m gonna try and clear the path for them with my railguns,” she said. “At least give them a fighting chance.”

“Red three, this is Pendergast.” The ship’s commander’s voice sounded oddly clear in her ears, coming from the communications array on the *Prometheus*, immeasurably better than what they had on the 302s. “Can you confirm the number and position of enemy troops?”

“Negative, sir.” Alice shook her head, even though nobody could see that. “I can estimate at least fifteen, but more like twenty. They have staff canons guarding the Gate.”

There was a minute of silence. Alice turned around, keeping low and slow, but out of range of the canons on the ground. She was going towards the clearing again.

“Red three, can you get rid of the canons and clear the area immediately in front of the Gate?” Pendergast asked eventually. This time it was Alice who didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Yes, sir.”

“Do it.”

“Doing it.” She pushed the stick to get lower and reduced the speed again. “Firing… now.”

She pressed the button for the railgun as soon as she got over the tree line. Three seconds later she released it, made a narrow turn and came over the clearing again, shooting a path from the Gate towards the SG team, veering left of them, just to be sure they don’t get any stray bullet. Bright lights flashing up around her were indication enough that she was again targeted by the remaining staff cannons. She turned again, adjusting her course to cross the path she made earlier, and pressed the button. Two cannons disappeared in a satisfying burst of smoke and flame, she must have hit the power source or something. She made another tight U-turn and went back for the last cannon-
- and at that moment someone on the ground took aim and the energy burst found its target. As the last cannon went down under the rain of her bullets, Alice felt a jolt, a red light started flashing on her controls, and veering left, the plane suddenly lost altitude and speed, already greatly reduced before.

She was going down.
It was pure instinct, with no conscious thought involved. She jolted the stick back and pushed the throttle control to cut off the damaged engine. Next she flicked the switch to distribute the power from the remaining operating engine more evenly and revved it up to its maximum; the risk of overstraining it was nothing as compared to crashing down, after all. She was at fifty five meters when the shot came and the aircraft dipped severely down; within the two seconds it took her to react, she was above the tree line and the underside of the plane’s hull was skimming over the branches. The wings of the F-302 were actually angled down, which meant that anything bigger than the slimmest bough could cut through them and cause her to crash, even at barely thirty meters per second; a speed easily attainable for a car or train, but just as deadly if met with an obstacle.

For a split second it looked as if the fighter was hovering over the trees; but then the injured engine was cut off and the second one increased the power output and the aircraft moved out of the stall. Its nose angled up now, the plane climbed up surely, but painfully slowly, or so it seemed to Alice. In reality she was safely above the trees and out of the range of any Jaffa weapons on the ground within seconds.

“Red three, come in, over,” a voice in her intercom said, but she didn’t respond just yet. She allowed herself a few additional seconds to actually start breathing; it occurred to her that she must have held her breath from the moment she took the hit. Her heart was doing a furious and irregular dance in her chest and cold sweat was trickling down her face. “Boyd, respond!”

“Red three,” she gasped, her voice thin and cracked. “I’m hit but I’m okay. Fucking Jaffa cannon took out one of my engines. He got what he deserved.” She remembered the flash of explosion as the bullets from her railgun had found the bastard who had shot her, a split second before she had felt the energy burst hit her. Or did she? She knew for sure two of the cannons went up in flash and smoke, but that last one… could she have missed? “I’m going back to have a look over”, she added over the radio, moving the stick to turn around.

“Negative, stay on course,” Bolton ordered. “Go up and away until we join.”

Alice twisted her mouth into a tight grimace, but the drilled-in imperative of following direct orders had already become second nature, so she corrected the course to fly away from the surface of the planet. She looked at her radar to see three hostiles still pursuing the rest of her flight which was coming her way on afterburners. Death Gliders matched the F-302s’ maneuverability and could attain even higher speed than the human starfighters in the atmosphere, but their staff cannons, which only shot in straight lines with poor accuracy and low fire rate, were no match for the air-to-air missiles which could home on the target despite its nimble evading maneuvers. However, the Gliders could shoot unlimited number of times; the F-302s carried only four missiles each. There had been ten hostiles, six already in the atmosphere and four more that had joined a bit later; Alice scored a kill on one of them and then got out of the fight, which left the three 302s pitted against
nine Gliders. Four missiles times three fighters meant that they could only miss three times; and despite the state-of-the-art radar guidance of the AMRAAMs and essential lack of electronic counter-measures of the Gliders, their supermaneuverability still allowed them to evade at least some of the hits. Alice assumed that the remaining three fighters of her flight were shot out, and though they still could use their railguns, it was much more dangerous and less effective.

“What’s your condition, Boyd?” Bolton’s voice came over the intercom again.

“I have lost engine two, I can get up to Mach 3, maybe 4 if I go to afterburner, but I’m gonna need the full force of my rocket booster just to break the atmo,” she reported, checking her instruments. “Hull structure looks intact, I snuffed the fire before it could do any damage there. Still got three Fox 3, ready to use them on the motherfuckers at your order, sir.” It felt good to say the profanity out loud for a change, and not only in her own head. Very cathartic, she thought to herself.

“Negative, Red three, we’re getting our asses out of here,” the Red leader said. “Return to Prometheus, we’re covering your six.”

“Yes, sir.” Alice didn’t argue, even though her adrenaline levels were still all the way up. Her bird was in no condition to perform any extensive maneuvers. It would be hard enough to break the atmosphere with the reduced power. “Colonel? Did our guys get out?”

“Not sure”, he replied frankly. “We’ve noted a Gate activation, but there’s just no way of knowing if they made it out. We did what we could. We have orders to come home.”

“Yes, sir.”

*  

“What did you do to my baby?!” The crew chief’s eyes were wide open as he inspected the underside of the engine two, blackened by the staff canon’s energy discharge. Alice shot a nervous glance at Vasquez who stood some distance away and looked at her with a mixture of annoyance and triumph; an “I-told-you-so” expression, her brother would have said.

“I got it back in one piece, didn’t I?” Alice replied in a tired voice. The adrenaline rush was gone, leaving her feeling exhausted and sleepy, much like on a day of work after an all-nighter. She was rather glad to descend the few steps off the ramp and find herself on the ship’s deck again. There had been a moment there when she had thought that despite everything, she wouldn’t be able to get back. The F-302 just wasn’t designed to leave the atmosphere on one engine; you needed all your power until you could activate the rocket booster and climb the orbit. To do that with less juice had taken some careful calculations; she had had to activate the afterburner, the aerospikes and the booster at very precise altitudes. Plus, you had to factor in a slightly different gravitational pull and air resistance of the alien planet. It didn’t occur to her that the task was nearly impossible and thus, how remarkable a feat it was on her part to make it.

“That you did, ma’am,” the crew chief mitigated himself. “But what happened? It doesn’t look like there was any sort of puncture or explosion to the engine…” He dived under the fighter’s wing to have a closer look.

“It was a Jaffa energy weapon,” Alice explained. “My guess is, it didn’t penetrate the Naquadah composite casing, but the energy was transferred into the engine itself and overloaded it. There
was a burst of fire inside, but I snuffed it as I cut the power, so hopefully the damage should be pretty contained.”

The chief came out from under the aircraft and gave Alice a long look. She thought she saw a new sort of respect in his eyes now; but maybe it was just her wishful thinking. She was quite tired of always being judged by everyone, even the damned enlisted men, who should be looking up to her as an officer, and instead thought of her as a kid; her entire deck crew was older than her.

“Well, we’ll see how much we can save on this bird,” the chief mused, looking away from her and focusing on the plane again. “If the damage is limited to the engine, we should be able to get it replaced fairly easily.”

“Before you do that, you should check the conduits and electronics. These energy bursts could well transfer internally and mess with other systems.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The chief nodded and waved at his crew to get to work immediately. Alice shot another glance at Captain Vasquez, who didn’t move from his spot, and decided that she was too tired to confront him now. She headed for the women’s locker room just outside the 302 bay, where she could store her gear, take a much-needed shower and get dressed for an imminent debriefing.

As she entered the briefing room, she was immediately aware that something was not right. Only Bolton and Vasquez were present. They were seated at a table, talking, but fell silent when she stood before them at attention and saluted.

“Colonel, sir, Lieutenant Boyd reporting as ordered.”

“At ease, Lieutenant,” Bolton said and gestured for her to take a seat opposite of him. That meant she had to sit next to Vasquez.

“I moved the briefing half an hour,” the lieutenant colonel said by way of explanation. “Spinner took a hit, the docs at the med bay need to check him out. He’ll be okay though.”

Alice nodded. She had been Spinner’s backseater at Groom Lake. He was a good guy, if somewhat twitchy with a stick. She hadn’t exactly befriended him, but they were on neutral-to-good terms. She was glad that he was okay. It occurred to her that it had been a pretty lucky mission; two fighters took a hit, and neither of them was lethal. That didn’t happen very often; she was guessing it was the nature of the Jaffa staff cannons that anything less than a direct hit wouldn’t be lethal, unless the pilot lost control and crashed.

“I wanted to speak to you two privately before we go ahead with the brief,” Bolton continued, his hands pointing and fluttering around in his usual emphatic way. “From what I understand there has been an altercation between the two of you.”

Oh, crap. Someone told Bolton. This could be bad. Alice was well within her rights to demand that Vasquez observe the orders of an officer superior to both of them, but the manner in which she did so was less than regular. She could get it pretty bad for insulting a ranking officer. Who told? Probably someone from her deck crew. Not the chief; he wouldn’t act as he did just half an hour before if he were the snitch. The sergeant who had been talking with Vasquez when she first approached the aircraft; it had to have been him. They were just a bit too familiar with each other, the captain and him.

“Colonel, I…” Vasquez started, but was silenced by the colonel with a gesture of his hand.
“I’ve already heard enough.” He looked sternly at each of them in turn. “And I don’t care who started and who was at fault. I don’t want to see such behavior ever again. It’s unworthy of the elite unit you are now part of, however temporary that might be. We are all here to do a job. If you can’t respect each other, at least respect that.”

There was a short silence following that statement. Vasquez and Alice were both looking at their commander, carefully avoiding each other’s eyes.

“In any case your jet is out of service for now. I don’t know if I can get a replacement before you two go back to McMurdo, and I’m not even sure if I should.” Bolton was frowning at them now. “You are effectively grounded now. If there are any more drills or mission sorties, you can fly back seat if it’s empty and if the driver okays it. Otherwise I suggest you make the most of your time to work out some of the tension here.” His lips twitched with a half-smile. He knew fighter pilots; almost all of them were Type A personalities, alpha males and females, who’d rather die than admit a mistake or apologize for anything. Still, they had to function together, and act as a team, and it was his job to encourage that. Alice thought he was doing quite well, although she was rather glad that she didn’t have to share a jet with Vasquez anymore.

There was another bout of silence after that, until the door opened and other aviators started filling the room for the proper mission debrief.

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The brief took almost two hours, and that was only the preliminary analysis of the mission. They would later break into smaller groups and go through each and every move of their machines, and those of their enemies; every shot fired, every miss, every hit, every swerve, every radio call. This, of course, in the hopes of learning something for the future; about the enemy tactics and their own possibilities and ways to improve their performance. A big part of it would be an in-depth analysis of Alice’s individual mission; it stood to reason that such close and low fly-bys would need to be repeated when a similar situation occurred. And it would occur again, that was quite clear to everyone.

About halfway through their first hour, the speakers on the ship went live again and Colonel Pendergast congratulated his entire crew on the successful mission; they’ve gotten a subspace communication which confirmed that all four members of the SG-10 made it through the Gate and back to Stargate Command. All of them were injured, one quite badly, but they were alive. Alice closed her eyes for a moment and said a silent thanks to whatever spirit was guiding her on that mission. Funnily enough, she didn’t feel especially proud. There was simply not enough energy left in her to feel anything more than simple satisfaction over a job well done. Maybe the feeling of her inner ego balloon swelling up, like it always did when she was praised, would come later. Probably that.

Not that there was any amount of excessive praising, though. Bolton did say she did a “good job” and a couple others nodded agreement, but the debrief was mostly focused on everything they did wrong. After all, its main goal was to identify areas for improvement. And almost crashing your aircraft did qualify into “needs improvement” area.

The remaining days on the Prometheus assignment were very dull by comparison. They continued their more-than-daily drills, and sometimes Alice was close enough to catch a back seat to someone whose regular sandbag was sleeping or otherwise occupied. She took to spending even more of her
time in the engine room, or wandering about other vital parts of the ship, such as the weapons control or life support. About the only place where she couldn’t easily get into was the bridge; she didn’t dare to go there when Colonel Pendergast was in, and he was in almost all the time. She actually wondered sometimes if the man ever slept. She did manage to slip onto the bridge a couple times when the commander was away, and the watch officer – Pendergast’s second-in-command, Major Davidson – as well as the rest of the bridge crew were pretty forthcoming with the explanations of various systems on the bridge. Alice guessed that they were bored with the routine of the Solar System’s patrols and welcomed her inquiries as a way to stay alert and engaged.

Her altercation with Vasquez led to an even clearer divide between her fellow 302 pilots with respect to their attitude towards her. A number of them started shunning her in a very obvious way: falling silent when she entered the room, throwing her indignant looks and finding new and inventive ways to make her daily job harder. None of them let her ride a back seat, either, even when it was empty. She didn’t argue; she knew there was no point to it. It wasn’t the first time she was bumped outside of a group. She thought longingly of the day when she’d be old enough for it not be possible to think of her as a kid at an adults’ table anymore.

On the other side, there were a few officers who turned out to be quite okay. All those in the permanent squadron aboard the *Prometheus*, Spinner and Fowles. They treated her exactly the same as they did the rest of the group: with respect and professional politeness, even friendliness. It was like Bolton said: they were there to do a job. Everything else was secondary to that. Alice didn’t know where the difference between them and her fellow pilots-in-training came from; could it be just because they were in constant contest against each other? Throughout all their tasks and missions, there was always this whisper and the thought at the back of their minds: they were being watched and evaluated, and judged against each other. Due to the nature of their job, pilots always lived a high-tension life, augmented with their own racy temperaments. But in their natural habitat, fighter jocks created tight-knit communities and formed strong bonds of comradeship and loyalty. This could not take place here because of the damn contest; and Alice could only hope that once they get their permanent assignments, everything would go back to normal.

The bad news was that she would have to suffer through six more weeks of that, and two of them were going to be in McMurdo again. She shivered at the thought alone. At least the summer was approaching; the temperatures would be slightly higher now than a month ago. Which of course didn’t change much; it was still freezing cold, but somehow it was easier to accept when your mind thought it was better than before.

They were beamed down into Groom Lake base by the *Prometheus*; very convenient way to travel, Alice thought, even if then they had to board a commercial plane back to Auckland and go further onto McMurdo, as they had done before. The Antarctic station was more crowded now; mostly civilian scientists, staff and support, come to take advantage of the milder weather of the summer. The days were longer, too, and so they could plan and maintain longer sorties. Although, Alice had to admit, after flying in space, let alone flying in combat, the routine drills and practice runs in McMurdo seemed pointless and boring. The entire base was of the same opinion, it seemed; only the six pilots permanently assigned to McMurdo seemed resigned to their lot and didn’t grumble… much. Nobody wanted to pull this number, though; and so instead of slacking off, they tried even harder to outdo each other, further exacerbating the competition. There were a couple minor incidents in which pilots just barely missed hurting the other’s machine – and their own in the process. Enmity and resentment rose slowly, but steadily. Alice wondered if the people who came up with the whole idea of this training-and-competition ever knew what they were doing.

Finally, though, the two weeks in McMurdo came to a close and the ten of them boarded a plane to a warmer place again. The change of scenery did wonders to the team’s morale; or maybe it was
because they were under Espinoza again? Either way, they all felt better in the Groom Lake facility, and their behavior showed it: suddenly everybody was a little bit more relaxed and tolerant. Even Vasquez stopped throwing Alice burning looks all the time. *Still a jackass*, Alice judged, *but at least not so overt.*

She was glad to be back at Groom Lake. The first day, she descended into the X-304 hangar and was shocked to see how much the work had advanced in just a month. The hull was almost completed; she noted with a hint of proud surprise the lack of the 302 bay door. So they listened to her. That was quite remarkable, she thought; not that it was that big of a contribution, but then again… with a giant ship like that, every little design flaw could potentially have harmful consequences.

Inside, it was still pretty much a jumbled mess of wires, cables and pipelines, but a closer look revealed a method to this madness: most of the primary equipment was being installed and first rough stress tests were being performed on every piece of mechanical or electronic gear. From this point, Alice knew, it wouldn’t take long to complete the setup. She judged another month, maybe a bit more, and the ship would be finished. Then it was just to put some finishing touches – like furniture and mobile equipment – and the X-304 would be ready to fly. Of course it would be another couple weeks until all systems were properly tested and the spacecraft could endeavor to leave the Earth’s atmosphere for a real mission. Alice would have given almost anything to be able to take part in its maiden voyage. That was unlikely, though. For now she consoled herself by exploring the ship further.

It was curious how much her perspective has changed in only a few weeks. Previously she wandered about like a wide-eyed child, asking “what’s this” and “what’s that” of anyone who’d listen. After two weeks on the *Prometheus*, a working ship, albeit of a previous generation, her understanding of the engineering involved, as well as science behind it all, was much greater. There was still a lot she didn’t know, but she moved on from basic questions to actually trying to figure out the systems for herself. Some of the engineers and mechanics didn’t mind her tinkering with their precious equipment; most of them, though, shooed her away whenever they caught her doing that. And of course she kept asking questions; but they weren’t simple queries anymore. It was like back in college, when they were supposed to split up in groups and discuss a problem in order to better understand it.

For all intents and purposes, their two weeks at Groom Lake were pretty uneventful. The intra-squadron tensions subdued by the master management skills of Espinoza, the pilots kept training and drilling; and in between her flying and other duties, Alice spent every waking moment on the X-304 deck. It occurred to her that she was the only 302 pilot who showed event slightest interest towards the ship. Of course, fighter jockeys weren’t usually curious about anything except their own jets; everything else was too big, too clumsy and too slow. And even though it was a spacecraft, the X-304 for them was essentially an equivalent of a carrier. Granted, most Air Force drivers never had a chance to operate from one, but neither did they like their Navy counterparts who did. All in all, anything bigger than the eighteen tons of their birds was of no interest to the F-302 pilots.

After Groom Lake, their group went back to the *Prometheus*. Unfortunately for Alice, that meant going back to sharing the plane with Vasquez. Bolton could have changed their assignments; but for some reason he kept them. For the young lieutenant, it was an ordeal; Vasquez was no longer satisfied with throwing her indignant looks. Instead, he found a hundred and one ways to make her life miserable. And she couldn’t report it for fear of appearing petty and unable to team work.

There were all kinds of things: her safety gear would be all jumbled up in her locker when she opened it; a tube would be disconnected from her breathing mask and needed to be reconnected and
checked for any air leaks; her scheduler would go missing; the shower in the ladies’ locker would be clogged up; her bunk would be stained (she didn’t want to think with what); the plane’s non-essential instruments would be deregulated as she came for her shift; and many more small, but irritating things that were piling up and making her more and more annoyed. When finally the inside of the lock to her closet was taped so that she had to meticulously scrape the tape off with a knife, she had enough. She *had to* retaliate. She couldn’t just let the man play her like that, could she?

She was thinking about ways to get back at Vasquez that entire day. The man was out of control. He didn’t behave like a professional pilot; in fact, he didn’t behave like an adult at all. He was like a kid, like a sophomore in high school playing pranks on the guy from his varsity team that he didn’t like. Childish, it’s what it was. Completely beneath them; and surely beneath her. She’s never been much of a child – her brain matured too quickly for that. And she never missed it. Vasquez, despite his age and rank, apparently did. He belonged in a frat house and not an elite team of pilots!

The next day Alice went into Vasquez’s room that he shared with three other guys, empty at that time, and simply left a note on his bunk. “This is childish”, the note read in Alice’s loopy handwriting. “I refuse to play this game.” She underlined the word “refuse”.

Surprisingly, from that day, the annoying pranks stopped; but as Alice had grown gradually aware, it only reinforced Vasquez’s hate for her. How could an essentially small thing like the incident between them few weeks ago grow to these proportions? Alice couldn’t comprehend that. It seemed entirely illogical. And once again, she was faced with the simple truth: people were not logical, they were not governed by reason; prejudice, emotions and a set of preconceptions were what dictated their actions, and Alice just didn’t know how to interpret that. She was at a loss; machines were easier.

It was the last day of their tour. They were patrolling the Solar System, currently passing by Uranus at a leisurely pace calculated for maximum sensor efficiency. Everybody was excited to be coming home; they would be getting a week of shore leave before getting their permanent assignments. *Shore leave* was a nautical term adapted by the Air Force to suit the needs of space vessels, just like *ship*, *carrier* and *cruiser*. Alice thought her father would have appreciated the irony.

She had already finished her last shift. There would be no more flying for her until she got reassigned – unless there was another combat situation within the next four hours or so, which was rather unlikely. She went up to the bridge to use the rare opportunity to talk to the crew when Colonel Pendergast was elsewhere. She was standing next to the sensors display, studying the complex network of pings and contacts, some of which were natural occurrences such as asteroids, others artificial, like a number of space junk floating around – mostly nearer to the Earth. Some went unexplained, maybe energy bursts, gravitational anomalies or who knows what else? Recognizing actual danger in this pile of dots and dashes on the screen was hard work.

“The computer does a lot of that for us,” Lieutenant Arley explained, jabbing her finger at the screen. “The software is constantly learning. We’re continuously scanning the perimeter and thus
feeding it with new data, which then the program compares to information already stored. It looks for the same characteristics in objects and contacts that it finds in the same place, but it also plots possible courses for those which move, so that when it finds something on such a previously plotted course, it then can recognize if it’s the same thing that just changed position, or a completely new contact. We can then…”

Alice never found out what they could; at that precise moment all the lights and displays clicked off and went dead. There were muffled gasps of surprise sounding off in the darkness; and then the backup generators must have kicked in, because dimmed, reddish lights came back on and some of the screens started flickering back to life.

“What’s going on?” The watch officer asked no one in particular. “Sensors?”

“There were no bogies, sir,” Lieutenant Arley shook her head emphatically. “We’ve been staring at the display for ten minutes prior, sir, and I swear there was nothing even remotely significant nearby. Routine as hell.” The sensors’ screen was lighting up as she spoke, and her hands were already occupied with typing in commands. “Give me five more seconds... still nothing, sir. It doesn’t seem like we’ve been attacked.”

“No reports of any damage to the shields or hull, sir,” another crewman reported from the other side of the bridge.

“What the fuck?” Major Davidson mused. “Why did we lose energy? Any internal damage?”

“Sections reporting in, stand by, sir.”

Alice still stood in the same place, by the sensors display, as perplexed as everybody else.

“Sir, all sections have checked in except engine room.”

_Oh, shit_, Alice thought.

“Holy shit,” the watch officer echoed her thoughts. “What’s the engine status?”

“Engine is… not operational, sir,” the crewman said in an incredulous tone. “I mean all stats are good, but it’s not listening to my commands, sir.”

“Oh, we need to…”

Davidson was interrupted by the arrival of Colonel Pendergast, who entered the bridge dressed in sweaty fatigues, clearly having been working out when the power-down occurred.

“What’s wrong with my ship?” Was his first question.

“Sir, we’ve experienced a sudden loss of power for unexplained reason. There were no external attacks, the sensors are clear, shields and hull intact, but the engine room is not checking in, sir. I was about to send someone down there to check the situation.”

“You were taking your sweet time, too,” the colonel remarked in an annoyed tone. “I’m going down there myself, call in Saunders and Matthews to meet me there.” Then he suddenly noticed Alice standing on the other side of the bridge and trying to look small and invisible. “Boyd? What are you doing here? Nevermind, come with me.”

Alice raised her eyebrows in surprise. _Seriously? Why?_ She didn’t have time to wonder too much, though, because Pendergast just turned on his heel and left the bridge. Alice trotted behind him.
“You’ve been spending a lot of time in the engine room, they tell me,” the colonel said as they were breezing through the corridors.

“Yes, sir,” she confirmed, trying to keep up with him without actually breaking into a run. He had longer legs and one of his strides accounted for almost three of hers.

“Any idea what’s going on?”

“No, sir.” Actually there were many possible explanations for what was going on; too many to be able to present them all, though; and without any further data, she couldn’t narrow it down. But soon enough they reached the engine room; the door was open, and Saunders stood outside. He was a master sergeant, the leader of the small marine unit kept on board for security reasons. His second-in-command, Matthews, was already inside.

“Sir, we’ve got some unconscious people inside,” Saunders warned them as soon as they were close enough to hear him without raising his voice. “I’ve called the medical team, they’ll be here in a minute, but it doesn’t seem like they’ve been outwardly injured.”

Pendergast and Alice entered the room. In the dim reddish light from the backup generator, the three people lying on the ground looked almost bloody; but Saunders was right, they didn’t appear wounded in any way.

“They’re all alive, breathing and all,” said Matthews, crouched down next to one of the unconscious people. Alice moved a bit to see her face; it was Doctor Novak.

“Any idea what happened?” Pendergast asked, leaning over the control desk, lined with computer displays.

“No, sir.”

Alice kneeled down next to Doctor Novak; the other two were her crewmen, also engineers. She touched her carotid artery first and counted the pulse. Then she opened one of her eyes and looked in.

“Where are the medics?” She asked, looking back to the entrance to the room. There was no sign of them. “Her heartbeat is very irregular, she may go into V-fib any moment.”

Matthews just continued to look at her as if he didn’t hear her.

“She may still die!” Alice raised her voice. That got everybody’s attention, including Pendergast. “She needs medical attention at once!” The young lieutenant ignored the older men’s stares and moved on to check the pulse of the other two. “They’re in better condition,” she judged. “Probably were farther away from the source of the energy burst, which means it started over there, by the control crystals hold.”

“Energy burst?” The colonel repeated, but at that moment the medics finally arrived. Alice waved them on to attend to Doctor Novak first. Then she stood up and approached the control station. Colonel Pendergast was standing on the other side of it, looking at the now-dead displays, but she didn’t go around to join him; instead, she squatted down and pushed the back wall of the station aside. Then, very gently, she reached in and pulled out one of the control crystals.

The entire engine control station was a masterpiece amalgamate of human, Goa’uld and – since recently – Asgard technology. That meant that a large part of the system was recorded and operated through crystals, much like Goa’uld ships, but also – like the Stargates. That led the Earth scientists to believe that the Goa’uld harnessed the crystal technology from an earlier race, perhaps
the same that built the Gates – the Ancients. The study of that technology was one of the most important parts of the human attempts at gaining some advantage over their enemies. Therefore, Alice had made a point to understand as much as she could about it during her time on the *Prometheus* and the X-304. By now, she knew enough to figure out what had happened.

She reached out again and took another control crystal out. Then she stood and showed them to Pendergast.

“Look, one of them is completely scorched.” She lifted one hand; the normally clear crystal was blackened, as if seared with soot. “This one is responsible for outputs.” She waved the other one around slightly. “The damaged one is for inputs. That’s why the computer thought the engine was fine, even though the helmsman couldn’t get it to listen to his commands.”

Pendergast reached out and took the two crystals from her hands to look at them closer. Behind them the medics have loaded Doctor Novak on a gurney and were moving her out of the room, while another EMT was checking the vitals on the two remaining victims.

“What did that?”

Alice hesitated. “I’m not sure, sir. I’m not an engineer…”

His eyebrow went up. “Aren’t you?”

She smiled embarrassedly and looked down. “Well, I have a degree in Electrical Engineering, but crystals is hardly the kind of technology we studied back at CalTech, sir.”

“Your best guess, Lieutenant,” he ordered.

She sighed. “Give me a minute, sir.”

She crouched down again and looked into the crystal hold inside the control station. She couldn’t see very much. She turned to Matthews, who was standing behind her now, watching her like a hawk.

“You’ve got a flashlight?”

He nodded and produced a small torch from one of his numerous pockets. Alice wondered what else he was hiding in there.

“Thanks.” She turned it on and shined inside the hold to examine the situation. There were only a dozen or so crystals in there; others would be installed in different parts of the ship, and even in this room there were two similar holds, albeit smaller and with fewer crystals in them. There was something wrong, though. She frowned, looking at the empty spaces where the two crystals she removed had been. One of the spaces was slightly blackened, but other than that…

“Son of a bitch,” she whispered to herself. It was quiet enough in the room that Pendergast and Matthews both heard her, though.

“What?” The colonel demanded.

“Someone switched the crystals, sir.” She breathed, then got up to face her commander again. “I didn’t notice at first because it was too dark, but this –” She pointed to the charred crystal Pendergast was still holding in his hand. “- is actually a simple memory bank, it should be put in the slot in the back of the hold. They were switched, sir. Now, there are certain safeguards in the system that should prevent loss of engine control should the input crystal be damaged, but
unfortunately… they are stored in the memory bank crystal.” Alice pointed again. “So as soon as
the helmsman on the bridge entered a course correction, the crystal short-circuited and burned
down. Now as to why it produced an electric shock strong enough to knock out three people, that I
don’t know.”

“Someone did this deliberately?” Pendergast asked, his face screwed up in an expression of barely
contained fury.

“I don’t know, sir. It might have been a mistake.”

“Would any of the engineers make such a mistake?”

Alice thought for a moment.

“I doubt that, sir. But you can never rule out human error unless there’s proof. People goof.” She
shrugged. “You can go through security footage, it should be fairly easy. Whoever switched the
crystals, must have done so within a very specific timeframe: between the last change of course and
the one that caused the short. That couldn’t be more than a few minutes.”

“Saunders?”

“On it, sir.”

The marine left the room; the medics have already moved the two remaining victims out, so only
Pendergast, Alice, and Matthews stayed in the room.

“Right now my ship is bound to go in one direction only,” the colonel said. “Can you fix this,
make her respond to the commands again?”

Alice frowned.

“I don’t know, sir. It could be as easy as putting the right crystal back in; but if the conduits are
damaged too… I don’t know enough about the technology yet to repair it myself,” she admitted.
“But there should be two other engineers on the ship who were not on duty, and therefore weren’t
here when it happened. They surely will be able to repair it.”

Pendergast handed the two crystals over to her and then walked to the wall phone.

“Try to put it in place and let’s see what happens,” he said to Alice and then lifted the receiver.
“This is Pendergast. Find me the off-duty engine room crew and get their asses here ASAP.”

Alice dropped down to her knees again. First, she replaced the undamaged output crystal where it
belonged; it started glowing slightly. Then she removed the input one from the memory bank’s
place. It looked intact. She inserted it in the right slot. Nothing happened.

“I’m afraid I was right, sir,” she said without looking up. “The conduit must be damaged as well.
I’m pretty sure it’s possible to redirect the signal to go through the memory bank, but the memory
bank is burnt. Not sure if we have a spare.”

“We don’t.” A new voice said from the direction of the door. Sergeant O’Reilly came in, dressed
in a uniform hastily put on the bottom of his pajamas. He was one of the two other engineers who
manned the engine room. “Can I have a look, ma’am?”

“Be my guest!” Alice stood up and moved to make way for him. He examined the inside of the
hold with a flashlight of his own and then stood as well, now with a deep crease in his forehead.
“This must have been done deliberately,” he professed. “I will never believe that any of the other guys here would make such a stupid mistake. The damned crystals are different colors.”

“Can you fix it?” Was all that Colonel Pendergast was interested in at the moment.

“I can. I will have to cannibalize a memory bank crystal from another system and program a specific sub-routine into it, though. That may take time.”

“Fine, can we use hyperdrive to get closer to the Earth?”

The engineer shook his head.

“The Asgard hyperdrive is wired through the same control station, which means it uses the same crystals as our sublight engine. That’s because it wasn’t originally installed as part of the design, the system was retrofitted to accommodate the hyperdrive. It will be different on the X-304, but here… I’m afraid we have to repair this.”

“How much time? If we continue on course like this, we’ll eventually hit something.”

“We can shut off the engine manually from here, sir” Alice put in. “We’ll be stranded and drifting for a while, but at least we won’t have a close encounter with any gas giants or something. Hopefully.”

“Do it, then. And start working on that memory bank thing at once. I’ll be on the bridge.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the colonel left, the second engineer from the other shift came in. Matthews was still in the room with them, too, and it didn’t look as if he was about to leave. Alice left O’Reilly to bring Doctor Chenkov up to speed and went herself to the other control panel to switch off the engine. It was a manual switch – based on a set of hydraulic segments that literally cut the power to the engine. The lights flickered a bit when she pulled the handle; they were still basked in the reddish gloom of the emergency lighting. Come to think of that, this was also odd; the short circuit must have overloaded some other conduit as well, otherwise they wouldn’t have lost power in the first place. That was probably also what caused the electric shock that knocked out Doctor Novak and the two others. How, though? She was annoyed at herself for not knowing. She clearly needed to study this technology further. But she was quite sure that once they re-start the engine, the power in the entire ship should come right back up; even if one conduit was damaged, there were enough redundancies that it shouldn’t matter. Or at least she hoped so.

O’Reilly and Chenkov had already set to work; Alice stayed with them to help, but it was more for her own benefit than anything else. She’s never seen the process of actually inputting any data into a crystal; she did know enough about computer science to understand the program they were writing, though. It was very crude, hastily made string of code, but it should do the trick, she judged. They only needed to get as far as Earth; it shouldn’t take them much time. The hardest part would be atmospheric reentry, of course, because it needed a lot of different kinds of inputs for the engine; and all of them needed to be included in this sub-routine.

It took them almost five hours of hard, relentless work to finish the program; and then another hour of testing it in the engine diagnostic tool. Along the way, they’ve heard Pendergast’s curt announcement over the ship’s speakers; basically, he said that there was a mechanical problem and it was being dealt with. No mention of sabotage, though; but if it was deliberate, then it must have been a sabotage, right? Yet they had no news about possible culprits.
Finally they were able to install the new memory bank crystal and power up the engine. The helmsman’s voice sounded indeed very relieved when he reported that he now regained control over the spacecraft. They set a course for Earth; they would reach it in about four and a half hours. At that point, Alice had been awake for twenty hours, so she just headed to her bed, not sure if she was supposed to report back to Pendergast or not. But, she figured, if he wanted to see her, he would have said so when they talked over the intercom. And anyway, she was just too tired to care anymore.

* Alice woke with a start, blinking in the darkness of her cabin, for a second unsure of where she was. Then it came back to her; she was in her room aboard the Prometheus. She flicked a switch to turn on the lights and looked at the clock. That didn’t tell her much at first. She couldn’t remember what the hour was when she went to bed, and so she didn’t know how long she slept. The clock was showing six fifty; but was it six fifty in the morning or in the evening? They were operating according to the Greenwich Mean Time, because they had to have some indicator of time; but of course anything like day or night didn’t exist on a spaceship. It was all artificial ways to make the life aboard easier for the crew. She finished her shift at eight o’clock in the evening; the power loss happened at around nine, and then they worked for about five hours… which meant that she slept for around three hours. They would be nearing the Earth now. She wondered idly if they had found the saboteur.

She got up and headed to the shower. It was nice to feel the warm water on her skin; it washed away some of the residual tiredness and grogginess. After she put on her uniform, she finally felt more like a person again. She wondered where to go from there and figured she had the best chance of finding out if anything new happened in the mess.

There were always people in the mess, if not eating, then socializing. It was a big hall filled with long dining tables and lined with counters and stands full of different kinds of food. The name mess was another loan from the Navy terminology; although as often as not, airmen called it a “chow hall” in a proper Air Force fashion. The difference was that aboard a Navy ship, there was always a separate wardroom for officers; here everybody ate together. That was mostly due to civilians’ presence on board – who could not be counted neither as officers nor enlisted, after all. Of course naturally different groups were spending time together; even amongst officers there was a clear division between, say, 302 pilots and bridge crew.

The mess was surprisingly full; Alice would have thought that with less than an hour in space, people would have gone to their quarters to pack, expecting a few days of shore leave. But it looked like everybody not currently on duty was here. And as she made her way through the hall, Alice noticed that few people were actually eating, but it seemed like everyone was talking at once. That piqued her curiosity.

She grabbed herself a plate of cold lasagna and a soda can and made for the table where 302 pilots sat; it looked like almost everyone was there, even those who were officially still on duty now. Their animated discussion died down as she approached them. She felt vaguely awkward and slowed her pace, almost hovering nearby. Then Spinner moved to the side and waved her to take a seat next to him. She smiled hesitantly at him and sat down. Everybody was looking at her with varying degrees of interest.

“Hey, LT,” Spinner greeted her, breaking the sudden silence at the table. “We were just talking
“about you.”

“Oh?” She looked down at her soda and pretended that she was struggling to open the can.

“Yeah, they say you were there when they discovered the sabotage,” someone else said. “What happened?”

She looked up.

“So it was sabotage?” Even though she suspected as much, it was still kind of shocking. They were on a ship filled with people who went through the most severe background checks, people their government trusted with the biggest secret ever, a true elite amongst both military and civilian personnel. To think that one of them might be a saboteur, a… traitor? It was mind-boggling.

“That’s what they say,” Fowles confirmed from the opposite side of the table. “Although they still don’t know who did it.”

“How can they not know?” Alice was surprised. “What about the security footage?”

“It was tampered with. Someone erased it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope,” Spinner’s head bobbed left and right emphatically. Alice wondered if it was something he picked up from Bolton. “They’ve launched a full investigation…”

“But they have no evidence,” Vasquez interrupted, surprising Alice again. He was talking to her now? She glanced at him; he was looking at her with a sour grimace on his face, but there was something strange about his expression. She couldn’t exactly put her finger on it, but he was almost… hopeful? How odd.

“I would not cast any judgments yet, Captain,” a new voice joined the conversation from behind them. All heads snapped around or up to look at Bolton. “Lieutenant Boyd, I need you to come with me now.”

Alice sighed and shot a longing look at her lasagna. She couldn’t remember how long it was since her last meal. She ate just after her shift ended so… eleven hours? Her stomach rumbled at the thought, but she stood, leaving the untouched food behind, and followed her commander out of the mess. He led her to the briefing room.

“Sit down, Lieutenant.” He gestured to her and took a seat opposite her. “How do you feel?”

“Dead tired, sir,” she admitted. “Is it true? Was the security footage erased?”

“Not exactly. The feed was interrupted about half an hour before the incident in the engine room, and for ten minutes the cameras showed only a frozen frame. Saunders is beside himself because nobody noticed.”

“They can’t look at all the cameras all the time,” Alice said. “It’s just physically impossible. I wouldn’t be too harsh on his guys.”

“Well, either way, the cameras inside the engine room and outside on the corridor weren’t operational. The problem we’re now having is that half of the crew on this ship has the skills to do this.”
Alice nodded thoughtfully.

“Whoever accessed the camera controls must have used someone’s login. Did you check the logs, sir?”

“We did.” Bolton nodded empathically again. “Lieutenant Arley’s credentials were used.”

“But Arley had a shift at that time, she was on the bridge, so she couldn’t do it, could she?”

“No, she couldn’t. But apparently she wasn’t as careful with her access codes as she should have been. She wrote them down in her diary.” The words came out almost in a low hiss. Alice grimaced. She liked Arley and she was sorry for her; there was no way this would be overlooked. Such a colossal breach of security! Didn’t she know better? How could she be so stupid?

There was a flip side to that bit of information, though. *Who would have known where to find her codes?*

“She’s being questioned now,” Bolton said with a gesture that looked like a halfhearted attempt at swaying at an irritating fly. “Sooner or later we’ll find out who’s behind this.”

Alice didn’t respond for a moment, still deep in thought. She didn’t know Arley all that well – they only spoke the few times Alice made it to the bridge in her quest for knowledge. She always seemed very friendly, though. Maybe she got too friendly with someone? Someone who then betrayed her trust and used her to get the access codes they needed?

But what was the point of it all? Once you got the access codes required… there were many more effective ways to sabotage the *Prometheus* than to switch the two crystals. It was very odd that a saboteur would be satisfied with such a small feat, with so little damage… which reminded her.

“How is Doctor Novak and her crewmen?” She asked, suddenly anxious. Novak, she did know pretty well. And liked very much; the engineer was always nice to her and shared her knowledge with Alice freely.

“They’ll be alright,” Bolton answered. “Novak got the worst of it, so she’s still in the infirmary, but the doc says she’ll make a full recovery. The two other engineers were already checked out, they’re fine, if somewhat shaken.”

“Can’t blame them,” Alice agreed.

There was a bout of silence that followed. Bolton was looking at Alice in a way that made her feel uncomfortable. She looked down.

“There’s one other thing,” he said gravely after at least a minute of quiet staring. “We found your fingerprints all over the computer that was used to tamper with the camera feed.”

Alice’s head jerked up.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“You’ve heard me. There were also your fingerprints on the crystals in the engine room, though you’ve touched them after the incident so that’s not so important. How did they end up on the computer, though? Care to explain?”

Alice looked at him in disbelief. Was he really accusing her of doing this?
And then it hit her.

The expression on Vasquez’s face as he said that there was no evidence. Evidence. The first thing that came to mind when she heard this word were always fingerprints. That was the number one forensic evidence used in court, wasn’t it? Even the courts-martial relied heavily on them. And now her fingerprints were found on the computer used to commit sabotage? Could that be a coincidence, a strange happenstance, that of all people, Vasquez should use this word, evidence?

Suddenly an image flashed before her eyes: Arley and Vasquez at the entrance to the mess, him letting her go first, her returning smile, shy but friendly. Very friendly. Could it be? Was that a coincidence as well?

So was it his ploy to get back at her? He could have damaged the entire ship. He put all of their lives in danger. What was he thinking?! And the answer came to her as soon as she asked that question: he wasn’t thinking. He was still being a frat boy, working to exact some sort of revenge on her.

This was ridiculous. It couldn’t be about her. Could it?

The hatred in his eyes. The grimace of disgust on his face every time he looked at her.

Maybe it could.

So what was she supposed to do with this newfound knowledge? Should she say something to Bolton? Or Pendergast? Would they believe her? She didn’t have any proof. Nothing tangible, at least; just a vague speculation based on his expression and choice of words, and his too-friendly attitude towards Arley. There was no doubt in her mind now that he was to blame; but they didn’t know him the way she did. They didn’t know about the weeks of hostility – even Bolton didn’t realize the extent of it. They had no idea about the childish pranks Vasquez put her through before; she never told anyone. There was no proof, no evidence. Just her word against his.

“Boyd?” Bolton interrupted her reverie.

“No, sir, I can’t explain,” she said, blinking hard, coming back to the present moment. “Except that I have touched a lot of things during my tour aboard the ship, sir. It’s possible I have left my fingerprints on the computer before that incident.”

He nodded, as if he expected this answer.

“There is only one small problem. This computer has been wiped clean. We didn’t find any other fingerprints, except yours.”

Alice stared at him for a few seconds, unable to mold her thoughts into words.

“Do you really think so little of me, sir?” She asked eventually. “Do you really think I’d be so stupid as to wipe clean all other fingerprints but leave mine?”

“Not really,” he acquiesced. “But you are one of the people who have the skill to pull it off.”

“What possible motive could I have, sir?”

“You tell me.”

They looked at each other in silence for another moment.
“The way you handled yourself in the engine room, Colonel Pendergast was very impressed,” Bolton said casually. “Is it really such a stretch to say you might have framed it up?”

“Yes, sir, it is. How would I have known that Pendergast would call on me to follow him there? It was his snap decision to take me with him.”

“True.”

Bolton continued to bore her with his eyes, for once not fidgeting the way he usually was. It was very uncomfortable. *Shit, does he really think I’m to blame?*

Whatever he was looking for in her reactions, he must not have found it, because after a minute or so he started to relax and a small smile appeared on his lips.

“Of course I never thought you were the saboteur.” He looked up to the ceiling and then sighed. “But I was ordered to question you nonetheless.”

Alice raised her eyebrows, but didn’t say anything.

“Don’t worry, you’re in the clear. But we will find whoever did this, and they will be court-martialed.” The smile faded on his face. “Do you have any idea who that might be? Any inkling?”

Alice pulled her lips in a tight line and then shook her head. She wasn’t going to start throwing unfounded accusations based on pure speculation, no matter how positive she felt about them. It could only harm her in the long run. If it really was Vasquez, they’d find out pretty soon. Arley’d talk. She would have no other option if she wanted to avoid a court-martial herself.

“Okay,” the lieutenant colonel sighed and then checked his watch. “We’ll be entering the Earth’s atmosphere in a couple of minutes. I suggest you go and pack your things. Once we’re on the ground, there will be an official debrief for you. After that, I guess, your shore leave will start. Any plans?”

Alice was still too disturbed to smile, but she let her face relax a bit.

“Not much. I’ll go visit my mom, my brother promised to come home for a few days as well.”

“A family reunion. Nice.” Bolton nodded and then stood up and left without another word.

Alice stared into space for a moment. *What a fucked up situation,* she thought to herself. She still had a hard time believing that Vasquez would do something so stupid, but what other explanation was there? Coincidence… maybe it was a coincidence. But Alice was rather sure that, sooner or later, she would be called to bear witness at Vasquez’s court-martial.

Not that she would be sad to see him go, but the fact that he would do this, risk so much, just to get back at her… the very idea was incomprehensible to her.

People would never stop surprising her. They were just so hard to understand. Not for the first time, she thought she would never fully grasp human psychology. She wondered fleetingly if aliens were easier to decipher. Maybe she should stick to machines, though. Machines were logical. They operated on reason. They didn’t have pride that could be hurt.
It was dark when she drove up the familiar lane and pulled onto the driveway. The house looked empty and desolate, lights off, shutters closed in the windows. The lawn was yellow – nobody was watering the grass anymore. She should have some sprinklers installed. Of course nobody was living in the house now, but she should do it at least for the sake of the neighbors who cared about the overall appearance of the street.

Alice picked up her bag that was sitting on the passenger’s seat and got out of the rental. The car beeped loudly when she shut the door and turned on the alarm. In the house on the other side of the street a window lighted up and someone’s silhouette appeared behind the curtain. Alice skipped over to the front door and flicked the switch of the porch lamp. She then turned around and waved to Mrs. Hootfield, the watchdog of the community. She could almost hear the indignant huff of the old lady as she turned the light off again, pretending that she went back to sleep. Alice knew her neighbor too well, though. She’d be watching for a while still, tonight, and then start over in the morning.

The door opened without a sound, softly. Alice went through the corridor to the living room, flicking switches as she went. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. Most of the furniture was under protective covering, though: big, transparent plastic bags lay over the couches and tables, the TV set and mom’s grand piano in the corner. The same was true of every room in the house. They should have sold the place, but mom was just too attached; if she found out, it would break her heart. Well, Alice would just have to do some cleaning. Jake would join her the next day and help – even if she had to coerce him to do it.

She went up the stairs to her room. Here, too, the plastic was covering every surface. She dropped the bag on the floor and started unwrapping the furniture. She had to have a place to sleep, after all, and sleep was one thing she needed. It had been such a long day.

After they docked in the BC-303 hangar near Groom Lake, Alice had been called to the main facility to give her deposition about the events of the day. It took almost two hours to recount everything to her questioner’s satisfaction – an Air Force JAG major (dedicated to Stargate program). Then, finally, she had been released and her shore leave started. Of course, she still had to get to Los Angeles. She took a commercial flight from Las Vegas to LAX, got a rental car there and drove straight home. It was now almost midnight.

Finished with the coverings, she sat down on her bed and looked around. She hadn’t been in here for months. No, more – it was now over a year. This was the place she dreamt her dreams as a child, before she outgrew it and went away to make those dreams a reality. She was barely fifteen when she started college, but this room didn’t look like it had belonged to a child, or even a teenager, she now reflected. The walls were pale green, the bed cover a richer shade of the same color, matching the dark browns of the furniture; it made it feel like a forest. She had insisted on such colors, she remembered. She must have been seven or eight and she’d read somewhere that green was good for your eyes and that it had a calming effect. So very her to think of such a thing instead of just picking her favorite color – which was blue.

There wasn’t that much stuff in the room. A bed, a desk, an old-fashion wardrobe and a low cabinet. And shelves; taking up every bit of available space on the walls, everywhere - shelves full of books. It looked now like there were more than she had remembered. There was even a couple cardboard boxes stashed in the corner of the room and under the bed, also containing books. An old PC sat on the desk, as well, but that was pretty much it; no musical instruments, no toys, not even a favorite teddy bear. She wondered idly what had happened to Mr. Fluffy who had been her companion for the first three years of her life. She didn’t know; it just disappeared from her
memory and she couldn’t seem to even place when exactly that was. Despite her near-perfect photographic memory, the first few years of her life were fuzzy in her mind, like a bad picture on an old TV screen.

No posters, no diary, not a thing that would indicate that a little girl used to live here. There was a tiny corkboard over the desk, below some more shelves; she used to have postcards from places her dad had visited pinned to it. She took them off after he died. They were somewhere in a wooden box on the bottom of the wardrobe, along with other memorabilia she couldn’t bear to look at in that short period after he was gone and before she went away. She sighed at the thought. She missed him more than usual today. Maybe it was the fatigue, or maybe it was because she thought he would have been so proud of her. He would have loved the fact that she joined the Air Force, but was more of a Navy aviator now, based on a ship. He would have appreciated the irony.

She sighed again and then suddenly slid down to her knees next to the wardrobe. There was quite a lot of junk on the bottom of it; old shoes and clothes, and more books. She dug out the small wooden box and put it on her lap, pausing for a moment before she opened it. The memories came to her strongly as she took out the stash of postcards. Each of them was addressed in her dad’s messy handwriting, and the messages were kept short, but warm.

_Sweetcake_, he’d write. He’d always find the most ridiculous nicknames for her. _I wish you were here to see this! We totally blew the feathers off the other guys’ backsides, though it was close for a while. Which only reinforces the age-old adage: the loser is the one who stops fighting first. Never stop fighting, sweetmeat. Yours forever, Daddy._

She bit her lip. She felt as if some great weight were crushing her heart. Why did he have to go? Why did he have to leave her? _I miss you, Daddy._ She felt lonelier than ever before. Why it was hitting her so hard today of all days?

Other things were in the box, too. Dad’s reading glasses, his favorite crossword pen, an old cassette with his favorite album. And his dog tag. It wasn’t the one he was wearing when he crashed; those were reissued after he had given his original tags to her and Jake, one for each of them, when they were very little. She couldn’t have been more than three then. Now she put all the other souvenirs back into the box, keeping the tag. She hid the box again in the bottom of her wardrobe, under some clothes, and hauled herself back onto the bed. She stared at the piece of metal in her hand.

It couldn’t have been the first time he was leaving for a tour aboard the carrier, but it was the first time Alice was aware that he would be away for an extended period of time. As soon as she understood that, she threw a temper fit – she could be pretty volatile when she was small. And then she ran away and hid in an empty closet in the spare room upstairs. There, she sat on the ground and sobbed, thinking to herself that if she wouldn’t say goodbye to Daddy, he wouldn’t leave. And of course he didn’t; he found her, and held her and comforted her. And he promised her he’d be back. He always promised he’d be back. An impossible, unkeepable promise. But she didn’t know better back then. She believed him because she trusted him. Because he was her Daddy. And that’s when he took his tags, unclipped one of them and gave it to her – _for safekeeping_, he said. _One day I’m gonna take it back._

_No, you won’t, Daddy._

Jake got the other tag. He cried, too, and threw a similar tantrum that day. Well, there was no denying that they were related; the sibling rivalry only accentuated the similarities between them.

There was a muffled sound of a car outside. It stopped right in front of the house, she thought. Jake wasn’t supposed to arrive until the next day, but who else could it be? Nobody had a reason to be here except the two of them.
Alice sighed deeply yet again, hearing the front door bang as her brother shut them with much too much force, as usual. Yeah, definitely Jake.

She looked again at the small piece of metal that was a vivid reminder of her dad’s passing. No, she suddenly decided. Not of his passing; of his life. That was what she was supposed to do: celebrate his life instead of endlessly mourning his death.

She fished out her own tags from under her shirt and clasped her dad’s ID onto her own chain. Now she had three. An odd number; that suited her just fine. It wasn’t strictly regular, but who would ever know? She always kept the tags hidden under the shirt. And even if not, it’s not like anyone would like to be caught staring at her chest.

She stood and walked out of the room. She bent over the railing to look at her brother who stood in the hallway, just depositing his backpack onto the floor.

He didn’t change much. He was just as huge and imposing as always, even from her vantage point above. If anything, he looked even more muscular than the last time she saw him. What were they feeding them marines? His auburn hair was a bit longer than usual, too, and there was a ghost of stubble on his cheeks.

“Hey, brother,” she greeted him with a weary smile.

“Hiya,” he replied. His voice was almost as tired as hers, but he managed to sound enthused. “Long time no see.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” she agreed and descended the stairs. “You’re home early. I thought you were supposed to get here tomorrow?”

“Changed plans. Got some extra time off after last mission. Doctor’s orders.” He chuckled as if it was funny. Alice frowned.

“Are you alright? Were you hurt?”

“No really, just banged my head pretty hard on the floor,” he admitted. “The doc thought it’d be a good idea for me to take it easy for a couple of days, and I had this vacation time coming up anyway, so…”

“I see.” She glanced him over; now that she was on the same level with him, he was towering over her by nearly ten inches. Was he always so fucking tall? Of course, he was, but she hasn’t seen him for so long that it felt like he grew in this time. Maybe her memory was not as perfect as she had thought. She chuckled to herself. “Wanna grab a bite to eat before we turn in for the night?”

“Sure, sis, but is there anything here to eat?” He raised his eyebrows.

“No, but I came prepared. Go to the kitchen and get rid of that wrappings covering everything, I’ll need the microwave.”

He nodded and turned around. She went back upstairs to fetch the pre-made tacos she’d picked up on her way home; one package was supposed to be for breakfast the next day, but Jake’s arrival changed that. They needed to be reheated, though. She grabbed two cans of soda, as well.

“Healthy stuff,” Jake commented when she entered the kitchen. The coverings were all laying neatly folded in one corner of the room. “But I’ll take that over nothing.”

“You better. I don’t have anything else. Will have to run to the grocery store tomorrow morning if
we want anything for breakfast.”

He looked at her doubtfully as she unwrapped the tacos and laid them onto a plate.

“Judging by the rings under your eyes and the state of your voice, morning meal will not be an issue. I think the first one we’ll have will be lunch.”

She smiled, putting the plate into the microwave, and then tossed him one of the soda cans.

“Maybe a brunch, then.” She threw him a dubious look of her own. “You don’t look so good, either.”

“Long day.” He shrugged. “The drive up here kinda sucks. I mean as long as you’re on the Interstate, it’s fine, but as soon as you get in the populated area… I mean, come on, it’s not like I was driving in rush hours…”

“Oh, brother, you’ve apparently forgotten the reality of LA,” Alice chuckled. “But I’m glad you’re here now. This place gets eerie when there’s no one else…”

Jake laughed.

“You’re easily spooked for an officer!”

“Hey, I can face anything when I’m in my F… 16.” She almost said “F-302”, stumbling over the number. “No spooky apparition is going to survive a meeting with one of my AMRAAMs.”

“One day I’m gonna teach you how to properly defend yourself in close combat,” Jake promised with an impish smile. He was no doubt devising a way to throw her around some. Sadly, even with all the special training she’s been through as part of her preparation before joining the 302 program, Alice knew she would never be able to compete with Jake.

“One day I’mma teach you how to shoot straight,” she teased in reply. To Jake’s eternal chagrin, Alice’s shooting skills were just slightly better than his, especially with a sniper rifle, but she beat him most of the time with any kind of gun. Dad used to say that she had a crazy eyesight; after she got into the Air Force, it turned out that even for a pilot, her eyes were indeed exceptionally sharp.

The microwave pinged, announcing dinner ready. Alice took out the plate and put it in the middle of the kitchen counter, where both of them could easily reach it. Jake was first to grab a taco; it burned his fingers, but he didn’t even wince too much, just stuffed his mouth with a blissful half-smile. He must have been really hungry. Alice waited until it cooled enough to eat normally.

“So where are you based now, actually?” Jake asked just to fill the silence.

“Ha! If only I knew that,” she answered, smiling crookedly. “Just finished training. I’mma get my assignment after I get back.”

“But where was your training?” He pushed.

“Oh, here and there…”

He frowned.

“Alice,” he said reproachfully, as if she’s done something wrong. She supposed she did. They’ve never had secrets they couldn’t share with each other before. But this wasn’t her secret and she wasn’t the one to decide to whom it could be revealed.
“Sorry, Jake, I can’t.” She shrugged and took a bite of taco. She avoided his eyes boring into her.

“Classified?”

“You know how it is…”

“Yeah,” he groaned. There was an edge to his voice now. It made her look up at him. His expression was sour as he chewed his taco. It took a minute for the frown to go away. “How did you like the training?”

“It was… different,” she admitted. “Mostly routine stuff, once you got a hang of it, but there were a couple more racy moments.” Like when she almost crashed the damn plane. *Twice.* “ Mostly I learned a lot.”

Now he laughed out loud.

“You would.” He wiped his hands on a paper napkin and took a sip of soda. “Made some friends, did you?” There was definitely a mocking undertone in his question now.

“I did, actually,” she replied, thinking of Archer, Espinoza and Dr. Novak. “Though I also made enemies.”

That got his attention.

“You? Enemies? How come?”

She sighed.

“Basically this one guy decided to make my life miserable after I pointed out to him that he was in breach of orders. He’s ranking, but the orders came from way above,” Alice clarified. “Lots of small things. He got half of the group to shun me. Played some practical jokes on me as well, fratboy-like stuff.”

“Really?” Jake was visibly amused with her exasperation. “What’d he do?”

“Oh, he would fill my locker with junk or empty my toothpaste tube, things like this.” She shrugged again. “Like I said, fratboy stuff. But I’m pretty sure he did something much worse, something that could have put people in danger. I can’t tell you what, but it was pretty serious.”

“Did you tell on him?”

“No.” Alice shook her head emphatically, only a second later realizing that she was unconsciously mimicking Bolton. It made her smile for a second. Then she frowned. “I just don’t have any proof, so it would boil down to the word of a Captain versus Lieutenant’s.”

“I see. Oh, and by the way – congrats on making First LT.” He grinned at her. “Sorry I couldn’t be there.”

“No problem,” she snorted. “Even if you could, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you where I was. It was a nice celebration, though. People mostly acted like they cared.”

He looked surprised.

“Why wouldn’t they care? Their leader got promoted, isn’t that a good thing?”

She had to remind herself that he was used to a completely different structure and culture.
“I don’t lead people, Jake.” She sighed. “In fact I am the lowest rank in my entire squadron. And the youngest, of course.”

“What else is new?” Jake rolled his eyes. “I don’t blame all those other people for getting annoyed at you. It must be terrible to have a genius like you in the team.”

He was mocking her again, looking if she would bite, but she was too tired for that. She didn’t reply. For a while they sat in silence, finishing the sodas. Finally they were done and Alice swept the taco containers and the cans into a plastic bag and Jake put the plate into the dishwasher.

“I forgot to turn on the water,” Alice remembered. “We’ll need that tonight. Do you mind…?”

“On it.” Her brother unlocked the kitchen door and went out to the backyard, where the water switch was located. Alice went up to her room, moved her bag onto the bed and opened it, looking for her pajamas and toiletries. She heard the kitchen door close and went to the bathroom to get ready for bed. It was nearing one in the morning. She could feel the tiredness like a crushing weight on her shoulders. It was the bad kind of fatigue; not like after a physical exertion, but the kind you felt after a long and stressful day.

Jake was sitting on her bed when she came back to her room. He was in his pajamas, too.

“One more thing,” he said with a grin and handed her a haphazardly wrapped box. “Happy late birthday. Open it.”

She smiled and pulled the wrapping away with one decisive movement. It was a book, of course. The surprising part was the author and title. Alice Boyd, it said on the elegant dark violet cover with silver letters. Schrödinger’s cat realized, or superpositioning quantum states as a way to obtain a measurement on a system. It was her senior thesis, edited and printed in a form of a book. It looked pretty thick, though, and it shouldn’t because it wasn’t all that long.

“Wow, Jake. I don’t know what to say.”

“A thank you will do.” He was still grinning at her and she replied with a smile, too.

“Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

“Not that anyone will understand it,” he mused, getting off her bed and standing in the doorway. “I mean I tried to read it and it sounds like gibberish to me.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Goodnight, Jake.”

“Goodnight, Allie.”

He closed the door behind him and Alice walked slowly to her desk. She sat down and opened the book. There was a handwritten dedication on the cover page.

Sorry for all the genius jokes, sis. I’m proud of you.

She flipped through the pages. She quickly realized why it seemed thicker than it should; the paper was glossy, more like for a photo or an artbook. There was also a foreword, written by Professor J. Pierce, one of her teachers at CalTech. Wow. This took some time to prepare.

It was nice to see her name in print, even if only on a single, lonely copy. She was always
particularly proud of that thesis – and it was what has gotten her the *summa* added to her *cum laude* when she graduated. Of course, it was but a theoretical position paper; she never gotten to the actual research part. But it got some attention, mostly from some professor from France Alice never heard about before. Maybe he’d carry her idea into fruition.

She sighed, closed the book and left it on the desk. Then she turned off the light and crawled into her bed; she was asleep barely a minute after resting her head on the pillow.
The park was noisy; families with screaming children, dogs barking, teenagers playing loud music from their boomboxes, some drunk people singing loudly. All of that faded into the background; they were set up far enough from the crowd not to be bothered, but close enough not to feel alone. They had spread out a huge blanket on the grass, put down their wicker baskets and coolers and sat or lain down in the half-shade of a sycamore tree.

“This was a brilliant idea,” Alice allowed, smiling at her little family. Her mother was sitting at the edge of the blanket, a bit nervous at finding herself in unfamiliar surroundings, but comforted by the presence of her children and aided by the powerful mix of meds she was on. Getting her out of the facility for the day proved easy enough; she was making so much progress in the fight with her illness lately that her doctor permitted the trip with no reservations, actually encouraged it heartily. The ultimate goal was to get Alice’s mother back into the semi-normal life she used to lead before dad’s death, before she got worse. Giving her a change of scenery and a taste of independence could only help, the doc had said.

“Told’ya, sis.” Jake beamed at her. They were both dressed in casual civilian clothes, jeans, t-shirts and cardigans, their mother the only one dressed more thickly, with long-sleeved blouse, a trench coat and an ankle-length skirt. It was very relaxing to just sit there, share a cool soda and talk about nothing in particular; a perfect lazy Sunday, except that it was a Thursday. They were almost at an end of their respective leaves. Soon enough Jake would be going back to Twentynine Palms and Alice to Nellis, again, to find out what her next assignment would be. She was getting nervous about that, not sure what to expect. She thought she’d done a good job; she did splash one enemy ship in a real combat, and she did help to get an SG team safely home. Also, the thing with the control crystals the last day on the Prometheus must have earned her some goodwill, right? But at the same time, the conflict with Vasquez, and her general lack of seniority, and her rather mediocre performance on the trainings... all that was weighing her down. Would they give her a chance? Would they recognize that she was an asset? Was she an asset?

“What’s with the frown?” Jake interrupted her reverie. She came back to the present, annoyed at herself; she had promised herself not to think about work when she was with her family.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about something work-related,” she admitted sourly. “The closer it gets, the more nervous I am.”

“Why are you nervous?” Her mother inquired. “You aren’t off to do anything too dangerous, are you?”

Alice controlled her face, even though the desire to grimace was almost overwhelming. Now came the lying part; she’d lied to her mom before, but never that massively.

“No, mom, it’s just that there’s a steep competition for the position I want and I’m worried my relative inexperience will prevail over the consideration of any qualifications I might or might not have.” Yes, mom, if I get the assignment I want, I will be in mortal danger every day of the week, except when I’m on shore leave, here with you. Not exactly something she could say to her schizophrenic, depression-prone mother.

“You’re worried about the competition?” Jake huffed. “I’ve never seen you bow down before a challenge.”

“Well, I am not bowing down,” she protested, annoyed again. “I’m just nervous, is all. I’ve done
all I could, and the waiting is what’s killing me.”

Her brother hmphed.

“You’ve never been the patient one,” mom chuckled. Alice grinned at her; she loved that sound. It meant some of the good things were back in her life, as if they never left. There was a time when mom was never, ever even smiling. Alice pulled a mental image of that scared, depressed woman she’d left behind when she went to college, and compared it to the slightly anxious, but content person sitting nearby now. A warm, fuzzy feeling swelled in her heart. Mom wasn’t entirely happy yet, but she was getting there. She’d make it. She’d always be mentally fragile, but one day, sooner or later, she’d come back to the house and pick up the pieces of her life, and she would go on; damaged, but no longer broken; independent, but never alone. She made friends at the Treatment Center. There were people in her life now. Even if her children were away, she’d make it. *Unless something happens to one of us… this would break her all over again.* But Alice couldn’t think like that. She pondered it long and deeply, and decided that she couldn’t curtail her life just to fit in her mother’s world.

“I'll do my best not to die on you, mom.”

“Nothing,” Alice agreed. “'S why I became a fighter jockey. If anything, these birds are fast.”

“You sound like your father,” mother said disapprovingly, but her eyes were twinkling. Not so long ago she would grow dark and sad at every mention of her late husband; this was such an amazing improvement, Alice couldn’t help but grin again. She caught the sight of Jake’s similarly elated expression.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” A new voice joined in their conversation. They all turned to look at the man who stood at the edge of the blanket now. He was tall, dark-haired and brown-eyed, his face marked with a long, pale scar going from his right ear to the corner of his mouth, forming a crescent.

“Uncle Simon!” Alice and Jake exclaimed at the same moment and both jumped up to greet the man.

“Hey kids! Hey, Eileen, how are you?” He said, hugging each of them curtly, and then coming down to sit with them at the blanket. Alice handed him a soda and he immediately popped it open.

“Quite well, thank you, and how are you and your family?” Mom replied with a smile, relaxing after the initial bout of confusion at the newcomer.

“Fine, fine. Jodie started college this year. She hates it.” Uncle Simon laughed. “I told her it’s either that or West Point, somehow she was suddenly much more appreciative of her school…”

“Ever the black sheep of the family,” Jake admonished jokingly. “How about Tobey?”

“He’s considering some options.” Simon scooted over to one of the wicker baskets and selected an apple. “He still has time, though.”

“I thought he wanted to follow in your footsteps?” Mom wondered.

“He did, but then he’s gotten this crazy idea to try ROTC.” Uncle rolled his eyes. “He’s actually thinking about following in her footsteps.” He gestured to Alice with a sour expression. “I tell him we don’t need any more Air Force pukes, that ground forces are what is going to protect this country, but he’s got this crazy idea to join NASA one day…” He shook his head. He was pretty genuine about his disdain for anything that lifted off the ground, unless it was ferrying troops,
Alice knew. She felt her lips twitch with a suppressed smile when she thought how wrong he was. She’d have to call her cousin and encourage him to go through with his plan. One thing was sure: they’d need all their bright youngsters to go out there, fight for their planet, for the entire humanity. Ground troops were important, but it wasn’t about the type of forces; things were happening out there and they needed smart brains more than anything.

“Oh, you know, I actually think he’s onto something,” Jake said, surprising all of them. “Air Force is getting all the fun assignments, although when things get tough, they still run crying to us for help.”

*Okay, that’s new. Air Force gets all the fun assignments? What’s that about?* Jake has usually been on the same wavelength with Uncle Simon when it came to usefulness of troops. Of course; marines were a ground force, too. They all had their professional pride – and clearly defined loyalties. Which was why his words now made little sense to Alice.

“Yeah, they’re getting all the funding, too,” Simon grumbled. “I have a buddy high up in the Pentagon. I couldn’t believe when he told me how much has been allocated to Air Force research projects in the past couple of years. I mean, seriously? Research projects?” He huffed with exasperated expression on his face.

*That would be the battlecruisers that are protecting your planet from alien invasion,* Alice thought with a polite smile. Jake was shaking his head and rolling his eyes. Uncle Simon was a Colonel in the Army, and he was well connected; he liked to flaunt that before his lower-grade family and friends. Jake, who was the only enlisted person in a family of officers, never really cared about this, but he looked annoyed now.

“That buddy told me something else, too.” Simon paused for effect, waiting until all of the others’ eyes were trained on him. “About you, Allie.”

“Oh?”

“He said there was a general call for all squadron commanders to look for outstanding fighter pilots, a couple of months ago. He said he’d had a look at that list. Your name was there.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. So much for the secrecy. But what else could be expected? If you propagated information to all squadron commanders… and it’s not like they’ve gotten anything that could give them any understanding of what was really going on. *Find me your best fighter pilots* was hardly an extraordinary request.

“Care to comment?” Uncle prompted.

“Not really, no.”

“She’s been on a secret training for the last couple months,” Jake offered helpfully. Alice glowered at him. *So much for sibling loyalty.*

“Aah, so you’ve gotten past the initial selection phase!” Simon was delighted with that tidbit. “Congrats!”

“She’s waiting for her new assignment now,” Jake added, the traitor. “It will be determined based on her performance during the training.”

“I am not commenting on any of that,” Alice put in tersely.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll do just fine.” The Army colonel waved his hand dismissively. “As always.”
“I wish people stopped doing that,” she snapped.

“Doing what?”

“Expect too much of me.” She stood up, annoyed, and walked up to the tree whose great canopy was providing shade for them. She leaned against the trunk and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“What’s with her today?” Simon asked innocently.

“Oh, will you just give her a break”, mom ended that discussion. Nobody wanted to argue with her. They sat in silence for a moment, while Alice fumed with her back against the tree.

The problem was pressure, of course. Ever since she was a little girl, there’s always been too much of it. Part of it was her own fault; she always set a bar very high for herself, higher than she did for anyone else. A perfectionist, she was. But a huge part of it were the expectations people came to have for her as soon as she let on just how smart she was. She was a wonder child; she learned how to read at three and how to write soon thereafter. From that point on, everything school-related came easy to her. She didn’t realize why until she was a little older and noticed that other people weren’t able to read as fast as she did and remember the things they’ve read as well as her. She had an exceptional memory; nothing near the mythical eidetic memory seen in movies and books – that was just an urban legend. But, nevertheless, she retained much more information than her peers, especially if it was given to her in written or visual form. She could also read much faster; at some point, her parents took her to see a professional who determined with wonderment that Alice, age seven, was able to read almost two thousand words per minute with near-perfect comprehension rate. That meant that she could read a book of 240 pages within thirty minutes. An average person read ten times slower than that and would have taken five hours to finish the same book; and then they would probably remember less than Alice. That same professional also tested her IQ and gotten a result of 156. Convinced it was a mistake, he had Alice retested, and then again and again in regular intervals, until she went to college at the age of fifteen. Although she’s never taken the same test twice, Alice consistently scored in high hundred-sixties; sometimes it was 155, other times 159. She’s never broken the 160 threshold, and never went below 153. The psychologist always marveled at that. Alice even sent her the copy of her IQ score from when she joined the Air Force; there, she scored 157. She got a warm thank you note from the man in return. He claimed she was still the most gifted person he ever examined.

She didn’t feel gifted. There’s always been more for her; more to read, more to learn, more to accomplish. Her mom especially liked to send her off to chess tournaments and various contests. Eventually, dad put an end to it; it was one of the biggest fights they’ve had that Alice ever witnessed. She cried in the wake of it, hating that they were arguing over her, but in the end felt a bit better when she could go on with her life in a more normal way.

It was hardly normal, though; she breezed through her education and graduated high school at fourteen. Two months later, having turned fifteen, she went on to college as an early entrant; not the only one at CalTech, but one of very few for sure. Always at least three years younger than anyone else in her class (she didn’t have any courses common with the other early entrants), she devoted all of her time to learning as much as possible, and ended up with a double major and a minor, graduating summa cum laude. Which was great except at nineteen she was a well-educated genius who’d never really… lived. She didn’t have any close friends, just acquaintances. She’d never been on a date, and her only kissing experience had come in form of an equally awkward and embarrassed freshman she met at the graduation party she felt obliged to attend. Obviously, that didn’t last past the night. At twenty-two, she was still as innocent as she’d been when she was leaving home at fifteen. She felt vaguely embarrassed about it; like she wasn’t good enough, like nobody wanted her. Especially that once she’s become one of the guys in the Air Force, she had to
endure an endless amount of inappropriate, explicit jokes the men in the uniform felt like they had a right to share, often making her an object of those jokes. They must have known how uncomfortable it was for her, but they just didn’t care. They knew she could have reported them for harassment, and knew she never would. She wasn’t the reporting kind.

So she was a twenty-two years old first lieutenant in the Air Force, the youngest person to have been chosen for the 302 program, and here she was, leaning against a tree trunk in a park in LA, freaking out because… what? Was it really that she wanted to be assigned to one of those ships that badly? Or did she just want to prove to everybody that she was good enough? Or was it just her thing of putting too much pressure on herself? Or was it that she was afraid of failure?

*All of those things, she thought bitterly. Face it, girl: you’re just that f*cked up.*

She sighed. There was really no point in this brooding. She would find out what fate was awaiting her soon enough.

She unglued herself from the tree and walked back to the blanket to rejoin her family, who has moved on to some lighter topics, thank god. They all could use some more relaxing time.

* The alarm clock went off at five thirty in the morning. Actually, *all* the alarm clocks went off at five thirty. Six women reached out to turn them off and various morning grumbles and yawns filled the room. They were back at Nellis Air Force Base, in the shared lodging they had been housed at back when they had just joined the program. Their weeklong shore leave was over. Everybody used it to visit their families; three of the six women were married, one of them even had a child. Alice wondered how she was dealing with it. Long-distance relationships must have been difficult enough, but being a mother and spending weeks or months at a time away…? *You’re such a hypocrite,* Alice thought to herself as she scrambled off the bed and stumbled along to the shower. *You don’t have a problem with men being away weeks at a time.* Her father was like that, after all; he served on a carrier, and that meant months apart, with only phone calls to alleviate the feeling of abandonment. The Internet usage wasn’t as widespread back then and they only got a modem a couple of months before dad’s death. They were pretty singular, though, because they didn’t move with dad to his home base. Mom didn’t want to. She loved LA, and she loved her work, and so their separation was longer than usual. Neither Alice nor Jake never really resented him for that, even though they were always sad to see him go. She wished for Fiona’s sake that her child would have the same attitude.

After morning shower, workout and another shower – to wash away the sweat – Alice went to the chow hall, where most of the other pilots were already eating their breakfast. All three groups have made it back to Nellis now. She looked at their faces, remembering their names as she made her way through the hall with a tray in her hands. It didn’t take her long to determine that Vasquez wasn’t there. That might have meant that he just didn’t get there yet, or… wasn’t that interesting?

She sat down next to Archer. He smiled at her and scooted closer.

“Hey, Boyd, long time no see!” He greeted her enthusiastically. “How have you been?”

“Not bad, thanks,” she replied evenly, still wondering about Vasquez at the back of her head. “Took the leave to see my family. How about you, sir?”
“Good, thanks. Been to see my folks, too. Where are you from?”

“City of Angels. You?”

He whistled.

“Nice. Me, I’m just from a small anonymous town up in Washington. The Academy was really the only option to get outta there. Worked out pretty well, methinks.” He chuckled. “I heard some stories about your exploits on the BC-303. They true?”

Alice looked down at her toast.

“Depends on what you heard.”

He laughed heartily.

“Ever so forthcoming, Boyd.” He stabbed his oatmeal with a spoon. “I guess I’ll just have to drag it out from you. Unless someone wants to fill me in?” He looked expectantly at the other people sitting at their table. As her luck would have it, there was her old frontseater among them, Spinner, one of those who actually seemed to like her a bit. He was still wearing a band aid on his forearm from where the electric shock burnt him after he took an energy blast right into his canopy during the same fight that Alice got hit, too. He was more than eager to tell the story, mainly because he had bragging rights to it himself – he had splashed two Death Gliders before he got shot. They went over that mission in such detail afterwards that any of their squadron could tell a minute by minute account, even if they were in a different flight and couldn’t possibly witness what the others were doing. Archer proved to be a good audience, too – exclaiming “no way!” and throwing significant looks in proper places. Actually, more people from other groups joined in to listen.

“I knew you had some game in you, LT,” the captain commented after the tale was over. “Good job.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled and quickly added: “What about you? Anything interesting happened?”

“You could say so!” Archer smiled proudly. “We’ve run an op, too. We didn’t get to hit anybody, but not for the lack of tryin’!”

“Do tell!” Spinner encouraged him and so Archer launched into his own story. Alice listened curiously. It boiled down to a scheduled mission which was run in collaboration with the Jaffa rebels. They wanted to lure out a Goa’uld who was hiding on one of the occupied planets; he didn’t have a mothership, but he commandeered a small wing of Al’kesh that were terrorizing the inhabitants, keeping them from a full-on rebellion. They staged a fight over the planet, and soon enough the Goa’uld’s vessels appeared nearby, trying to assess what was going on. At the same time, the Jaffa rebels on the planet started a regular uprising. As soon as the Goa’uld figured out it was a trap, he tried to get back to the planet, but there were allied Jaffa ships on his way now. They took some of the Al’kesh out, others were successfully overtaken by rebels. All in all, the humans didn’t have to fire a single live shot – such was the deal, they’d only be there for the staging and would hang back, ready to help if it was needed. Apparently it was important to the Jaffa leaders to do stuff themselves.

“Nice,” Spinner admitted after Archer finished. “But ours was better.”

“You got shot and almost crashed. I fail to see how that is better.”

“I splashed two hostiles!”
"Yeah, but you got shot and almost crashed." Archer grinned teasingly. "That goes for both of you heroes."

Alice rolled her eyes. She decided she heard enough so she stood up.

"You done yet?" Archer eyed her tray, still almost full. "You gotta eat, you know."

"Yes, mommy," she mumbled, walking away. Her stomach was a bit unruly and she didn’t really feel hungry. She guessed that must have been the nerves.

She heard him chuckle after her.

She definitely liked this guy, but he was annoying as hell sometimes.

She didn’t have to wait long for the briefing. It was scheduled for eight in the morning and was held in the same room as the initial program presentation, all those weeks ago. She noted with mixed feelings, as she entered the room and did a quick sweep of now-familiar faces, that Vasquez was still not there.

She sat at the back, again. Archer took a seat next to her on one side, and Spinner on the other. That made her feel a bit awkward, but it was nice, nevertheless.

A hush fell on the gathered pilots when Colonel Cox appeared behind the speaker’s pulpit again, just like before. Only this time nobody bothered coming to attention for him. By now, they all knew him pretty well; he would’ve just waved them to sit back down again anyway.

"Good morning," he said in a clear voice. "Welcome back to Nellis, everyone. I will keep this short. You have now been through a rigorous training, and then each of you got two tours at McMurdo, Groom Lake and aboard the Prometheus. Throughout all that, your performance and attitude have been assessed and evaluated by all your commanders and instructors. We have now came to our conclusions and made the selections. We already know what is each of your individual assignment going to be. In the course of the day, you will find out as well. We will ask each of you for a private conversation, during which you will be given a general grade and some feedback on how we think you fared during the past four months. At the end of this meeting you will be informed about your future assignment. We expect everyone to take it with grace." He paused, throwing them a long look, lingering on no one in particular, but obviously anticipating some resistance. Nobody wanted to get stuck at McMurdo or on some remote off-world base that never saw any action at all. "You are allowed to ask for reassignment. If you do, your case will be reviewed, but we can’t promise any result that will satisfy you. You can also ask to be excluded from the 302 program altogether, if you wish. Nobody will force you to stay against your will."

Well, that was new.

"Tomorrow you will start moving to the base of your permanent assignment. We expect the initial phase of the move to be concluded within three days. Of course all normal rules apply, including family relocation as needed. That means, of course, Groom Lake facility for those of you who will end up on the Prometheus or the X-304."

He didn’t mention McMurdo, but Alice couldn’t imagine any possibility to move anyone there permanently. Interesting, though: how they wanted to solve that? She wondered what she’d do if she pulled that assignment. Would she quit the program? Probably not. She’d stay, hoping there would be an opening somewhere else and putting in for reassignment as soon as there was. How long could that take? She didn’t know, but she shivered at the very thought of going back to that place. Cold, way too cold.
“The details of each individual assignment will be shared with you during the meeting, including deployment lengths, relocation options, and so on.” Cox smiled tightly. “You’ve done a good job, gentlemen. You should be proud of yourselves. You are the first group to ever go through this new 302 recruitment program. We’ve learned a lot in the process. It will be tweaked and improved for future groups, but you’ve done it. You are now part of the strict elite of no more than sixty people who ride the best fighters this planet ever produced.”

Sixty? Sixty? There were thirty people in this room; was it possible that there were only thirty other 302 pilots? Shit, they weren’t kidding when they said they were short on personnel.

“That is all. Dismissed.” Cox finished, nodded to them and disappeared in the door. An eerie silence fell on the group. This time, no one really felt like discussing the options; everybody was antsy to find out their assignments.

Soon enough Alice discovered she wouldn’t have to wait too much; the first person they asked was Adams, which meant they were going to go in alphabetical order by their last names. That meant Alice would come fourth, after Adams, Archer and Bennet.

They were waiting in the chow hall, sitting at a table with Archer and Spinner and a couple of others, not really talking about anything that mattered. About fifteen minutes after Adams went in, an airman came to take Archer. The captain made a face at them as he was leaving. Alice hid a snicker. Sometimes he was even worse than her brother, and that was a true accomplishment.

It was almost exactly half an hour later when the same airman came for her. She was disappointed; she had hoped Archer would find his way back to the hall to share some insight. She took a deep breath as she stood before the door to the room where the conversations were taking place. The timing was almost perfect; it wasn’t even a minute after she arrived when the door opened and Bennet went out. His expression was a curious mix of smugness and dissatisfaction. Alice wondered briefly what that meant, but then it was time for her to enter the room.

Unsurprisingly, there were three men sitting at the table, opposite her: Cox, Bolton and Espinoza. The latter two smiled at Alice as she made her way to them and stood at attention, saluting. All three returned the salute mechanically, and Bolton gestured for her to sit down.

“Hello, Lieutenant,” Cox began, looking down at his notes. “How are you feeling today?”

Damn pleasantries. She just wanted to get it over with!

“Fine, thank you, sir. A bit anxious,” she admitted. “And you?”

“Still fine,” Cox replied, his eyes still on his papers. “Although I imagine by the end of the day I’m gonna hate the living guts of anyone who comes through this door.”

Alice nodded sympathetically.

“You don’t have anything to be anxious about, LT,” Espinoza said in his usual quiet voice, smiling encouragingly. “Everybody in this group did a splendid job.”

Alice got hung up at the word “everybody” for a second. The continuous absence of Vasquez was screaming to her, but it wasn’t the time to bring that up.

“Which only made our job harder,” Bolton added. “We had to think not only of each of your performances, but also the unique skillset you bring to the table and how to best use it.”

Alice nodded a bit nervously. He was mentioning that for a reason, but was it bad or good for her?
“First of all,” Cox continued. “We would like to share with you the grade that we used to assess your overall performance. The actual assessment was a complex combination of factors, which gave us a percentage. Based on that, we have determined a mean score and thus divided all of you into four groups: below average, average, above average and outstanding. That required, respectively, below seventy percent, seventy to eighty-four, eighty-five to ninety-four and ninety-five to one hundred percent.” He paused and finally looked up from his notes. Alice held her breath. “You have scored ninety-five percent, which means you have been graded as outstanding.”

The silence that fell on the room after that statement was almost palpable. The three officers were looking at her with varying degrees of curiosity and encouragement, but she froze. Impossible. No fucking way. They must have made a mistake.

Throughout all her life, Alice has always been the smartest kid in the class – or nearly so. She’s read the most books, had the biggest theoretical knowledge, remembered most details. There was no hiding the fact that she was gifted, and she knew that. But her parents made sure she also knew that intelligence was not all that counted. That was a precious bit of wisdom, but it had trapped her in her own head. She was always the youngest, the least experienced, with the least practical knowledge. She often felt like an alien in any group she formally belonged to. School, college, even the Air Force – she was always an outsider looking in. A physically unimposing, quiet introvert, she had never gained the kind of confidence that other people seemed to have naturally; despite her brilliant mind, she had always felt insecure in her own skin. She was constantly worrying about how people viewed her, and what they thought of her; it wasn’t vanity, it was fear. She was always afraid that she didn’t belong, didn’t fit in, that she was somehow worse, not deserving of acceptance, a freak, a phony. The very thing that made her special – her brain – was also what made her incompatible with other people. She just wasn’t seeing the world in the same spectrum; there was something wrong, a glitch in her mind. She couldn’t understand people, and she assumed that they would have the same problem with her; it certainly seemed so in the past. And so she learned to hide just how smart she was, offering her opinions rarely, and hardly ever making real connections with people, for fear of being exposed. Of course, she wasn’t doing it consciously, at least not all the time. But the more she was withdrawing into herself, the less she believed she was special in a good way. And so whenever someone was praising her, or expressing their appreciation, it always surprised her, and pleased her in an unhealthy way; she could almost sense her heart swelling with the size of her ego. She made a conscious effort to remain humble, even as she felt like she was about to burst with pride.

The same thing was happening now; as the news sank in – you have been graded as outstanding – the disbelief gave way to that feeling of a balloon growing inside her. That was a good metaphor, because like a balloon, she knew her pride could be burst with just one sharp sting.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she managed after half a minute of flabbergasted silence, the officers staring at her. “Thank you.”

A big, affectionate smile broke on Bolton’s face.

“Don’t thank us,” he said. “You deserved it. Every step of the way, you defied the assumptions made about you and delivered top quality performance. Thank yourself.”

Alice couldn’t find her voice to respond. She felt overwhelmed.

“There were things that fell short, of course.” Thank god for Cox; he could be depended on for bringing her back to the Earth from cloud nine. “Especially at the beginning, during the basic training. You need to work on your fitness and in particular hand-to-hand combat. We know your... physicality might not be exactly helping, but this is important. It can mean the difference between
life and death someday.”

Alice nodded fervently. If they were saying that, and if that grade was real, then maybe, just maybe she will get assigned to... Please, please, please. Pleaaaase.

“There was also the matter of your... ehm... conflict with Captain Vasquez,” Bolton put in, his voice grave and serious.

She tried to adopt a sufficiently contrite expression, but she was failing.

“We have only recently learned of the scope of that... conflict,” Bolton continued. “Frankly, I am surprised you haven’t brought that up yet. I mean you must have noticed he’s not here.”

_Not exactly something I’d like to attract your attention to during my performance review,_ she thought, frowning. How to phrase it?

“I didn’t think it was any of my business, sir.” She decided to say. It was part of the truth, anyway.

“Well, then you might be interested to find that Captain Vasquez was dismissed from the 302 program.”

Alice didn’t answer, looking into Bolton’s eyes, her face impassive.

“You’re not surprised,” he stated.

She didn’t reply to that, either, just maintained eye contact.

“So you must have suspected that he was the culprit in that sabotage case,” Bolton puffed. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did not have any evidence, sir,” she said, dropping her eyes to look at her hands. “It was his word against mine, and everybody knew we weren’t on the best of terms.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Well, he is going to face consequences of his actions now. You should probably know that he admitted he wanted to lay the blame on you.”

“It wasn’t the smartest plan in the world,” Cox interjected. “But I was glad to learn that at least one of you was mature enough not to get pulled into this childish feud.”

Alice suppressed a sardonic smile. _A fucking fratboy, that’s what he was._

“Your way of dealing with this conflict was also taken under consideration during the final assessment,” Bolton went back to the original topic. “As well as other things. You have always done your duties with utmost diligence and you could be depended upon by your colleagues, even though there was some obvious... resistance at having a person your age join such an elite group.”

“Which only proves that we were right to include you in the first place.” Espinoza spoke up, smiling at her again. Damn, she liked this guy. Bolton and Cox were great, too, but there was just something about Espinoza that felt very... genuine. “And your exploits highlight your skills.”

“That thing you did when your instructor cut you off comms during one of your first rides in the 302 was very impressive,” Cox agreed. “Proves you can think on your feet, make snap decisions based on limited data, _and_ that you know the plane damn well. Very creative, that was.”
Alice blushed at the memory. It didn’t feel creative then; it felt scary and desperate.

“Of course the way you handled yourself during our skirmish with the Death Gliders was one of the deciding factors, too.” Bolton made an indeterminate gesture with his hand that could mean literally anything. “As first missions go, that one was pretty fucking successful.”

Alice fought hard not to raise her eyebrows at the swearword.

“Oh of course it would have been better if you didn’t get hit,” the lieutenant colonel continued stoically. “But you didn’t crash and the objective has been achieved.”

“I studied that mission pretty closely,” Espinoza put in, a little crease between his brows forming. “And I have to say, what impressed me the most was that you were able to leave the atmosphere seemingly without problems.”

Alice looked at him in confusion. Well, it wasn’t easy to get back to the ship on one engine, but she didn’t think it was such a great feat.

“You have to understand, this is still a very new piece of technology, and a very precious one. Very expensive, too. No stress tests on one engine were performed before, but we all know the specs well enough to realize that your machine in that moment barely had enough power to reach the orbit. I doubt anyone else could have made the calculations you did on the fly, without aid of a computer.”

Okay, that was something she hasn’t considered before, but now that Espinoza mentioned it, Alice realized just how complex her path to safety had been then; calculating the exact times when she had to engage aerospikes and the rocket booster while taking the different gravitational pull and air resistance of the alien planet into consideration was certainly not something someone less knowledgeable about physics could do. And it wasn’t only knowledge that counted; the ability to perform complicated computation in such a short time was one of the perks of her freak brain.

“The CI engineers are testing appropriate software now,” Cox said, looking at his notes again. “They want to introduce it at the beginning of the new year.”

“What will the software do?” Alice asked curiously.

“It will calculate the energy outputs necessary for all maneuvers in changing environments and under all possible circumstances,” Cox explained. “Basically if you’re over a planet with twice the standard Earth’s gravity and more air resistance, and your aerospikes are shot, the program will make an automatic diagnosis and will calculate for you the timing and sequence of maneuvers you need to get out to the orbit. And such.”

Wow. That actually sounded amazing. And in a way, she inspired that improvement. That was a nice thought.

“Quite frankly we were all impressed with your… willingness to learn,” Bolton put in. “And the speed with which you seem to acquire new knowledge. Doctor Novak spoke very highly of you.”

“And so did Doctor Decker,” Espinoza agreed in his usual calm and quiet way which seemed to express so much more than Bolton’s emphatic gesturing. His odd cadences of speech now seemed familiar and welcome to Alice. “She said your ability to comprehend even very complex science and engineering was rather remarkable.”

“None of the other pilots from your group showed any inclination to learning more than just riding the 302.” Bolton tapped his fingers on a sheet of paper in front of him. From where she sat, Alice
could just make out the upside-down letters; a list of names. “There were a couple of people more like you in the two other groups, but none had quite the chance to showcase their newfound knowledge in such a spectacular way as you did. Colonel Pendergast was very impressed.”

Alice’s lips twitched, but she suppressed the smile. It could have been misconstrued, she thought. At any rate, Pendergast didn’t look all that impressed to her as he was leaving the engine room, the last time she saw him. But then his ship was in distress, and naturally he’d been preoccupied by other things.

“Given all that, our initial decision was very easy,” Cox took up the conversation after a brief silence. He’d looked at his watch and a little crease appeared on his forehead. They were probably getting late on the schedule – they predicted twenty minutes per person, undoubtedly. “Clearly, your unique skillset will be best used aboard a ship, despite your relative inexperience.”

FUCK YES. Alice yelled the words inwardly in her head. It was happening! She was going to be assigned to one of the spaceships! Of course, she’d prefer to end up on the X-304. Its design was far more advanced than that of the Prometheus, and its first mission was already set... to go to another galaxy, to help search for the lost city of Atlantis, to find out what fate had befallen the two hundred people who bravely stepped through the Gate all these months ago, perhaps to save them. A whole new galaxy to explore, Alice thought, trying to keep her face impassive and failing. Her cheeks were red and her eyes glinted with excitement, her body tensed as she leaned in, awaiting the final verdict. Please.

“The ultimate decision lay with the ship’s commanders and their 302 squadron leaders, of course,” Cox waved to the two men sitting on each side of him. “And I have to say, all of them wanted you.” His eyes twinkled in a way very unlike him. “But Colonel Pendergast was the most persuasive.”

Oh. Alice felt disappointed, in spite of herself. Dammit! T’was so close.

“I am pleased to inform you,” Bolton said officially, “that you have been assigned to 201st Space Fighter Squadron, housed aboard the BC-303 Prometheus. Would you like to contest that decision?”

Would she? Could she? She wanted to get aboard the X-304 so bad… and from what they just told her, there actually was a chance they could reconsider. Could they? Would she dare try? Suck it up, Boyd, she thought, miffed at herself. As far as yesterday you didn’t believe you’d get aboard any ship. Prometheus is a good assignment. Don’t complain, now.

She shook her head, still not convinced, but determined not to make a spectacle of herself. It was better to accept and be grateful for what came her way.

“Perfect!” Bolton exclaimed and grinned at her. “Now just for a few details... we don’t have much time so if you have additional questions, they will have to wait till tonight, after we get through all of you.” He nodded to Cox, who was looking at his wristwatch again. “The permanent base of operations for the Prometheus is in Groom Lake facility. As you know, it’s a bit isolated…”

That was putting it mildly; the place was in the middle of nowhere.

“...So most of the personnel lives on site. The housing is quite good. Of course, you can choose to live off-base, and you will get the usual allowance, but seeing as the closest town is like two hours drive…”

“On-site housing sounds good,” she assured him. Not that it made that big of a difference. They’d
be deployed for most of the time anyway.

“Good. Do you have anyone you would like to relocate with you?”

“No, sir.” She kept the reply short; there was no reason to tarry on this. They all knew perfectly well that she was single, with no dependents. Having a family at twenty-two was not unheard of in the service, but usually not amongst officers; in fact most officers at that age were just graduating the Academy (or ROTC or Officer School, but compared to the number of people in the Academy, those were minorities).

Bolton nodded emphatically. The other two officers were looking at them silently.

“You know, of course, that assignment aboard the *Prometheus* means long deployments in space, with little Earth duty,” her new squadron commander resumed. “The standard is to spend four weeks in space and one week in the base. This is more dictated by the need to repair, maintain and restock the ship than anything else. The X-304 will have much longer time-in-space than the old BC-303.”

That made sense. The older generation cruiser, despite being retrofitted with Asgard technology, would not be able to carry as much supplies or go without repairs and maintenance as long as its newer sister. Alice wondered what they would be doing during their stay on Earth. It’s not like they’d get shore leave every time they’d get down to the planet, after all.

“However, the ship might actually be deployed in space far longer, or shorter, depending on her duties. And we go wherever she goes.”

That was quite obvious. Alice didn’t know why he’d even mention that. Bolton went quiet for a moment after that statement, looking intently at her. She returned his gaze, feigning calmness.

“Our time is up,” Bolton said finally. “If you have any more questions, I’ll be available tonight. If not, you can go and find Master Sergeant Luton, he’s charged with overseeing all formalities. He’ll give you paperwork to sign and will tell you what’s next. Any questions?”

“No, sir.”

“Good.” Bolton grinned again, and Alice saw that Espinoza was smiling, too, a little wistfully. *I know, Colonel, I’d prefer to be under you too.* She almost snickered at her own double entendre. “Good job, Lieutenant. I’m glad to have you on my team. Dismissed.”

She stood and straightened up to come to attention and saluted the three superior officers. They saluted back casually, she turned on her heel and left the room, another person already waiting at the door to enter, his face showing just a shadow of nervousness.

*

Before all the paperwork had been finished and Alice managed to install herself quite comfortably in an apartment she’d been assigned at Groom Lake, the *Prometheus* sailed back to space, picking up her patrolling duty. The ship had stayed in the orbit for a few days while Bolton had been at Nellis, but then he was promptly beamed back aboard and the BC-303 went away. The 302 pilots must have been really stretched thin – there were only six of them, for eight machines. Six more people would be joining that squadron now – including Alice. There simply weren’t enough pilots
who could fly 302s to fill in all sixteen places available for the squadron. The X-304 took priority; she could hold sixteen fighters, which meant thirty-two pilots, if fully staffed; there were only about sixty F-302 drivers in total, and there needed to be some posted at McMurdo, Groom Lake and in some off-world bases as well. But the X-304’s first mission was to try and find and possibly rescue the Atlantis expedition; that was obviously not going to be easy, and the more experienced personnel they’ve had, the higher the chances of success were. But it meant that twelve people would be manning eight fighters on the Prometheus; basically, six machines would be operating at all times, and two would be left for whoever was up and able to get to them in an event a full squadron was needed. There would be more pilots trained for F-302s, but the groups would be smaller, they were told, and the training and assessment different than what they went through. Alice understood that they were guinea pigs and the experiment didn’t go the way the talking heads from Washington had planned. She wondered if the Vasquez situation had anything to do with them rethinking their strategy.

And so Alice spent her first three weeks after getting her new assignment on Earth, while the ship was finishing up her deployment tour. That didn’t mean she had nothing to do, of course; all of them staying in the base were assigned temporary duties. To Alice’s amazement and utter contentment, her provisional function was helping with the X-304; she was counted as one of Doctor Decker’s engineers and under her instruction, the young lieutenant was installing new features and performing stress tests on ship’s core components.

When not aboard the X-304 (and Doctor Decker often had to shoo her away when Alice’s shift ended; if it were up to her, Alice would spend all her free time in the engine room, too), Alice tried to boost her hand-to-hand combat skills and overall physical condition; she had taken Cox’s words seriously. She remembered the SG-10, stranded off-world, trying to make their way back to the Gate… she was close to crashing there herself. She realized that, even if she had survived the crash, her chances of staying alive and making it back to Earth were minuscule. If she could increase them even slightly by doing some additional training, it was worth the time and effort.

She also spent a lot of time hanging out with Archer and Spinner, both of whom got assigned to the X-304 and were awaiting ship’s completion. She felt mildly envious of that fact, and it seemed unfair to her, since they got lower assessment grades; but she liked the two of them too much and so she forced herself to ignore these feelings. They were the only ones who even wanted to spend time with her. Although, the competition finished, the tensions within the squadrons largely subsided, they weren’t the kind of tight-knit group that was characteristic for Air Force, at least not yet.

And so it was with some uneasiness that Alice said goodbye to Archer and Spinner, when the Prometheus finally arrived and they were about to get aboard. She was leaving behind two people who were the closest she had to friends in the Force. She wasn’t sure when would be the next time she’d find someone to whom she could get close enough.

Life aboard the Prometheus, now that they were finally part of the permanent squadron, was only slightly different than before. There were less of them, so only six fighters were constantly manned, while the two others were to be used only when necessary and if there was an available pilot. That meant that, even when she was not on duty, if there was a combat situation, Alice had a chance of taking the first seat, if only she was close enough to get in and make the sortie.

Another difference was that now there was another female pilot in the squadron; Fiona Trove had also been assigned to the Prometheus. Alice quietly wondered at her decision to stick by that assignment; Fiona was the one who had a small child. At the same time, Alice kept chiding herself for being a chauvinist hypocrite; two or three male members of her squadron also had kids, but for some reason this didn’t bother her as much. She supposed it was because the society’s
stereotypical standards left some imprint on her, like it or not. She strained to keep an open mind about it.

“My husband took a paternity leave when Ridley was born,” Fiona told Alice one night; the young lieutenant purposefully steered the conversation towards that topic. “I was back to work within two weeks. Of course, I had to wait to be cleared to fly, but I figured the sooner I’d come back, the sooner I could drive my fighter again. Heiko and I had made a pact when we married. He knew full well I wouldn’t give up my ambitions just because I had a kid. He’s a good husband. He understands.”

“What does Heiko do?”

“He’s a court clerk. Very boring, if you ask me, but he likes it, and it’s a stable income... I mean if anything happens to me, he and Ridley can survive on his salary,” she clarified in a dry tone. Alice didn’t comment on that. It might have been a tad calculating and cold to think that, but it was also practical. She wondered if her own father thought about that, too. Mom, when she was still working, made more money than he did in the Navy. Her income was not as predictable as his, but it was more than enough to provide for their family of three, after Dad died. Of course, soon thereafter Jake enlisted to the Marines and Alice went away to college herself – and on full academic scholarship, too. But that was also when Mom started coming apart, and now all the money she’d saved up had already been used up to pay her medical bills and to cover her continuous stay at the Hallaway Treatment Centre. Mom didn’t know that; in one of her more lucid moments, she had given Power of Attorney to both Alice and Jake, and then as she sank slowly deeper and deeper into delusions and depression, she became disinterested in her own affairs and well-being. Alice and Jake never burdened her with problems such as the scarcity of money; instead, they took to funding the medical and residential bills for their mother themselves, with some help from their two uncles. They joked between themselves that they worked so much, they actually didn’t have anything to spend their salaries on anyway. Which, in Alice’s case at least, was becoming quite true: she was going to be spending four weeks at a time, more or less, in space, on a carrier where everything from food to clothing and entertainment was provided and paid for by Uncle Sam. She paid next to nothing for the small apartment she’d got at the Groom Lake base, and even when she wasn’t deployed, there really wasn’t that much at the base she could do, except perhaps get drunk in the club, which she wouldn’t do anyway. Additionally, of course, she’s just graduated to the higher pay grade, having become a first lieutenant. She also got a salary bump for her new assignment on the Prometheus: she was now eligible for additions for Hazardous Duty, Hardship Duty and Imminent Danger Pay, along with other more standard allowances.

And in imminent danger they were, indeed. It hadn’t been until a couple of weeks after moving to Groom Lake that the six of them had received the exciting news: the Prometheus, now fully equipped with the Asgard reactor core and thoroughly strain-tested, was going to attempt the jump from the Milky Way to the Pegasus Galaxy – the very one that the X-304 was being built for. The mission was to be headed by General Hammond himself and carried out by a handful of his hand-picked crew. Because there weren’t any pilots to spare, however, Alice’s entire new squadron was to participate in the operation; it would take a few months to get them to the Pegasus galaxy, and who knew what they found there? Were the members of the Atlantis expedition even alive, still? Was there anything to find? Nobody knew the answers to those questions, which was, of course, why they were going in the first place. Each pilot was given an option to stay back for that mission; none took it. In fact, two other pilots who were initially assigned to the X-304 came aboard in order to ensure that all eight fighters were operational at all times during what everybody was expecting would be a long and difficult journey with an uncertain fate awaiting them at the end of it.

For such an immensely important undertaking, the mission had been prepared in quite a rush; when
Alice asked him, Bolton told her that originally they were planning to wait until the X-304 was ready, but the construction was lagging behind for some unforeseeable reasons, and the decision-makers up top decided to use the *Prometheus* instead, as soon as the new Asgard components – especially the hyperdrive – were thoroughly tested. There was also a matter of knowing where to go; it wasn’t enough to determine there were headed for the Pegasus galaxy, they needed exact coordinates. It took time to pinpoint the location of the planet where the Atlantis expedition went to, and the mission was put together hastily as soon as they found that out.

So it was only two and a half weeks of dull patrolling duty for Alice before the *Prometheus* touched down at Groom Lake to restock. They were back up in space within a day; and as they sped away from the Earth on sublight thrusters, every crew member was called into the conference room – there were so few of them that they fitted in easily – and General Hammond greeted them and thanked for their willingness to risk so much. Then they dispersed and went back to their duties.

Alice, when not out on a sortie, was assigned to the engine room, to her own utter amazement. Doctor Novak told her in secret that she’d been the one to request the young lieutenant as her helper, and Alice was indeed very grateful. This let her spend time learning all kinds of stuff about the ship; Novak knew the cruiser better than anyone.

It was barely the second day of their travel, and they were still well within the Milky Way, when Alice found herself in the chow hall after her shift had just ended.

“Crew rest doesn’t mean continue working,” Novak had told her with a frown on her face. “Get outta here.”

“But I like working here,” Alice had protested, but to no avail. Novak had shooed her away, so the young lieutenant had decided to go grab something to eat.

The chow hall was almost empty, except for four guys in black uniforms, enjoying a meal at one of the tables. They were one of the SG units, brought aboard for security and in case they were needed along the way – or at their destination, of course. SG-3, Alice remembered, led by Colonel Reynolds.

Alice stood with her tray, undecided. Should she just take a seat somewhere else? Or should she attempt to bond with fellow officers, albeit from a different unit? In the end, her curiosity prevailed and she made her way to their table. She’s never met an actual SG team, and from what she heard, the number three was one of the best.

“Hi,” she breathed coming to a stop nearby, forcing herself to speak, her heart beating hard. *Why* was socializing so difficult? She could fly a fighter jet into battle, no issue, but anytime she was about to meet new people, she felt like running away and hiding somewhere dark and lonely. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all,” the colonel said with an inviting smile. They all threw her assessing looks, making her feel uncomfortable. She nodded and sat down, her tray clattering a bit when she lay it on the table a little too fast. “I’m Albert Reynolds, and these are Jake Bosworth, Andy Baker and Todd Mooney. Who are you?” He sneaked a look at the single silver bar on her shoulder.


“I’d say,” Mooney barked, eyeing her insignia. “You a bit young to be a first lieutenant, ain’t you?”
She smiled shyly.

“I am unusually young, yes.” Mooney was clearly older than her and only a second lieutenant. She quickly changed the subject. “Jake,” she said nodding at Senior Airman Bosworth. “My brother’s name is Jake, too. He’s a marine, though.”

“Your brother is a jarhead? I’m so sorry!” Jake Bosworth smiled broadly and then remembered himself. “Ma’am.”

She rolled her eyes at the formality and decided to change the subject again.

“I’ve never met anyone from the Stargate Command before,” she admitted, lifting a piece of toast to her mouth. “What’s it like?”

“Awesome,” Bosworth and Mooney both said in the same moment. All four of them laughed at that.

“Kids are right,” Reynolds agreed. “The shit we’ve seen is unlike anything you could imagine. God knows it’s dangerous, too, but I can’t think of anything else I’d want to do.”

“Hell yeah,” Baker chimed in, mouth full of oatmeal. He swallowed hard before he continued. “It’s defo worth the risk. I’ll never forget the first time I stepped through that Gate…”

“Maybe because you tripped and fell head-first into the wormhole,” his team leader howled with laughter at the memory. “You should have seen the faces of the Jaffa rebels we were meeting on the other side when he sprawled on the ground before them, eagle-style.”

Baker was laughing, too.

“I was so confused for a second I didn’t know where we was, sir!” He remembered. “I actually drew my rifle at ‘em…”

“Thankfully we knew them before, or we’d have a lot of explaining to do…” Reynolds finished the story, grinning. Alice realized with surprise that she was feeling quite comfortable now with these guys. They had an easy camaraderie going on, rules relaxed to actually allow some real human interaction. She figured the normal bond that grew between team mates must have been strengthened by the dangers they’d faced together. But they didn’t close themselves up to others; they embraced her with an unusual openness. At least, unusual to her – she was more used to being ignored or even shunned. She’s always thought that it was normal; after all, she was an outsider. A kid at the adults’ table, she’s always thought of herself. But maybe it wasn’t all that natural as she’d thought? Or maybe these guys were just that nice. That seemed more probable.

They continued their meal, the SG-3 teasing each other good-naturedly, pulling Alice into their stories and their comradeship, despite her general reticence. As was her habit, she spoke little, but listened eagerly and smiled quite more frequently than usual. Eventually, though, they finished eating and she bade them goodnight; she had to use her crew rest for some actual rest, after all.

* *

She had been asleep for a few hours when she suddenly woke with a start. It was dark in the room, so she fumbled for a switch. Squinting in the light too bright for her unprepared eyes, she looked at
the clock and realized barely half of her off-shift time had passed. Fiona was snoring lightly in her cot on the other side of the cabin. Alice didn’t know what woke her. For a moment, she lay on her bed, wondering if she would be able to fall back asleep, but she felt wide awake, so she scrambled off and went to take a shower. She was just stepping out of it when an alarm sounded off on the ship-wide comms. It only lasted a few seconds and went dead, and it wasn’t an emergency siren or a call to battle stations, but she was curious, anyway. She dressed hastily and went out to the corridors, her hair still damp. She took out a hair tie and swiftly put it up in a bun, marching to the engine room. Doctor Novak was not in, the sensors and computers manned instead by Technical Sergeant Hicks. He was by far not as fond of Alice as his civilian colleague, but he couldn’t disrespect her. Despite being some ten years younger, she outranked him, after all.

“What’s going on?” She asked as she entered the engine room, Hicks sitting behind the control post. “What was the alarm for?”

“We’re making a detour, ma’am,” the technical sergeant answered, barely looking up from his computer screens to salute offhandedly. She replied with the same gesture impatiently. “The word is we’ve received a distress call nearby and we’re going to check it out.”

“Oh,” Alice breathed, raising her eyebrows. “Wonder if they will need the 302s?”

“No idea, ma’am.” Hicks shrugged, throwing her a bleak look. She rolled her eyes and turned on the additional computer, just to check the engines’ status. They were well within the green for all marks. For a while, there was silence in the room. Then Alice sighed and flicked the screen off and left without another word. As she strode across the near-empty corridors, she felt the ship jump out of the hyperspace. It was an odd sensation, like being suspended in motion for half a second.

She made her way to the 302 bay, where nearly all other pilots were already assembled in little groups of three or four and talking vividly. She walked up to Bolton and two other officers.

“We’ve taken a detour to answer a distress call,” Bolton told her unnecessarily. “We’re waiting to hear if we’ll be needed.”

“That is unlikely, sir.” Fiona said, joining them. “I heard rings activate as I walked by. My money is on SG-3 checking out whatever sent the signal.”

Bolton nodded.

“At any rate, we’ll be told…” A strange noise cut him off; kind of electrical, high-pitched sound. They all turned to see a deck crew member fall, odd blue sparks dancing over his body for a split second. Then they saw a dark-clad figure entering the bay; shiny black armor and helmet covering all of its body. Although she’s never seen it before, Alice recognized the creature at once from a recent mission report she’s read.

“A Kull warrior!” She breathed and turned around to run away – she didn’t have any arms on her, she figured running was the most sensible thing to do. But then she heard the strange sound again and it was like an electrical current went through her entire body, except it wasn’t electricity. And it hurt like hell. Her knees buckled under her and she keeled over, her vision blurry, but with the last remnants of consciousness she saw a group of four pilots, all poised to run, being hit with a single blast of energy, the blue sparks engulfing them all, and then her eyelids dropped and she swam away into darkness.

*
She came to gradually. First sensation she felt was pain; not the same searing stabbing as when she was shot, but rather a more systematic soreness, very much like after too much physical exertion – except then your head wasn’t usually cracking with what felt like a massive hangover. Then came the ability to move her extremities and finally, after another few seconds, she could open her eyes and sit up with a grunt. Jake Bosworth was leaning over her, his face screwed.

“You okay, ma’am?” He asked, concern plain in his voice.

“Fine,” she rasped and took his offered hand to hoist herself onto her legs. She swaggered a little and he steadied her with his other hand. “What happened?” And then she noticed the surroundings: the walls, painted reddish gold and etched with hieroglyphical markings, were sloping up to the ceiling, enclosing them in sort of a pyramid. All around crewmen were either laying or sitting on the floor, or just standing up. “Where are we?”

“We’re aboard an Al’kesh,” the senior airman reported. “We’ve been bested by a Kull warrior. We came to investigate the Al’kesh, and he ringed aboard the Prometheus. We couldn’t get back, he did something to the controls…” He waved over to a panel on the opposite wall. “And then he started ringing unconscious people in. The last group to come was General Hammond and the whole bridge crew. The only one we’re missing, apparently, is Doctor Jackson…”

Alice didn’t reply, but she wasn’t surprised. Obviously, the only member on the famed SG-1 would be the one to remain behind while the entire damn ship crew was captured, including the commanding general.

“We’re dead in the water,” Jake continued, his face still a mask of worry. “The Prometheus flew away, and this Al’kesh is damaged. We’re stuck in the middle of nowhere, ma’am.”

“Well, Airman, what is damaged can be fixed,” she said more confidently than she felt. “We’ll find a way. Where’s Doctor Novak?”

“Power room,” Bosworth pointed to a door leading out of the pyramid. “General Hammond had just been here to speak to her. He’s back at the bridge now, I think.”

Alice nodded and marched out of the room, looking around curiously. She’s never been aboard an alien vessel; it felt rather odd. It was very real; there was a strange, sort of powdery smell hanging around, the dark corridors lit by emergency lighting only – or maybe that was just standard Goa’uld brightness setting? She didn’t know. She stuck out her arm to touch the walls and feel their slippery, metallic texture. Definitely real. But at the same time it felt unreal. Like in a very involved, deep dream; everything seemed realistic, but there was a hint of untrue about it. She couldn’t reconcile these sensations.

She passed by several different empty rooms until she got to one which wasn’t. Familiar voices were coming from inside and as she entered, she marked the presence of Novak, Hicks and Reynolds without surprise.

“Alice, good to—” Novak started and then hiccupped loudly, clasping her hand on her mouth. She took a careful breath, and went on. “Good to see you. I hope you’re well enough to help us!”

“Of course, Doctor,” Alice assured her as she approached a wall full of sliding panels, one of them open, different colored crystals protruding from its base. “What would you like me to do?”

“We need to determine first what’s the extent of the damage,” the civilian said, and hiccupped...
again. She waved her hand toward one of the panels. “You can start there.”

Alice nodded and took out her tablet from a pocket. Thankfully, she’s had gone to the *Prometheus*’s engine room before heading to the 302 bay, and had grabbed the mini-computer from her room just in case. It was a small thing, barely larger than her hand, with a silvery string of cable attached to its side. The cable’s other end was split between several cords, each of them with a special tip that could be easily clipped to a crystal – or possibly other forms of technology too – to create an interface between alien and human instruments.

Alice slid open the panel Doctor Novak had pointed to her and hooked up the tablet. She then stood up and started methodically checking each of the crystals. It was surprisingly easy; although routines loaded onto them were in Goa’uld, the data extract was clear enough. It was quite a revelation for her, though she could have thought about it before; physics was a universal language. Additionally, the way the crystals operated was virtually the same as the ones aboard the *Prometheus*, which made sense, since the human vessel was largely based on Goa’uld (and through them, Ancient) technology.

It didn’t take the three of them long to figure out all that’s been wrong with the ship; they’ve rerouted power to some essential systems, but the hyperdrive and sublight engines were completely dead, their respective control crystals fried.

“Maybe they have some spare somewhere on the ship?” Hicks suggested without much conviction, and he and Alice left the room to try and search the Al’kesh. It wasn’t a big ship, and soon enough Hicks radioed to say he didn’t find anything.

“Nothing here, either,” Alice confirmed from the last room on her side of the vessel. “What about the cargo ship?” The news about their exact situation has already spread; the *Prometheus* gone, they were stranded in the middle of nowhere, but there was another ship nearby, even smaller than the Al’kesh and in worse condition still. “Maybe there will be something we could use there?”

Nobody replied and Alice sighed and slowly made her way back to the power room. Only Doctor Novak was in.

“Where’s the colonel?” Alice asked her, picking up her tablet and looking at the data. It would be so useful to know how these routines were written… surely there were ways to learn Goa’uld now, weren’t there? They’ve been fighting against them for so long, they must have made some kind of language course for all the scientists who worked on their technology, if no one else. She resolved to find that out as soon as they were back on the *Prometheus*… if they could make it back.

“He went to assist General Hammond,” Doctor Novak said and hiccuped loudly. Alice could almost tell the level of stress of the engineer based on the frequency and volume of her hiccups.

“General will attempt to extract the two crystals from the cargo ship. There’s no life support aboard,” she explained, seeing Alice’s raised eyebrow. “ Barely enough air for one person to sustain for a few minutes.”

“Oh. Why General, though? Why won’t Colonel Reynolds go? Or one of his men, someone… you know… younger?”

“General Hammond wants to do it,” Novak shrugged. “He’s a brave man.”

“That he is,” Alice agreed, and added in her head: *and stupid.* Didn’t he know how valuable he was? They needed him more than anyone else. If something were to happen to him it would be much worse than losing any other airman.
“I have to get to the bridge, will need to guide the general,” Novak said, putting her own tablet on top of a panel. “Stay here.”

Alice nodded and watched her leave the room. There really wasn’t anything she could do now but wait, so she concentrated on her instruments, trying to make sense of parts of the programming that seemed familiar and produced recognizable data. Hicks joined her a few moments later, asked for news and then sat down by the wall, eyes closed, visibly tired. Ten minutes had passed before Novak came back, holding two bright crystals, with Sergeant Harriman tailing her.

“He did it!” Alice exclaimed with delighted surprise.

“It was close,” Walter told her gravely. Novak took to replacing the crystals right away, then plugged her tablet to them and took some readings. Alice looked at her own instruments.

“Looks good,” she said after a minute or so. “I don’t see any interference with the power flow.”

“Me neither,” Novak agreed. “I think we’re good to go. Will you stay behind with Hicks and monitor the outputs and inputs? I need to get back on the bridge.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alice smiled. “Let’s get our ship back.”

“That’s the spirit.” Novak replied with a grin, then hiccupped, rolled her eyes at herself and left the room. Hicks came to stand in her place and took up her tablet without a word to Alice. She shook her head slightly and then sighed, focusing on the readings from crystals again.

She didn’t keep track of time, so she wasn’t sure how long it was when they entered, and then dropped out of hyperspace. But it was only a few moments after that when she heard her name over the radio.

“Boyd, reroute all auxiliary power to shields and weapons,” Colonel Reynolds’ voice creaked through the transceiver.

“Yes, sir,” she replied and immediately tapped the correct combination into her tablet. “Power rerouted, sir.”

Hicks threw her a dirty look, visibly irked that the colonel called on her to do what was essentially Hicks’s job – he was, after all, Novak’s stand-in. He didn’t dare say anything, though.

Alice concentrated on her data. There were now serious power fluctuations in the two systems Colonel Reynolds mentioned. Were they in a battle right now? It certainly seemed so; the shields were getting strained in irregular intervals, and the weapons were drawing much more power than usual, not continuously though, but in bursts. It took only a few minutes to calm down and the energy inputs and outputs came back to normal levels. Then the communication array came alive for a short time and soon thereafter, Doctor Novak found her way back into the room.

“We’ve caught up to the *Prometheus,*” she said happily. “We can ring aboard as soon as Colonel Reynolds’ team gives us a green light. We get to keep this little baby, too!”

“That’s great,” Alice agreed. “What happened with the *Prometheus*? Was Doctor Jackson able to defeat the Kull Warrior single-handedly? Mind you, I wouldn’t be surprised…”

“I don’t know the whole story,” Novak shook her head. “And right now, it will have to wait. *Prometheus* got it bad from these Goa’uld bombers, our first priority now is to fix her. Take your stuff and let’s get back to our ship, both of you.”
Fixing the *Prometheus* was easier said than done. The ship sustained serious damage from the enemy Al’kesh; shields and hyperdrive were totally busted, but what was even worse was hull damage. Alice took an F-302 out to assess its extent and went back to Novak to report it didn’t look good.

“We can seal off a few sections to be able to jump in to the hyperspace,” she told her with a frown. “But it will not be enough to get us through months of journey between galaxies.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Novak agreed. “I’m pretty sure we can get the shields and the hyperdrive working again, but I’ll be recommending to General Hammond that we get back to Earth as soon as possible.”

And so Novak, Hicks and Alice set off to work on fixing the two vital systems. It took them several hours of hard, concentrated work, but finally they managed to get them online. Then Novak sent Hicks to get some rest – he’s been on duty longer than either of them – and went herself to inform General Hammond about their success. Not long after she left, an alarm sounded off and the voice of Senior Master Sergeant Harriman boomed over the ship’s speakers that “the prisoner has escaped”. By then, of course, the whole story of the Kull Warrior – or rather the fraud Vala Mal Doraan disguised as one – made its way into the engine room, so Alice wasn’t very worried. Without the Kull Warrior’s impenetrable armor, Vala didn’t really present all that much of a threat. There was no second alarm, too, so Alice assumed they caught her. She was only informed that the woman fled on the Al’kesh - *their Al’kesh* – after an hour or so, when Novak came back to the engine room to relieve her.

Alice wasn’t really tired, but she felt positively ravenous, so she made her way to the chow hall. It was pretty full and she paused with her tray, unsure where to sit, combing the crowd with her eyes, searching for a familiar face of a fellow 302 pilot… but instead a pair of glasses and a messy tangle of hair came into view. Doctor Jackson was sitting at one of the tables, scribbling furiously in a tiny notebook, his food forgotten on his tray. Could she possibly join him? She couldn’t pretend before herself that a member of the famed SG-1 wasn’t of any interest to her. And especially Doctor Jackson. *This is the guy who actually ascended!* She thought to herself, biting her lip, uncertain what to do. Could she just sit there and chat him up? Should she? Was she brave enough? *Oh, for fuck’s sake, get your shit together, Boyd,* she scolded herself, squared her shoulders and marched down the narrow passageway between tables to the one occupied by Doctor Jackson. She noticed that everyone else gave him a wide berth.

“Excuse me, sir, would you mind if I sit here?” She said in a small, polite voice. Jackson didn’t look up but waved his hand in agreement. Alice put down her tray carefully so as not to clatter too much, sat down and, watching the archeologist scribble away, dug into her food.

Soon enough, though, simply looking at Jackson became boring, though she didn’t want to interrupt him. He looked thoroughly engrossed in whatever he was doing. She took out her little tablet from her pocket and turned it on. It had a few of the routines from the Al’kesh stored in its memory. Of course, one crystal could hold billions of lines of code, more than any human-made supercomputer, let alone her tiny portable machine, but she selected a few of the sub-routines that looked familiar and produced the most interesting data to keep them and possibly learn something.

She was so concentrated that she didn’t actually realize when Jackson stopped scribbling. She
became gradually aware that he was staring at her, but she didn’t raise her head until she came to the end of the line. Then she looked up to find Jackson watching her with raised eyebrows; her food was only half-eaten and now forgotten. She suppressed a smile. They were very alike in the way their work took all of their concentration.

“Hi,” Jackson said when he finally got her attention.

“Hi,” she replied and then added, as an afterthought: “sir.”

“Am I correct that you’re reading Go’auld?” He nodded to her tablet which was showing the odd hieroglyphical language at the moment.

“Um… more like trying to,” Alice admitted and cast her eyes downwards. Jackson’s gaze was very intense. “Never seen signs like these before, but the data produced by this sub-routine is pretty straightforward, so I figured I might be able to decipher something.”

“And how’s it going?”

“Not very well.” Alice grimaced. “Physics is physics no matter the language, but unless I get some point of reference, understanding this little bit will take me ages…”

“And yet you’re trying,” Jackson stated. Alice peered at him from underneath her lashes. His eyebrows were still raised.

“Well, it’s better than not trying.”

He huffed at that, but didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Your hair is very orange,” he opined suddenly. Alice looked up at him, bewildered, and then snorted. She just couldn’t help it.

“That’s very observant of you, sir,” she teased. A thin smile appeared on his lips, as though he was trying to restrain it.

“I guess I deserved that,” he acquiesced. “I’m Daniel Jackson.”

“I know,” Alice said levelly. “I’m Alice Boyd. It’s an honor to meet you, sir.”

He blinked.

“You’re Alice Boyd, the fighter pilot?”

What the fuck? Daniel Jackson knows my name?!

Her eyes grew wide.

“Sam… I mean Colonel Carter told me about you,” he explained. “She was pretty excited to get you into the 302 program.”

“Really?” Whoa. “I… I don’t know what to say. I didn’t know she took that much of an interest in me.”

“She said you were brilliant, and coming from Sam, that’s something,” Jackson admitted.

Colonel Carter said I’m brilliant. Sweet lord, I think I’m gonna burst now. Alice forced herself to restrain a stupid grin that was threatening to spread over her face.
“I think she gives me too much credit.”

“That’s very modest of you.” His eyes were boring into her face with strange intensity again. “You said you needed a point of reference?”

She looked at him, confused for a moment, and then realized what he was talking about and nodded.

“I’ll email you something,” he promised. “If you really want to learn some Goa’uld.”

“Oh, that would be great!” She enthused. “I’m really interested in how they were able to get the time dilation zeroing module to operate without reverse suppression…”

Daniel chortled.

“Now you’ve lost me. But I can see what Sam meant when she said you were thirsty for knowledge. Are you always this enthusiastic about anything new?”

“Usually,” Alice admitted sheepishly. “I kinda read through the library in my old base…”

“You read through an entire library?”

Alice shrugged.

“It was small and poorly stocked. And I read fast.” She decided they’d talked about her enough so she changed the topic. “Will it be too much if I ask what were you writing just then, sir?”

Daniel was still looking at her with a slightly disbelieving expression.

“I was making notes on what happened today,” he said offhandedly. “I always do that, helps me focus on details. And it’s easier to write mission reports later…”

“Oh, I see.” Alice nodded thoughtfully. “I’ve read some of your reports back when I had just joined. I found them utterly fascinating.”

“If you did, why not apply and move to an SG unit?” Jackson suggested, a strange twinkle in his eyes now, as if he was inwardly laughing at an inside joke. “We could use someone with your brains.”

Alice smiled, looking down.

“I don’t think I’d be very good at that,” she confessed. “I’d be scared out of my wits.”

She peeked at him under her lashes again. His eyebrows were arched all the way up.

“That’s coming from a person who flies space-fighters for a living!”

Alice shook her head.

“It’s different with fighters. It’s not… physical. I know what to do, and I know how my machine is going to respond to what I do. I don’t need to run around with a rifle. I don’t need to risk my neck. And most of all, I don’t need to… well…” She stammered. Was she really about to profess to Doctor Daniel Jackson how much she didn’t like people?

“You don’t need to deal with people,” he finished for her. She jerked her head up to look at him, wide-eyed. **How did he know!** “I’m pretty good at reading people,” he explained, seeing her
expression. “It’s obvious to me you’re shying away from your fellow human beings. Surprised you even talk to me.”

“I was very curious,” she admitted uneasily. Was she that transparent, or was he that good at seeing through everyone? “I mean… nevermind.”

He cocked his head to the side.

“Tell me.”

“I’m… um… you… you have ascended.”

“Ah,” he breathed. “Yes. I could have seen this one coming. Of course you’d be interested in that. I don’t remember much of that, though.”

“I know, I just…” She began, but a rich, sonorous bell ring interrupted her. She glanced at her wristwatch and started. “Oh my, I need to go. I’m sorry, sir. My shift has just started.”

“Sure,” he agreed with a nod. “Go. It was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise, sir. Goodbye.”

She rose and, picking up her tray, still half-full, she made her way back, smiling slightly. She was glad she found the guts to approach Jackson. He was a really intriguing character.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I have honestly forgotten that I was also publishing this text on AO3. I am deeply sorry, especially that I just discovered (with pleasure but also surprise) that there were people who gave me kudos and even a nice comment. Thank you! I don't know how I managed to completely erase the fact of posting this on AO3 from my head. I hadn't been in a very good place, mentally, in the last year or so. Maybe that's it.

Now, this story is finished. It continued to be updated elsewhere, and I kept on writing it. The final chapters are about to be published on another platform, but I am already busy writing part II. Partly because, to my everlasting shock, there are actually people who like the story and want to read it. And partly because writing it is immeasurable fun. So I will continue to update it here as well. (Assuming I don't have another hole in my brain that leads me to forgetting about it. I'm joking, I won't forget. I hope.)

The *Prometheus* returned to its hangar at the Groom Lake facility for an overhaul. Not only the engine and shields needed proper fixing; all sorts of systems were to be tested and patched up, and the hull itself had to be repaired, too. It was painfully obvious that the ship would spend a lot of time on Earth, and so the 302 drivers were all redistributed amongst different places and jobs while their carrier was being restored. Four of them were sent back to McMurdo (Alice thanked her stars that she wasn’t among them), another three went to some off-world bases, and the remaining five stayed in Groom Lake to train with the pilots assigned to the X-304. Alice couldn’t help but feel glad about it. She had practice sorties two to three times a week, and in the meantime she was working along Doctor Novak and other engineers on repairing the *Prometheus*, and sneaking up to the X-304 after her shift’s ended. The construction of the ship was halted due to unforeseen incompatibility of some systems; Doctor Decker and her team were working tirelessly on fixing that, with occasional help from the Asgard, Hermiod.

“I’m pretty sure he knows exactly what we need to get it done in a blink of an eye,” Decker said irritably to Alice one afternoon, for the third time this day trying to adjust the sub-routine to get the Asgard core to cooperate with their close-circuit internal communication programming.

“Why wouldn’t he say anything, though?” Alice doubted, without looking up from a patch of code she was examining. “He knows it’s critical for us to get to the Pegasus as soon as possible.”

“Oh, I’m convinced he wants us to get the answers,” Decker scoffed. “And he doesn’t really care about the possibility of our people dying in another galaxy. And why would he? He’s not human.”

Alice didn’t have an answer to that, but she doubted an Asgard could be so inconsiderate. From all that she’s heard about the race, they were way further along on the civilization path than the humans of Earth.

Getting stuck at Groom Lake for a few weeks had also another advantage: she could hang out with Archer and Spinner again. She made a point to go out with them in the evening at least twice a week; it was hard for her, what with her being an extreme introvert, but she forced herself to go every time, and always wound up enjoying herself in the end, even though she usually made an early exit.
“It’s that animal magnetism of ours,” Archer told her in a serious tone when she confessed to her predilection for them one night at the base club. “You just can’t resist.”

“Yeah, you’re slightly less repellent than the others, that’s why,” she teased awkwardly. She never knew how to react to these kinds of remarks; she was reasonably sure Archer was just pulling her leg, but she had an absolute zero experience in flirting, so how would she know if he were hinting at something? Could there be something between us? She thought and grimaced. No way. Archer was too much like her brother to ever interest her in that way. And Spinner was just too damn old for her. Honestly, almost everyone on the base was too old for her, though.

“Oh, now you’re just hurting our feelings here, Boyd!” He chuckled and took a swig of beer, draining the glass. “I’m gonna get some more drinks. Anyone wants anything?”

Alice finished her wine with a last sip and nodded.

“I’ll take a Martini, dry,” she told him.

He made a face at her.

“Are you old enough to drink, though?” He laughed when she rolled her eyes at him. “Spinner, anything?”

“Nah, I’m good, mate,” Spinner raised his half-full glass to illustrate his point. “So, Alice, got any plans for the weekend?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I think I’ll just stay on the base…”

“Again?” Spinner shook his head disapprovingly. “You know there’s more to life than fighters and engines, right?”

She smiled crookedly.

“Yeah, there are also shields and code…”

He snorted, but his eyes were serious.

“You’ve gotta get out there sometime, girl. You’ll burn yourself out if all you do is work.” He raised his hand to stop her from interrupting him. “I know you like it and it doesn’t feel like work, but trust me, it will take a toll on ya sooner or later. You’re young and you want to learn, and that’s good, but you’ve gotta just kick back and relax sometimes, too. Let your brain breathe freely for a while.”

“I know, I know… it’s just – it’s so boring when I try to do that…” She complained. Spinner gave a hearty laugh at that.

“Clearly, you’re not doing the right things then!”

“What right things?” Archer was back with another glass of beer and Alice’s Martini, which he handed to her before stepping to the side and revealing someone standing beside him. “Look what I found at the bar!”

It was Espinoza; he was wearing his blues, but he was missing a tie and the top button of his shirt was popped open. He had a beer in his hand, too.

“Hi guys. Don’t be ridiculous, sit down!” He said as both Alice and Spinner started scrambling up
to stand at attention. “We’re all off-duty.”

“So, what right things?” Archer prompted as he and Espinoza made themselves comfortable at the table.

“We were just talking about things to do during the weekend,” Spinner explained. “Alice here seems to be under the impression that looking at engines all day is the best option to go for.”

“Well, engines are more interesting than you guys, for instance,” Alice joked. “Sorry, sir. I meant these two knuckleheads.” She told Espinoza, gesturing to Spinner and Archer.

“Ouch,” he said with a smile. “But as much as I like your attitude towards learning and engines and all that crap, they’re right. You can’t spend all your time at work. And don’t tell me that’s not work. You know better than that.”

“But I like to do that!”

“I like to fly fighters,” Espinoza scolded her merrily. “Doesn’t mean I should be doing that every waking moment of my life. You gotta let your mind rest a bit.” He raised his eyebrows, seeing her expression. “I can make that an order if you prefer.”

“Oh, that’s not fair, sir!” She said, now really irked. Were they really going to dictate her what she was supposed to do in her free time now? Fuck you if you do, she though irritably.

Espinoza raised his hands in a don’t blame me gesture.

“I’m kidding, Boyd,” he puffed. “Well, sort of. You do whatever you want. But you really should keep some balance, you know?”

She rolled her eyes again, but didn’t reply. What else was she supposed to be doing during the weekends? It’s not like there was a wide choice here. She didn’t really like watching TV. She went to the movies very rarely. She supposed she could read some books – maybe fiction, for a change, instead of science books? Or she could go hiking. Then she remembered they were in the middle of a Nevada desert and there weren’t many hiking paths around. What else was there to do?

“What are you doing in the weekend, then, sir?” Archer interceded, sparing Alice the need to find a suitable continuation to the conversation.

“I thought I’d go to Vegas,” Espinoza revealed, sipping his beer. “There’s a band I like playing there on Saturday.”

Oh, wow. It was so weird to hear a lieutenant colonel speak about going to see a music gig. As if he were a normal guy, and not someone… better. How is he better, exactly? Alice asked herself sharply. He’s just older, and higher up in the hierarchy, that’s all. He was just a guy. She shouldn’t be surprised to see him have a normal life.

“What band?”

“Dead Man’s Eyes,” Espinoza replied. Alice looked up at him with raised eyebrows, her moment of annoyance already forgotten. “They’re quite new but very cool.”

“What are they playing?” Archer continued his interrogation.

“Sort of a mix of classic and indie rock with a dash of punk,” Espinoza laughed. “It’s rather hard to pinpoint. You should hear the drummer, he’s wicked.” His eyes glowed. He was more agitated
than Alice has ever seen him before. She snickered, looking down to hide it. “The lead is great, too. He has a very peculiar tone, though. Sort of smooth but growly? It’s weird.”

“So is that it, sir? Music, your thing?” Spinner put in. “You seem uncharacteristically excited about this band… what was its name again? Dead Guy’s Eyes?”

“Dead Man’s Eyes. Yeah, I guess it is my thing,” Espinoza allowed with a smile. “My father was a musician, he’s never made it big, but we lived off his music career, so I guess it’s part of me now.”

“It’s a ridiculous name, though, Dead Man’s Eyes,” Archer opined.

“It’s not ridiculous,” Alice protested with a grin she could no longer suppress. “It has its own story. I didn’t know they were going to play in Vegas, that’s good to know. Thank you, sir. I think I know what I’m gonna be doing during the weekend, after all!”

The three of them stared at her for a moment. She just continued to beam at them silently.

“You know the band?” Espinoza asked eventually.

She nodded vivaciously.

“Oh, yeah. We grew up together.” Her grin widened as she took in Espinoza’s bewildered expression. “The lead singer? That’s Aaron, my best friend from childhood. He lived a couple houses down my street. We used to spend hours upon hours in his garage, me, my brother Jake, Aaron, and their friends Curtis, Ian and Zach. Zach’s the drummer and I agree, he’s probably the best musician of the whole lot,” she told Espinoza. “They had gotten a new guitar player, Jeff, when my brother went off to join the Marine Corps, and that’s how the band was born.”

“Wow.” Espinoza whistled. “What a coincidence that you should know them, and they’re one of my favorite bands now.”

“What’s with the name, though?” Archer interrupted, clearly perplexed. “Dead Man’s Eyes?”

“You know the old saying, ‘to steal pennies off a dead man’s eyes’, right?” Alice didn’t stop grinning. “It means to be very untrustworthy and mean. I once used that to describe Aaron after he pushed me off a ladder.”

“He pushed you off a ladder?”

“Yes, but only because I dared him to.”

Archer looked at her, dumbstruck.

“Aaron’s generally a very good guy,” she explained. “And one day, I don’t remember why, we got to call him Fuzzyron for some reason… anyway he got mad and he said he could be very mean when he wanted to. So I dared him to do something really mean. We were up on a tree house we’d built, and Aaron pushed me off a ladder. I broke a few ribs pretty nastily. And so for the next couple of months I’d go around and tell anybody who was willing to listen how mean Aaron was, mean enough to steal coins off a dead man’s eyes.” Alice shrugged. “I was only joking, but Aaron was really bummed about it. The phrase stuck, though, and eventually became the name of the band.”

Archer was chortling quietly from halfway into her story. Spinner was shaking his head good-naturedly and Espinoza was snickering into his beer.
“Crazy, but I guess it fits that sort of a band, doesn’t it?” The younger captain said once he regained enough composure to stop laughing. “So you’re gonna go to Vegas, too, Boyd? Maybe you guys could go together?”

There was a twinkle in his eyes as he said it. Alice felt a bout of panic; go with Espinoza to Vegas? That was like, five or six hours drive. She didn’t mind going to a concert with him, but all that time, alone in a car with him…? What would they talk about? Or would there be just awkward silence between them? The very thought made her blood chill. Any social interaction was hard enough, but to be stuck inside a vehicle for hours and hours with a ranking officer, pretending to be nice and affable, trying to find topics of conversation and, even worse, small-talk? She sucked at small-talk. No way, she thought with dismay.

She looked up on Espinoza. He was watching her with a thoughtful expression, and suddenly she remembered that he was more like her than anyone else; generally quiet and introverted, he too hated pointless chit-chat, spoke only when he had something interesting to say and felt best in a restful silence. And yet, as he has just proved, he could get excited for something, too. And music! That was one topic they had in common besides work, wasn’t it?

Alice was surrounded by music ever since she was little. It was all because of Aaron, of course; he had known he wanted to be a musician at the ripe age of six; and he worked tirelessly towards that goal, sucking his friends into his world full of melodies and lyrics. Jake was especially entranced, and it had seemed, for a while, that he would follow Aaron’s lead into this career. But then their father died and Jake gradually changed his mind and eventually decided to enter the service. Still, their entire childhood was filled with music of all kinds and it continued to be Alice’s big fascination.

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea,” Espinoza said after a short pause in the conversation. “We’d save up on gas that way for sure. Unless you mind having company?” He raised his eyebrows slightly, his lips sealed in a tight smile.

“No, not at all,” she replied, more truthfully than she would have expected. “Thank you, sir.”

He nodded.

“Well, at least my wife can’t say that I’m being a loner again,” he confessed with a pretend indignation in his voice. “She claims I’m not sociable enough. I tell her I’m sociable enough at my job, I don’t need to do it after hours, too. The truth is, I don’t really enjoy her little neighborhood parties, but hey, I’m just a husband, aren’t I? I need to heed the orders of the superior officer at home.”

Spinner and Archer laughed heartily and Alice feigned a smile, too, but she was actually a bit shocked. Espinoza had a wife! Why was it so surprising for her? The guy must have been around forty years old, surely he had a family! It was just so… human. She was used to thinking of her superior officers – especially COs – as some supernatural beings, omniscient and all-powerful, and that made them somehow… artificial. Like they were not real people with lives and wives and children, with interests and dislikes, with fears… To think that your CO could be scared of anything was very disconcerting indeed. She realized, of course, how ridiculous and irrational was this kind of thinking, but never knowing any officers above the rank of captain more personally – with the exception of her father and uncle, of course, but they didn’t count – she never had a chance to see them as so down-to-earth, everyday men… so human. Lieutenant Colonel Espinoza was the first senior officer not related to her that she had a chance to observe outside work, just chilling with a beer, enjoying himself, even confiding in his colleagues… Was this it, then? The famous tightness of the community in the Air Force? She wondered. Commanders socializing with
their people, ranking officers not minding not being called sir all the time, sipping beer and Martini in a club after hours, making plans together?

Was this how normal people lived?

*

The crowd was still howling and hooting in hoarse voices, sweat pouring down everybody’s faces, fists punching the air, some people still swaying and dancing on the spot, others shaking their heads in rhythm with the music, now broadcast from the speakers, band gone from the stage. Slowly, very slowly, the throng began to thin out as more and more people were slipping out from the hall, fleeing the moist and stuffy air inside in favor of the cold bite outside.

Alice and Espinoza were standing close to the edge of the room, out of the way of the crowd. This vantage point gave them clear visibility of the stage without forcing them into the wild mob that had overtaken the space directly in front of it, which suited both of them just fine. They both enjoyed the music and – to some extent – the positive energy flowing from the crowd, but were introvert enough not to want to share in it too much.

Alice had found that all her fears have been unfounded. Espinoza turned out to be the perfect traveling companion. He didn’t mind the long periods of silence that stretched between them in the car as he drove up the lonely little roads issuing from the Groom Lake facility and meandering through the dull Nevada scenery, enlivened only once they got closer to Las Vegas; he turned on his car radio and changed records often, happy to show her his favorite bands and musicians. They spoke only to comment on music and didn’t talk much about anything else, least of all – work. Alice, to her amazement, found it rather refreshing. Maybe Spinner was right; maybe she did need to purge her mind with meaningless activities from time to time. Was that what relax was all about? Never before she felt any need for it, yet now it was strangely stimulating. It allowed her brain to go blank for a while, followed by a sort of stream-of-consciousness, disorganized musings that led her to some new and even startling realizations. For starters, for the first time since she’s left home for college, she thought she actually had friends. What else could she call Archer and Spinner? They were more than just colleagues; you didn’t hang out with colleagues after hours as often as they did. And in her line of work, socializing liberally with ranking officers, not calling them sir all the time, not minding teasing them or laughing at them outright… it was something she’s never known before. But it ran deeper than that: these two have become her confidants and she actually trusted them with her thoughts and opinions, she shared stories from her childhood voluntarily, sometimes even revealed her feelings – something she usually kept hidden well beneath layers and layers of pretense and indifference. She had learned very early on that showing emotion and speaking of your feelings made you vulnerable, and in her world vulnerable equaled weak, it tagged you as a target.

Was Espinoza her friend, too? He was certainly more compatible with her than Archer and Spinner; the two captains were too exuberant and extraverted. And yet she didn’t mind those qualities in them; quite the opposite, she enjoyed Archer’s brash and mocking tease and Spinner’s hearty and kind sense of humor. Maybe there was something in the saying that the opposites attract. Where that left Espinoza? Alice didn’t know, but she had to admit she didn’t mind having him around in the slightest. Bolton or Cox intimidated her and made her feel out of place. With Espinoza she could almost forget that he was three ranks and almost twenty years her senior. She did continue to call him sir, but she felt closer and somehow more personal with him than any
other CO she’s ever had – not that there were many of them, anyhow.

“That was epic,” Espinoza now shouted over the clamor of the crowd and music. “I had no idea they’ve written so many new songs since the last record!”

Alice grinned at him and gestured towards the stage.

“Do you want to meet the band, sir?” She cried, but her voice was too high-pitched and weak to pierce through the hubbub.

“What?” Espinoza bellowed, his own voice straining to raise over the noise.

She shook her head and waved at him to follow her. Turning on her heel, she led him through the thinning mass of people closer to the stage and then to the left, where an unimposing little door must have led backstage, since that’s where the band disappeared to. A tall and broad-shouldered man in a suit stood there and surveyed a group of (mostly) female fans, all clad in black, who were hovering near him and apparently trying to convince him to let them pass.

“I’ll pay you,” one of them said desperately. Her voice was shrill enough to pierce right through the noise – which was now dying away anyway. ‘I’ll give you fifty bucks if you let me in! Just for a moment, I just want to give a letter to Aaron, pleaaaase…”

The guard offered her a disgruntled look but kept his silence and professional outlook. Alice slipped through the pack of girls and stood at the front. She glanced back to see Espinoza floating on the edge of the group, apparently not willing to approach for now. Then she examined the girls pressing around her. It hit her that they looked and acted very young, like teenagers, but they must have been around her age, some even older. The one who wanted to bribe the guard was wearing a black mini-skirt and a halter top, decorated with a blood-red rose pinned to the strap, and, looking around, Alice saw that almost all of them showed more skin than she thought decent. You fucking prude, she laughed at herself inwardly. She was certainly sticking out, what with her midnight blue jeans, dark green sleeveless shirt, minimal makeup and orange hair haphazardly pinned up in a messy bun. Suddenly she felt old; a very unfamiliar feeling for her. But how could she not? These girls, all vying to steal one look at their favorite musician, would go back the next day to their little lives, perhaps spending Sunday tending to a (real or moral) hangover, perhaps going out with friends or enjoying brunch with their families, and then they’d go back to school or work, or to just doing nothing, nothing of importance… what were their lives worth? What was all that compared to what was out there? The threats, the enemies, the discoveries, the unknown… could anything on Earth match up to that?

But that was a very dangerous kind of thinking. It led to arrogance and vanity, and so Alice willed herself to stop this train of thoughts, to banish them from her mind. You are not better than them, you fucktard, she told herself angrily. You’re just lucky to have a few special abilities, but had you been born without them, you’d be just like them. Nothing special about you.

She shook her head infinitesimally and focused on the task at hand.

“Hi,” she said to the guard; by now the majority of the attendees have left the room and the noise decreased greatly, so her voice was finally audible, although she still had to strain it considerably. "Could you please go backstage and tell the band that Allie’s here?"

The guard threw her a dismissive look.

“You don’t think anybody already tried to pass as a friend of a band member?” He spat with disdain.
“Oh, I’m sure they did,” she agreed cheerfully, put up her index finger in a *please wait* gesture and fished out her phone from her purse. She flipped it open and browsed to the gallery. Then she handed the phone to the man. He took it and squinted – the picture quality was rather low, especially that it was just a mobile. “The redheads are me and my brother Jake, and the man behind us is my dad. It’s been something like ten years since that photo was taken, but I think you can recognize the fourth person?”

The guard looked up at her in surprise. The picture was taken outside Aaron’s old house on the street where they all grew up, and the then-sixteen year old was boasting his brand new guitar for the photo. Alice had it saved up on her phone because it was the last picture ever taken of her dad. Her mom had been the one holding the camera.

The girls around gaped at her with mouths hanging slightly open as the guard returned the phone to Alice and moved to open the door for her. She waved at Espinoza who crossed the crowd gingerly, trying not to touch anybody, and they both entered a poorly lit corridor leading backstage.

There was another door on the other side, slightly ajar. Now that they’ve been cut off from the noise in the concert hall, they could hear the low murmur of voices coming from inside. Alice pushed the door and stepped into the brightly lit room.

It was sparsely furnished. There was a low glass table in the middle, surrounded by a couple of sofas and armchairs, a wide wardrobe against one of the walls and a huge stereo leaning across another. Six people – six men – were sitting down around the table. They all looked up when Alice entered, Espinoza a step behind her.

“Allie!” A universal cry of surprise issued from five throats as they scrambled off their feet. They looked exhausted and sweaty, but their enthusiasm was genuine. A moment later she was swallowed up in a bear hug.

“Zach, I need to breathe,” she complained good-naturedly and the drummer let her go, laughing. He wasn’t quite as big as Jake, but still his bulk overshadowed everyone else in the room.

The others were there already, extending arms to shake her hand or pat her shoulders. The last was Aaron who smiled widely and hugged her, too, although his tall and lean frame could not overwhelm her the same way Zach could.

“Guys,” Alice said after they all took a step back, “this is Lieutenant Colonel Pedro Espinoza, he was my CO during training and now commands a sister-squadron where I am based.”

“Hi,” Espinoza said phlegmatically with a ghost of a smile. “Big fan.”

“Are you?” Aaron raised his eyebrows. Alice elbowed him – he stood closest to her – and he shook his head and extended his hand. Espinoza took it. “Nice to hear that. Come, sit down with us… oh, by the way, this is Donald, our new agent.”

A sixth man, who stayed in the back during the greeting session, waved his hand at them. He was a scrawny little guy with a few gray strings contrasting with his otherwise black hair. He was around Espinoza’s age.

“Hi,” he said to Alice. “You must be Allie. Heard a lot about you.”

“Don’t believe a word Aaron told you about me,” she warned playfully and, without waiting for invitation, plopped down on a couch. The rest took their cue from her and sat down, including Espinoza, who chose an armchair on the other side of the table.
“So how did you like the concert?” Curt asked and they both assured him it was great.

“The new songs are really rad,” Alice opined. “Some of them are definitely better than your first album, although they need a bit of polishing before you can record them.”

“We’re still working on this material,” Ian admitted. “Aaron is taking his sweet time with the lyrics…”

“Wouldn’t kill you to pitch in every once in a while,” Aaron picked up a candy wrapper from the table and threw it in Ian’s direction, but it fell short.

“Pitiful.” Ian shook his head.

“Which new song do you guys like the most?” Curt was always eager for praise.

“I think *Over the horizon* is possibly the best song I’ve heard in a while,” Espinoza answered in a serious tone. “It has a great melody, the bridge is awesome, and I just love what you do after the second stanza.” He inclined his head towards Zach. The drummer beamed at him in response. “Plus, it has great lyrics.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Alice chuckled. The song could be interpreted as a sort of an ode to duty, service and brotherhood, three things that military pilots were no strangers to.

“It’s one of our first songs we’ve ever written,” Aaron put in. He was sitting next to Alice on the couch, his elbows on his knees and his head resting on his joined hands. “We must have been, what? Sixteen?”

“Yeah, except you wrote it yourself and we’ve just polished it now that we decided to do it for serious,” Ian amended. “But I remember the first time we played it, it was in your garage under that freakishly red light, remember?”

“Sure I remember,” Aaron nodded. “You didn’t even stay to hear the entire song,” he said accusingly to Alice. She flung up her hands.

“I had an exam the next day!” She defended herself. “But I’ve heard it enough times in the year after. You stopped playing it after my dad died, though.”

She caught an interested look Espinoza threw her. His eyebrow was infinitesimally raised.

“Yeah, he was the whole inspiration for the song. Remember when he used to give us lectures on honor and duty?”

Alice smiled a bit wistfully.

“Yeah, I remember.”

For a moment, there was silence. Then Donald the agent got up from his seat and took out a case of beer from the wardrobe behind them and started offering cans to the band members and guests.

“Thanks, but I need to drive tonight.” Espinoza shook his head when Donald reached him.

“So? Come on, it’s just one beer…”

“Thanks, but no.” He was adamant.

“Take a cab instead.” The agent shrugged.
“Not really a cab-achievable distance.” Espinoza smiled. “We’ll be driving for a few hours.”

“You kidding, right?” Zach was the first to react. “It’s almost midnight, you can’t drive now!”

“I’m not scared of the darkness,” the colonel snorted.

“But you’re tired, what if you fall asleep at the wheel?”

“I won’t.”

“But…”

“Zach, stop.” Alice interfered. “You’re forgetting whom you are talking to. We know a thing or two about driving.”

“You drive planes, not cars, though.” Zach wouldn’t let go.

“Same difference. We know how to act under pressure and fatigue.”

“But that means that you’re based somewhere near, but it ain’t Nellis!” Aaron said in a lower voice, speaking only to Alice now. Espinoza heard, though, and their eyes met for a moment. He then was asked something by Jeff and they lapsed into two simultaneous conversations.

“Near is a relative thing,” Alice hedged.

“Allie!”

“There are several bases within driving distance,” she added, not looking at him. This was always the hard part. “It goes really fast on the interstate.”

“You’re saying that because you’re hinting at something or you’re trying to misdirect my train of thoughts?”

Shit , this guy knew her too well.

“Why don’t you just tell me? Is it a secret?”

She continued to look away, not saying anything, which was in itself answer enough.

“I see.”

The clear disappointment in his voice cut her heart in two, but she couldn’t do anything about it. It was time to change the subject.

“How is Jeanie?” She asked, looking up with interest. Aaron grimaced and Zach, who sat on the same couch, laughed.


“Shut up.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Well… we’re on tour, right?” Aaron began reluctantly. “But we had a break, we were supposed to spend it in San Francisco, but I decided to give her a surprise… so I dropped in LA, went to her
apartment, and what I found there?"

“Well?”

“She has a child.”

Alice felt her jaw drop. “What!” She didn’t expect that.

“You heard me. She has a little brat that she failed to mention to me for the last fucking year!” Aaron was getting angry, a vein in his neck pulsating wildly. “We’ve been dating for thirteen months, and I find out now and by accident that she has a four-year old son!”

“What did you do?”

“We had a fight, what do you think?”

“But what are you going to do now?”

Aaron was silent for a moment.

“I don’t know. I thought I loved her, and I kinda feel that I still do, but… how can you be with someone who’s been lying to you for so long?” He shook his head. “And about what! Only the most important part of her life!”

Alice felt a bit uneasy. She herself had no child, but for her, work was the most important thing, and wasn’t she lying about it to her best friend? But what else was there to do? She couldn’t say anything, and the longer she could avoid hiding behind the cruel sorry, it’s classified, the better. Wasn’t it?

Wasn’t it?

*

The road back passed in silence, broken only by the vroom of the engine and steady flow of music from the car stereo. Despite her earlier claim, they were both tired. Thankfully, for them silence was not an issue. They both felt pretty comfortable not speaking, each of them engrossed in their own thoughts. Alice sat looking out the window into the uniform blackness of the night until the sky over the horizon began slowly turning midnight blue, then bluish grey, and then it lit up with pale orange and pink of the sun’s first rays. A new day was dawning over the vast, barren uplands that surrounded the Groom Lake facility. Despite the bleakness of the landscape, the view took her breath away. The play of light and shadow over the rocks and valleys, the colors of the sky on the horizon, and the staggering stillness of the scenery, devoid of life, were simply astonishing; enough to break through her reverie and wake her up to the fact that they were almost there.

The rest of their visit backstage had gone in a nice and friendly atmosphere. Aaron had poured out his grievances to her and they discussed his options; she tried not to suggest anything and let him take the decision entirely on his own. She’s never really met Jeanie, but she knew that he was pretty serious about her, and the fact that she was hiding a child from him must have shaken him good. The only thing she had told him out-front was to take a step back and try to examine it without emotions. He’d laughed at her for that. We’re talking about a relationship, Allie, he’d said. It’s entirely made up of emotions. She asked herself what she’d do in his situation and had to
admit that she didn’t have a clue; she’s never been in a relationship. She could analyze the situation using reason and cold logic, but she had no idea what kind of emotions were involved and how she’d react if it happened to her.

It was nearly two in the morning when they finally left the band (minus Donald the agent who had checked out shortly after midnight). Beside Aaron’s relationship problems, they’d talked about everything old friends talk about when they get together after some time apart: music, the band’s U.S. tour, their new album-in-the-making, how things were back in LA, their families and common friends. Aaron and Zach had kept inquiring about Alice’s work and she had strained to find ways to defer their curiosity with clever dodges, misdirection, humor and some generalities that she could safely confess. Espinoza had talked little, but his remarks had always been to the point and soon enough he had earned the band’s total acceptance and even admiration when they had found out who was his father – apparently some local NY rocker who’s never made it big, but was a source of inspiration for countless musicians who happened to tread the Big Apple’s rock paths. At any rate, the colonel had seemed to enjoy himself, too.

It was almost eight when Espinoza finally pulled over in front of the apartment building where Alice had her quarters. He got out of the car with her.

“Thank you, sir, for the ride,” she said and smiled a bit tiredly at him.

“No at all,” he answered politely. “Thank you for inviting me backstage. It was nice to meet the band. They’re rather interesting people.”

“Yes, they are,” she agreed. “I’m glad you think so, sir. It would have been awkward if I introduced them to you and they turned out to be boring and unimpressive.”

He smiled his signature tight-lipped smile.

“Indeed. You wouldn’t believe how many musicians are unimpressive. I’ve met my share of them when I was a boy and I tagged along my dad to his gigs and parties.”

“He let you go with him to the rocker parties?”

“I didn’t say anything about him letting me go, I believe. My sister and I always found a way, though.”

Alice chuckled.

“Sounds a lot like me, my brother and Aaron in our time.”

“Aaron seems to be very attached to you.”

“He is. And so am I to him.” Alice nodded solemnly. “We don’t see each other much anymore, what with our separate careers, but we’re still good friends. He’s a like a second brother to me.”

“You think it’s reciprocal?”

She looked at him in surprise, frowning. What was he implying?

“Sure. You don’t think so?”

“You don’t think he might look at you in a… different way?” The tone he used was enough to indicate what way he meant.
“No.” She shook her head, the crease between her brows deepening. “There’s nothing like that between us. We’ve known each other since I was three and he was six. You spend so much time with someone, the mere thought of anything... carnal... between you is kinda gross.” She wrinkled her nose like she smelled something bad.

Espinoza hmphed, but didn’t look convinced.

“Anyway... it was a nice change to go out like that.” He inclined his head, almost in a bow. “And now I suggest we both go and sleep until we wake up. We should be sharp back at work on Monday.”

“Yes, sir. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Allie.”

Espinoza got back into his car, leaving her on the sidewalk, still surprised at his question and even more so at his calling her Allie. He must have picked it up from the band. Nobody but her family and childhood friends called her Allie.

She walked into her building and got onto the elevator, suddenly aware of the hour and the fact that she was coming back home in the same clothes as she left yesterday, with dark rings under her eyes and disheveled hair. If anyone saw her now they’d draw the only possible conclusion. Fuck. She looked out on the corridor before stepping out from the elevator to see if it was empty. Typical. I’m probably the first ever virgin doing the fucking walk of shame. Oh, the gossip that would start if someone saw her now... there were at least two other pilots and three scientists who knew her living on her floor. She exhaled with relief once she got safely inside her apartment.

She mulled over Espinoza’s last remark as she prepared a bath for herself. Was it possible that Aaron...? No. No way. She knew him very well, she’s seen him with several different girls, heard him talk about half a dozen others (he was always a popular guy), but there was never anything to suggest that he was in any way interested in her. She treated him like a brother and she was absolutely sure that he thought of her as his little sister. He’d said so countless times.

So why would Espinoza bring that up? Did he see something that she didn’t? But she was positive there wasn’t anything. Aaron wasn’t lying when he said he was still in love with Jeanie, despite what she had done to him. That was plain to anyone who saw him talk about her. Was it just because he sat beside her on the couch the entire evening? But so did Zach. So what was it?

She had no idea, but she knew the question would haunt her for some time now. As she sank into the bubbly water in the bathtub, she closed her eyes and tried to purge her mind from all thoughts. This trip has given her a surprising amount of reflection. Maybe she should do that more often. It could be quite illuminating.

* 

Alice thought that after their excursion to Las Vegas, Espinoza might start spending more time with her, Archer and Spinner, but, though he was invited, he didn’t appear in the club afterwards for a couple of weeks, and when he finally did, he only said hi to them and spent the whole evening with Bolton and two other officers of higher ranks. Alice thought it a real pity; she grew to like him as a person, and was rather hoping their newfound bond over music might develop in time. Instead,
she settled back into the routine of going out with Spinner and Archer twice a week. She did, however, give herself more time to relax during weekends from now on, too. No more trips to Vegas, but she made herself read some books that weren’t scientific – she hasn’t read fiction in so long she almost forgot how much fun it could be. She still wasn’t particularly into movies, but she went back to listening more music, too. There was a tiny music store on the base and soon enough she became a regular customer. However, the choice there was rather limited, so after a while she started surfing the Internet in search of new, interesting music, and that was how she first became aware of a thing she’s never heard of before: blogging. She first stumbled upon a blog about music by following a link on somebody’s MySpace page, and it contained several links to other blogs. Most of them were personal blogs, more like public diaries than anything else, but then she found a page devoted solely to physics, of all things. Posts there were more like articles with explanations of some laws and principles of physics, and were meant to propagate and popularize science, written in a way that most people could understand with no more than basic, high school level knowledge of the subject. The blog’s view count was laughingly low, the layout design horrible to look at and the author’s English rather precarious, but Alice thought that his purpose was very noble and from that day forward she kept track of his posts, leaving comments to each of them and entering discussions whenever she saw an opening. At first she was commenting as a guest, but after some time she registered an account under the nickname **Tinkerbell**, which had been chosen for her, to her initial chagrin, as her official call sign.

The *Prometheus*’ squadron decided to hold a naming ceremony a couple weeks before the ship was scheduled to take flight again. The pilots were already recalled from their various duties to begin training as a group again, and the old members thought it was high time to bestow call signs to their new colleagues. Alice has never taken part in such a naming before, neither as a participant nor a spectator, but she’s heard enough to dread the occasion.

“**You have to attend the naming,**” Archer told her a couple days before the planned ceremony. “**At least once. Didn’t you have one during the training?**”

“**I was sick in the med bay when they did it.**”

“Ha! You lucked out, then. Anyway, you need to just suck it up and go with the flow on this one. Trust me, if you skip this, they’re never gonna let you live it down.”

And so the day of the naming she went with the others to the base club, resigned to her fate. It turned out to be awful enough, but not unbearable.

The six original members of the squadron, including Bolton, have formed a naming committee. Each FNG – Fucking New Guy (or Gal) – had to present themselves separately before the committee first and recount their previous exploits in uniform, before joining the 302 program. Most of them had a lot to brag about; they were the fighter elite who’s been in combat more than once. The most prominent exception to that rule was Alice. Everybody knew this, and she sensed that the whole purpose of the exercise was to see what she would do, so instead of talking about her non-existent previous combat experience, she decided to enumerate her scientific accomplishments. She listed her publications, college papers that garnered special attention of her professors, her two majors and a minor, and her Latin honors. When she finished, there was a short silence in the room, but she saw a twinkle in Bolton’s eyes and a rather impressed (or just friendly?) smiles of the five other senior pilots.

The second part of the ceremony was predictable: a whole lot of drinking. The committee has prepared a general knowledge quiz, and penalty for a wrong answer was inhaling a shot of vodka. Thankfully, this was something Alice breezed through rather easily. The only two questions that she had problems with pertained to movies, which came as a surprise to no one. Two shots were
enough to make her feel almost drunk, though. She didn’t have a particularly strong head.

Being light-headed and tipsy, however, helped her to go through the next phase of the ceremony; the most dreadful of all, when they had to make a spectacle of themselves in front of their colleagues and superiors. Each of them was provided with a costume and they were required to mount a table in the club and sing a fighter pilot song (which were mostly incredibly offensive to anybody who wasn’t a fighter jockey and full of foul language and coarse innuendos). One guy wore a nun’s habit and sung “I’m just another fucking drunk”. Another sported a ball gown and bellowed “Silver wings” (uncensored version believed to originate at Ramstein AB, Germany). Fiona Trove appeared to the crowd dressed in a slutty nurse costume and floundered through “My dear bloody wingman” (the original didn’t say “bloody”, but it was Fiona’s bow to her British ancestry). After that, Alice knew that whatever they had in store for her would be equally degrading and smutty. Her fears were confirmed when she opened a package they handed to her before she went into the restroom to change. She had a moment of panic when she thought she couldn’t do it, that she should just refuse or leave, or maybe flee through the restroom window. But then she would never escape being thought of and called a stiff prude who doesn’t know how to have fun. She may have been exactly that, but in order to have any credibility with her new squadron, she had to pretend otherwise. So she gritted her teeth and put on the clothes.

To say that they were scanty was an overstatement; she felt like a damn go-go dancer at the end of her show. It was supposed to be a fairy costume, but it basically consisted of a blue bra dotted with sequins and a mini-skirt. There were fairy-wings fastened to the back of the bra, too. The only thing missing were shoes, and as she only had the sturdy military boots, she decided to go barefoot. She looked in the mirror before leaving the restroom and didn’t recognize herself. Holy shit. She did look like a fucking go-go dancer. Except that no dancer ever felt so uncomfortable and embarrassed as she did at that moment. She closed her eyes and turned to the door, trying to slow her breathing; she was almost hyperventilating. Oh how she longed to be in a fighter jet being shot at right now! Anything would be better than this.

You can do it, she told herself doubtfully, her eyes still clamped tight. Just... look at it as another challenge. But for the first time in her life this old technique wasn’t working. She felt more panicky than ever. You’re a fucking fighter pilot, goddammit! Act like it! This didn’t inspire courage either. She was just too far out of her element here. What would her mother say if she saw her now? The thought gave her a shiver. And dad? What would dad say?

But dad knew all about this. He was an aviator himself. Alice was sure the Navy naming ceremonies weren’t all that different from the Air Force ones. And dad had his own call sign, after all. He was known as Craft, though the origins of the call sign were a mystery to his children. But that meant he had to attend at least one naming. What would he say?

Traditions are important, he’d told her at one occasion, Alice remembered. They remind us where we come from. How this whole naming fit into that? A call sign was an important element of the Air Force culture, not to mention that it was used in radio communication to quickly identify flight members. A naming was also a social event, for sure. Something for the entire squadron to partake in. And also something that everybody could identify with. If you had a call sign, it meant you were “ours”, a part of the larger community of pilots, someone who could be trusted. But why it had to be so… demeaning? Was it to make them feel like one of the guys?

And then it struck her: it was supposed to be fun. She was probably the only one panicking about the whole thing. The earlier drinking was meant to loosen their screws and give them courage to become ridiculous. She wasn’t having fun because… she wasn’t. She couldn’t escape from being herself, alcohol or not. And in light of that, what was she supposed to do?
Show 'em, she thought. Show 'em you’re not scared. Show 'em that you are one of the guys. Show 'em you are not intimidated. Just fake it till you make it.

She opened her eyes, inhaled deeply and pushed the door open. The overwhelming sense of uneasiness hadn’t left her, but she made herself walk with a calm determination. With a bit of luck they’d mistake it for confidence. As she entered the room and the gathered pilots spotted her, a predictable burst of hoots and whistles burst out. Alice straightened her back slightly and approached the table. She climbed it by first sitting on the edge of it, pulling her legs up and then standing up. Even so, they must have glimpsed something beneath her skirt because the hoots grew momentarily louder. She stood on the table with her bare feet firmly planted on the wood and sang an all-time favorite, “There are no fighter pilots down in hell”. The crowd recognized the song instantaneously, and hoots and cheers soon turned into a drunken choir, singing alongside her. When she finished, she bowed, eliciting a wave of frantic clapping, and then jumped off the table and fled to the restroom to change back into her own clothing.

When she reemerged, the naming committee was standing in the middle of the room, with the five FNGs kneeling in front of them; they were only waiting for her. She joined them and knelt next to Fiona, at the end of the line. By now, everybody was more than a little drunk. Bolton’s speech sounded slurry when he spoke up. He congratulated them on successfully completing all the tasks set for them and welcomed them as peers in the squadron. Finally, after a short explanation why it was chosen for them, they each received their call sign. One guy was named Alibaba, for he was known as a ladies’ man and it was joked that he needed only to say two words and they opened their legs for him. Another’s got Slick because of his old preference for hair gel. Fiona retained her old nickname MOB, which stood for Mommy On Board.

“You were a v’ry sharming fairy,” Bolton said to Alice when it was finally her turn. “And you like tinkering with stuff, on board and off.” He laughed at his own double entendre. “And so you shall be known from now on… Tinkerbell.”

With all the dignity she could muster, Alice thanked them for the choice, but she was delighted when the official part of the ceremony ended shortly after and she could escape to a dark corner of the club with a glass of beer and sulk for a while. Tinkerbell! Now nobody ever was going to forget the damn fairy costume. And Bolton said she liked to tinker with stuff! She felt offended. She didn’t tinker; she was a highly skilled engineer and without her help, they wouldn’t be coming back to the ship in two weeks, but in two months! Bunch of morons, she thought resentfully. She wanted nothing more than to go home, but she couldn’t yet; it would be noticed if she left so early. She didn’t get to sulk on her own for long, either; a few minutes after she sat down, Archer, Spinner and, to her surprise and alarm, Espinoza joined her.

“Hi there.” Archer threw her a radiant, but somewhat mischievous grin. “How are you doing, Tinkerbell?”

Alice rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything. Complaining about one’s call sign was not in good form.

“I think you beat everybody else with your performance today,” Archer continued to tease her. “That costume was… wow.” He fanned himself with his hand to stress the wow.

“Shut up.” Alice hid behind her beer and took a sip. Archer laughed at that, Spinner smiled and even Espinoza looked amused.

“Well, it’s behind you,” Spinner offered stoically. “And it wasn’t that bad. Been through worse namings in the past.”
“Been through better ones, too,” Espinoza commented. “Ours was maybe less spectacular, but we kept the spirit without forcing people to expose themselves to ridicule.”

“Oh, come on, sir, a little ridicule never killed anybody,” Archer disagreed genially. “And I think it did some good to our little miss pout here.”

Alice glanced at him with murder in her eyes. He chuckled.

“Come down from your high horse, Boyd,” he warned. “You have to get a bit ridiculous, a little foolish, if you want to belong to the squadron.”

“Well, maybe I don’t,” she snapped. “And I don’t mind so much that it’s ridiculous,” she said, suddenly out of patience. “I can live with the ridiculous, and the drinking, and the obscene,” she spat, though it was not entirely true. “I mind sexist.” She set her glass on the table so forcefully that a bit of beer got spilled. “I mind that men were made to wear women’s dresses because apparently that’s degrading. I mind that Fiona and I were made to wear revealing clothes because apparently that’s shameful.” She scowled. “If I want to dress in a bra and a mini-skirt, that’s fine, but it should be my choice. Being coerced into something like that by a drunk, lascivious mob of predominantly male pilots… that is not nice.”

The three men gaped at her for a moment.

“Why didn’t you refuse, then?” Archer said uncertainly.

Alice laughed a bit derisively.

“So I would be excluded from the community?” She shook her head. “No, sir. I am here because I want to be a part of something, and if it requires some sacrifices on my part, then I’ll make ‘em. But don’t expect me to enjoy it.”

Archer made a face when she said “sir” to him, but didn’t comment further. Spinner kept his mouth wisely shut, but Espinoza was looking at her thoughtfully.

“You know, you are right. We go out in space, meeting new species and cultures every other day, but oftentimes our claims at being a civilized people are void. In certain areas, we are still very backwards.”

She inclined her head to him.

“Thank you, sir.” For a moment nobody said anything and then Alice sighed and asked an unrelated question to move the conversation into a different direction. The others jumped at the opportunity and they spent another hour and a half on nicer topics.

* 

Tinkerbell stuck. Fellow pilots started calling Alice that, and soon enough the ground crew picked it up, too. She got an official name tag to fix it to her uniform with Velcro. Normally she could also stencil the call sign to her machine, but because of the nature of their service, their machines weren’t theirs in the sense that they would be outside the Stargate program. For starters, there were two pilots for each fighter; it wouldn’t do to claim a plane for only one person.
After a while, Alice got used to her new nickname. The memory of the naming was still a bit sore, but she knew she would get over it eventually. In the meantime, she threw herself into the whirlwind of preparations; the *Prometheus’s* repairs were nearly completed. At the same time, the X-304’s construction was coming to a close, too, and Alice found herself hopping from one ship to another, wishing she could be everywhere at once.

“She’s ready,” Decker told her one afternoon, about a week after the unfortunate naming. They were in the engine room of the X-304, looking over the latest diagnostic data. “The only thing left is to get her going and perform stress tests in-flight. That is going to take at least another month, though.”

Alice sighed. She would have to miss that part.

“D’you hear what they’re naming her?” The doctor continued, undeterred by the young pilot’s silence. She got used to her habitual reticence. “*Daedalus*, apparently. Seems the Greek mythology is going to be in vogue.”

Alice shrugged. The name sounded okay for her, but it wasn’t something she was particularly interested in.

“I heard you’re leaving, Doctor.” That was far more important.

“You did, didn’t you?” Decker turned to face her and smiled. “Yes, Lieutenant, I am leaving the program. After almost two years working on this ship my family life needs some tending to.”

“I can easily believe that,” Alice admitted. “You’ve been spending a whole lotta time here.”

“So have you.”

“Yes, but I don’t have a family.” The lieutenant smiled, too. “So what are you going to be doing now?”

“I’ve got some offers to teach from colleges all over the country. I’ll accept one of them.”

“Don’t know which, yet?”

“Probably MIT. I didn’t want to say, I know your alma mater is CalTech.”

Alice laughed.

“Yeah, but I’m not that into the whole school competition thing.” Her expression turned serious. “So who is going to replace you here as Head Engineer?”

“Can’t you guess?”

Alice groaned. “No!”

“I’m afraid so.”

“This ship gets all the best people, it’s not fair!”

“Well, it didn’t get you, so not all of them,” Decker remarked in an off-handed way. Alice blushed and smiled proudly at the same time. She had a great amount of respect for Doctor Decker. Receiving praise from her had an immense value for the young lieutenant.

“I can’t believe you haven’t said anything before,” Alice accused Doctor Novak when she saw her
the next morning.

“I’m sorry! I couldn’t.” Novak raised her hands in a not my fault gesture. “It’s been a real pleasure working with you, Lieutenant, though.”

“Likewise, Doctor,” Alice assured her. “Thank you for all that you’ve taught me. I do hope we’ll meet again.”

“Why wouldn’t we? You don’t mean we should die on the mission to the Pegasus?”

Alice suppressed a smile. For such a brave person, Doctor Novak could be real anxious at times.

“No, I meant that I hope I could join the Daedalus crew someday.”

“Oh, good. I mean, that would be nice.”

“Hicks gonna replace you on the Prometheus?” Alice asked hesitatingly. She wasn’t a big fan of the man.

“Nah, they gave it to Chenkov.”

“Oh. Good.” She breathed with relief. She liked Chenkov, he was a nice guy and a very good engineer. But it was curious that civilians seemed to be always given the top positions in the engineering department; aside Chenkov, the Prometheus had three other excellent engineers, all of whom wore a uniform, though.

*

The Prometheus took flight again in mid-March. They spent a week testing the repairs, mostly flying in the low orbit above the planet. The crew had additional three days on Earth after that while the ship was being stocked with supplies; they were about to go out for their first long deployment since before the 302 qualification program began.

Alice said goodbye to Archer, Spinner and Espinoza, who were staying on the base while the Daedalus was being stress-tested in-flight. She also called her mother, Jake and Aaron to tell them she’d be unavailable for some time. She had a hard time answering their questions; not so much Jake’s, though, who, being in service himself, understood the point of classification of information way better than his civilian best friend. Aaron’s curiosity seemed insatiable, and he definitely didn’t buy her story about a particularly busy time ahead. With the advent of mobile communication, it was harder to claim impossibility of connection and Alice hasn’t figured out yet how to circumvent this problem.

A day before their departure, she was sitting at a table in her room, her computer humming in the background, the only other sound being the tapping of the keys as she typed. She was commenting on the new post on her favorite blog (which was called In Layman’s Terms) when her phone started buzzing. She looked at the caller ID, but didn’t recognize the number.

“Alice Boyd,” she said to the receiver, having pushed the green button.

“Hi Alice, this is Tobey,” a familiar voice responded.
“Tobey! Hi, cousin! I tried to reach you some time ago, beginning of December, I believe, but your phone went straight to voicemail!”

“Oh, yeah, I changed my number some six months ago,” the boy explained embarrassedly. “Sorry, I was supposed to send you a message, but I forgot.”

“No problem. Anyway, how are you?”

“Good, good… I’m calling because, euh, I have a slight problem deciding something, and I wondered if you had a few minutes to talk…”

“Sure. Your dad told me you were thinking of ROTC?”

“Yeah, that’s my problem. Dad wants me to go to West Point or Annapolis, but you know me, I would suck if I had to run around with a gun…”

Alice pictured Tobey in her mind as he was the last time she saw him: a lanky seventeen year old boy in flannel shirt and torn jeans, with messy clump of dark hair and little brown eyes hidden under a bushy brow. No, he did not look like your standard jarhead or grunt. But she’s seen enough to know that appearances were often misleading. Didn’t people make assumptions about her, too? A small, redheaded girl who didn’t say much, but who turned out to be a damn good fighter pilot and an appreciated engineer. She wouldn’t make the same mistake towards Tobey; he may have not looked like much, but she knew him to be a smart and determined kid.

“You know, you don’t need to join the service if you don’t want to. Jodie didn’t.”

“Jodie’s a girl. I know you don’t think so, but in my dad’s mind she’s dispensed from duty. I’m not.”

“Still, he cannot dictate what you do in life. If you choose something you’ll hate for his sake, you’ll just end up resenting him for the rest of your life.”

“I know, Allie, but the fact is, I want to join the service. Only…”

“Yeah?”

“I want it to be a means to an end, you know?”

“You want to be an astronaut?”

“Yes.” The boys sounded embarrassed when he said it. “I know it’s stupid and will probably never happen, but…”

“I don’t think it’s stupid.” Alice interrupted him. “I think it’s an awesome thing to have a dream like that. Going out there… exploring space… who wouldn’t want to do it?”

Something in her voice must have betrayed her genuine fascination, because Tobey’s reaction was very enthusiastic.

“You understand!” He exclaimed cheerfully. “I knew you would. So you see, I have to join the Air Force to get the required flight hours…”

“Well, I don’t think you could choose a better option, especially now,” she said, smiling to herself. “But you know it’s not that easy to become a pilot, right? Completing your diploma and getting a commission is not a guarantee that you’ll get a rated position.”
“I know,” Tobey assured her solemnly. “But I have every intention to do my absolute best. If that’s not enough, then at least I’ll know I did everything I could. But, Allie, will you help me? I mean, when I’m training and everything, could I call you from time to time and...?”

“Of course, Tobey!” She reassured him. “Whatever you need, if only I’m not on duty, I’ll be there.”

“Thank you.” His tone was full of relief and gratitude.

“So, ROTC, then? You’re not considering the Air Force Academy, are you?” She prompted.

“No. Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s a great college, but I think I have a shot at getting to CalTech, if everything at school goes my way for a year longer, and that trumps any other college in the States, maybe except MIT, right?”

“CalTech does trump MIT,” Alice admonished him half-jokingly. “What major do you have in mind?”

“Um... astrophysics.”

“You mean Astronomy,” Alice corrected. “CalTech’s astrophysics classes fall under Astronomy major. You want me to be honest?”

“Yes.”

“I think you should choose something else. You will not learn much of what you’ll need later on if your aim is to go out in space. Plus, I think the NASA would much prefer a candidate with a thorough understanding of physics or computer science.” She couldn’t tell him about the Stargate program, but though some of the best minds involved were astrophysicists, they’ve picked up so much knowledge and developed such theories since opening the Gate, that studying it on a university would actually be counter-productive – because all that progress was, of course, highly classified. “You can take Aerospace Engineering as a minor, though.”

Tobey didn’t say anything for a moment.

“But astrophysics is what I find the most fascinating...” He managed at last.

“Well, you’ll choose whatever you think is best,” Alice conceded. “But if you want my advice, go for Applied Physics or Applied Mathematics.”

“I don’t want to go for Applied anything, I want to be a scientist, not a mere engineer.”

“Ouch,” she chortled. “Mere engineer? Now you’re just hurting my feelings. If that’s the case, then CalTech has great departments of Physics and Mathematics, too, not Applied. It’s still a better option than Astronomy.”

“But...”

“Tobey,” she interrupted. “You will do whatever you want. But if you trust me at all, trust me on this: Astronomy on CalTech is not something that will help you in the future. If that’s what fascinates you and you want to study it, then by all means, go ahead. But you told me you want to go to space. So you’ve gotta ask yourself, what’s your real goal?”

The boy kept silent.
“Anyway, this is something that you won’t really need to think about until the end of your freshman year. Let’s first concentrate on admission, okay?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“If you have any problems with your application, you can call me and I’ll help you.”

“Thanks, Allie. I actually wanted to ask… would you consider writing a letter of recommendation for me? The applicants are encouraged to provide such a letter from a mentor…”

Alice raised her eyebrows, even though he wouldn’t see it.

“And you consider me your mentor? Tobey… I haven’t seen you in almost a year!”

“I know… it was just a thought…”

“Listen, you still have a year ahead before you have to send in your application. I bet we’ll be talking much more during that year. We’ll see later, then, okay?”

“Okay. It’s just that… you know, you’ve graduated CalTech and it would look nice if I had a recommendation from you.”

“I know. We’ll see later. What about the ROTC?”

“I’ll be enrolling the freshman year. It’s a four-year commitment after I graduate, right?”

“That depends. If you want to be a pilot, the commitment is for eight years.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.” Alice could almost hear him frowning. “So I won’t be able to apply to NASA until I’m thirty-four?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“But…”

“Really, Tobey… don’t worry about it right now. Air Force is not a machine, people and situations are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Many things may yet happen before you’re even eligible to apply to NASA. Don’t worry about it now.”

“Yeah, easy for you to say. Dad said you’ve been chosen for some cool, mysterious assignment.”

“Your father should not talk so much,” Alice grunted. Who else has he told? “Anyway, you know that I went through Officer Training School, so I don’t know as much about ROTC, but anyway in order to enroll you’ll have to go and talk to a recruiter. He’s going to tell you everything you need to know.”

“Yeah, I know. There are gonna be things, though…”

“If you have any problems, you can call me.”

“At any time?”

Alice sighed. This was getting tiresome.

“No, I’m afraid I won’t be available at any time. But call me and leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. That may not be very soon, though.”
“What do you mean?”

“It’s not… uncommon for me to be unavailable for a few weeks at a time.”

“Why?”

“Just the nature of the job. If you prove to be good enough, you might find out one day.”

“That’s crap.”

Alice laughed.

“Yeah, loads of. But that’s just the way it is.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Anything else you’d like to ask now?”

“Not at this moment, no.”

“Good. Then I’ll be going. Good luck, Tobey.”

“Thanks, Allie. For everything. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Alice pressed the red receiver button on her mobile phone and set it back on the table. Then she leaned back in her chair, thinking about the conversation she’s just had. Little Tobey was going to join the Air Force! That is, if he qualifies. Despite his reassurances, she wasn’t sure if he was exactly fighter pilot material. It wasn’t his appearance, or academic prowess (or lack thereof; she didn’t know anything about how he fared in school, except that his father was rather proud of his achievements). But to be a pilot you had to want it. And not only as a step on the road to something else; being an astronaut was a noble, though misguided cause (what with the Stargate and spaceships and everything), but it might prove insufficient to get Tobey through the hardships and difficulties that were awaiting him on his chosen path. Sacrifices had to be made, and only the utmost determination could assure success. One had to shed one’s own will and sense of self to learn how to function in the military hierarchy. It was more than just taking orders; it was fitting your whole life into frames set by other people. Alice still struggled with it herself; how would a free spirit such as Tobey do?

She realized she still thought of Tobey as a little boy; but he was now almost an adult; he would be eighteen in a month. Eighteen! Just four short years less than she was. It used to seem like a lot when they were younger, but now the gap didn’t look that wide anymore. And at the same time, she was already a First Lieutenant in the United States Air Force, served in uniform for two and a half years, earned a Bachelor’s Degree summa cum laude from the best technical university in the country, and that with two majors and a minor, and Tobey was still a year short of graduating high school. In four years, when he’ll be her current age, he will be in his junior year of college. The gap was wider than it seemed.

Wasn’t it better that way, though? Tobey’s way? Graduate high school will all your friends, go to college, choose a major, study for four years, have fun in the meantime, learn all the little things that she’s missed out on: how to enjoy a night out, how to relax in your down-time, how to flirt, how to have relationships, how to socialize; how to live. The disparity of their situations wasn’t based on age or achievements, but rather on a simple fact that Tobey was normal and Alice was not; and everything else stemmed from that.
Face it, lass: you're a freak, she thought to herself disgustedly. But what was there to do? She was herself and that was that; should she try harder to fit into other people’s definition of normality? Her entire nature rebelled against that. And so continued in her the eternal struggle between her pride at being different from everybody and her desire for normal life experiences and acceptance of other people.
Their first deployment after the overhaul was rather uneventful right until the end. The Prometheus flew here and there, assisting SG teams, helping Jaffa to consolidate their forces and flush out the last remainders of the Goa’uld, and in the meantime patrolling the Earth’s solar system. The F-302 pilots, however, didn’t have much work; they were performing practice sorties, of course, but other than that, their services weren’t needed. The galaxy was much quieter than before; with Replicators gone and the System Lords crushed, the Jaffa were finally free and trying to rein in the inevitable chaos that followed the disappearance of their former gods. But nature abhors a vacuum, and soon enough new powers rose to prominence, previously held in check by the System Lords.

The Prometheus was going back from a mission in a far-away quadrant of the galaxy. It was nearly time to finish their deployment; they were running low on supplies and several non-essential systems were in need of maintenance. Alice was in the engine room with O’Reilly and Hicks when the ship dropped out of hyperspace.

“What’s going on?” Hicks asked from the other side of the room. Alice looked at the monitors in front of her; she was standing behind the control station.

“Nothing, the bridge gave the drop-out order,” she replied. “I don’t know why.”

The three of them shrugged and went back to their work. Half an hour passed in busy silence; there was always something to be done in the engine room. Then the wall phone rang and Hicks took it.

“Yes, sir,” he said to the microphone and replaced the receiver. Then he turned to Alice. “That was Colonel Bolton, you are needed on the bridge, ma’am.”

Alice gaped at him, taken aback.

“I am needed? On the bridge?”

“That’s what he said. I wouldn’t make him wait.”

Alice rolled her eyes, but detached her tablet from the control station and walked out of the room without another word. Why did Bolton want her now? What was going on? If it was about a mission for the 302s, they would be called in to the fighter bay through the ship’s speakers. But she, Alice Boyd specifically, was needed?

The bridge was always a busy place, people coming and going, bustling about seemingly without a purpose. Today it was even more crowded than usual; in addition to the full crew and the vice commander on watch, Colonel Pendergast himself stood near the front window and to the side, next to the plotting table; Lieutenant Colonel Bolton was with him, alongside one other man whom Alice saw for the first time in her life, but had no problems recognizing. He was tall, muscular, had a sort of golden tint to his black skin and a short dark buzz cut. He was wearing a very long, loose robe of gray cloth, but the thing that stood out the most was a golden symbol on his forehead that identified him better than anything else.

“Sir, Lieutenant Boyd reports as ordered,” said Alice, standing at attention in front of the group and raising her hand in salute. She tried not to stare at the Jaffa.

“As you were, Boyd.” Bolton waved his hand impatiently in something that with a generous dose of good will could be called a salute. Alice dropped her hand and relaxed her stance.
“Lieutenant, this is Teal’c. Teal’c, this is the pilot I told you about, First Lieutenant Alice Boyd.”

The man smiled politely and inclined his head; he kept his hands behind his back. Alice, not sure what to do, returned the slight bow.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Alice Boyd.”

“Likewise, Mr. Teal’c,” Alice replied awkwardly. “I’ve read a lot about you.”

“Read?”

“Mission reports. Your SG-1 is a bit of a legend to all of us in the Stargate program.”

He arched one eyebrow, but didn’t respond to that. Instead, he turned to Pendergast expectantly. The CO cleared his throat.

“Listen, Lieutenant, we have a job for you. We are currently hovering over a planet designated P2K-254. It used to be in Ba’al’s area of influence, ruled by one of his governors, a lesser Goa’uld known as Ahmose. The System Lords are gone now, but there are still these smaller Goa’uld here and there, maintaining control over some planets. The Free Jaffa Nation is about to invade P2K-254 in order to liberate it. However, there’s a problem.”

Pendergast made a pause. Alice frowned slightly. She thought she knew what the problem might be and why Teal’c would be here, instead of talking directly to the Jaffa High Council.

“Ahmose is a Goa’uld,” the Commanding Officer continued after a moment. “But his second-in-command, Aat, is a covert Tok’ra. She was placed there as a strategic asset, P2K-254 used to be a major planet in Ba’al’s dominion. The Jaffa High Council will not stay the attack in order to save her, and there is no way to send her a message to get the hell outta there.”

“Aren’t there any Jaffa Rebels on the planet?” Alice asked.

“There are.” It was Teal’c who answered in his deep, calm voice. “But not in Ahmose’s palace. His private guards and servants are loyal to him. We cannot risk trusting any of them.”

“Teal’c came to warn us,” Pendergast carried on. “Our alliance with the Tok’ra is suspended for now, but the Stargate Command feels that it is in our interest to help, if we can. It might not restore our previous good relations but would constitute a nice first step. A sign of good faith, if you will.”

There was another moment of silence when Pendergast was looking out the window. Alice glanced that way, too. The sight of a planet suspended in nothingness beneath them still took her breath away, no matter how many times she saw it.

“We cannot, however,” the ranking officer picked up his speech again, “seem to interfere with the actions of the Jaffa High Council. Our relations are somewhat strained at the moment, many Jaffa don’t trust us and as it is, the Free Jaffa Nation is still only trying to consolidate its forces and form a viable government. We need to stay out of this. Can you see the conundrum?”

“Yes, sir.” The important question – for her at least – was why was he telling her all of this? What could she do?

“Colonel Bolton says you have memorized the schematics of a Goa’uld Death Glider.”

Pendergast’s words seemed disconnected with their previous conversation.

Alice’s eyebrows shot up.
“Yes, sir. Though I don’t know how he knows it, I don’t recall saying that to him or anybody.”

“Lucky guess.” Bolton shrugged and smiled. “Bet you ten bucks you’re the only pilot who bothered to look up anything more than Glider’s capabilities in combat.”

Alice nodded. Her fellow 302 drivers weren’t freaks like her.

“No bet, sir.”

“It is my belief, Lieutenant,” Bolton said seriously, looking earnestly into her eyes – they were almost the same height, him maybe two inches taller, “that you possess an unequaled ability to learn new things very quickly. Maybe it’s just that you’re five years younger than my other youngest pilot, or maybe it’s just you. Whatever it is, it will come handy in this mission.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The mission is this,” Pendergast stated with authority in his voice. “You will take a Goa’uld Death Glider right when the Jaffa High Council begins their attack, Teal’c will give us a go at the precise moment. You will fly into the inner gardens of the palace, get out of the fighter and make your way to Aat. You will strap a locator beacon onto her, get the hell outta there and signal to us when you’re clear and we’ll beam you both out of there.”

Alice gaped at him. That was insane. She was a pilot, not a fucking jarhead! She was supposed to fly in combat, not run around on the ground!

“We realize that it’s not exactly what you signed up for.” Bolton’s tone was unusually calm. “But we don’t have time to go back and request an SG team, and none of our marines could fly an Airbus, let alone an alien fighter. The attack is scheduled in less than two hours. Teal’c has to return to his fleet within the next hour, tops, as to not arouse any suspicions.”

“You will go with Teal’c,” Pendergast ordered. “He has an Al’kesh nearby, you will ring aboard with him. There, you will get on the Death Glider and fly out in space, find a good spot and wait for the go order. You can use the time to familiarize yourself with the Goa’uld systems. Teal’c will feed you data from the battle so you can avoid trouble. Go straight to the palace, land and penetrate inside.”

“But, sir, how am I supposed to do that?” Alice managed; her throat seemed constricted. There was no sense in beating about the bush: she was scared. Fucking terrified.

“There are human slaves in the palace,” Teal’c put in. “You will be dressed like them. Nobody will notice you in the turmoil. Jaffa guards do not care enough about the slaves to remember their faces.”

Okay, this sounded reasonable, but it was still insane. She wasn’t trained to go on missions like this. Fuck. Why her?

“Why can’t you just beam a team of marines into the palace?”

“The whole place is shielded,” Bolton explained. “Ba’al installed jamming devices in some of his key locations, and P2K-254 was one of them. The entire palace and its grounds are impenetrable to our beaming technology. Based on the schematics, we believe it’ll be most efficient to go in from the inner garden, which can be reached only by flying in.”

“But the Death Glider is a two-seat fighter,” she said tentatively. “Can’t someone more fitted to the task come with me? One of the marines perhaps?”
She caught a glance exchanged between Pendergast and Bolton.

“We think it will be easier for just one person to get through,” Pendergast declared, and Alice translated his words in her head: *You think it’s enough to risk one asset for a Tok’ra.* A new bout of panic almost overwhelmed her. Was she going to die today?

But she knew the assignment to the *Prometheus* would be dangerous. Every time they took off, she risked her life. What gave her confidence and quenched the fear of death was simple: *training*. Flying in combat, on Earth or in space, was what she trained for. She knew how to handle her fighter, how to act when the enemy did this or that, her reflexes were honed to allow her to survive even the toughest battles. Why was she so scared of this mission? Because it was new to her. Yes, she had gone through some training right at the beginning, when she joined the 302 program; the offworld mission drills they’d done all those months ago seemed like child’s play now. She’d had no idea what she was getting into. How different it all looked when one contemplated going into a real combat situation, on the ground, where death was final and there was no escape!

And yet she couldn’t refuse. It was an order and a challenge, both of which compelled her to do it; but that was not all. There was an ally down on the planet, an ally who would most likely die if she didn’t agree to rescue her. Tok’ra or not, the invading Jaffa wouldn’t wait for explanations. Whoever was caught inside the palace, their life would be forfeit. If Alice had even a passing chance at saving even one soul… wasn’t it her moral obligation to at least try?

“How will I know where to go inside the palace?” She asked after a minute of silence. She could feel the two officers relax with relief a bit. Did they think she’d refuse, even though it was a straight order?

“We have schematics of the place,” Pendergast told her and moved closer to the plotting table. A sheet of paper lay on the surface. “As irony would have it, they were delivered to us by Aat herself, back when the alliance was still strong.”

“But she can be anywhere in the palace?”

“Most likely she will be in the throne room or somewhere near.” Teal’c pointed to a big square on the schematics. “She poses as Ahmose’s bride, she will be close to him.”

“Fantastic,” Alice murmured. It would make extracting her from there that much more difficult. “And the gardens are here?” She pointed to the map.

“Yes. This corridor leads to the slave quarters, this is the Guards’ barrack, and this should be the armory.” Teal’c’s finger traveled across the paper. “Your optimal route would be from here through this corridor and then here, but depending on the situation inside, you might need to deviate.”

Alice didn’t reply, but looked intently at the schematics. She needed to learn them by heart; it wouldn’t do to get lost in the palace, or even just look lost, arousing suspicion.

“If you run into trouble,” Pendergast added in a strange tone, almost soothing, “and you think you can’t get through, you turn around, get clear of the place and radio us and we’ll beam you out, no questions asked.”

Alice nodded in thanks. She knew it was half-true; the offer of help was genuine, but if she failed her mission (and survived to tell the tale), there would be many questions and long debriefings.

“Anything else?”
“No, sir.”

“Okay, then. Time for you two to go. Good luck, Lieutenant.” Pendergast extended his arm. She took it and they shook hands. Bolton did the same.

“Get back in one piece, Lieutenant,” he told her seriously. “We can’t afford to lose you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, go get your gear. Ring aboard Teal’c’s Al’kesh when you’re ready.”

“Yes, sir.” Alice nodded again, turned on her heel and left the bridge. She walked to her room and changed into a battle dress uniform. She knew she needed to disguise herself as a slave later on, but because she didn’t know what kind of costume that would be, she preferred to wear her BDU rather than the flight duty uniform she’d had on before. She took her tablet with her, too; you never knew when such a thing could prove useful. Then she marched off to the armory. A marine was there, apparently forewarn because as soon as she walked in, he handed her a gun, a couple spare magazines and a zat (she learned how to shoot with it during her initial training at the Mountain Warfare Training Centre). A radio, two locator beacons, a few other small items and a GDO completed the gear.

“Why the GDO?” Alice asked the marine. “I’m not gonna be going through the Gates.”

The man shrugged.

“Don’t ask me, ma’am. I was told to give you all this and that’s what I did.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. What good was a GDO if she didn’t have an iris code? But at that moment another marine came in. She knew this one: his name was Saunders, he was the leader of the on-board Marine Corps team. He saluted and then handed her a folded piece of paper. The ink on it wasn’t even properly dry yet.

“Ma’am, this is your IDC. It’s been generated minutes ago and transferred to us using sub-space communication. You have to memorize the code and destroy the paper immediately.”

Alice nodded, looked at the string of numbers, repeated it twice in her head and then took out a lighter she’s just received and torched a hole in the sheet where the code was printed. Then she threw the remaining paper into a bin. Saunders observed her indifferently. Alice checked that her gear was safely stored inside her pockets and belts, nodded to the two marines and left. The ring room was only a few paces away and she activated the transport as soon as she entered.

Teal’c was waiting for her.

“Come, Alice Boyd, we do not have much time,” he told her and led her to the cargo bay of the Al’kesh. There, taking up almost the entire space, lay a Death Glider. In a sense, it was very alike the F-302; after all, the human spacefighter was partially based on the Goa’uld machine. The Glider was more crescent-shaped and less angular, though; its wings pointed even more downwards than the 302’s, and the surface was smoother; it was also decorated with what looked like gold but was probably some heat-resistant alloy. Plus, it didn’t have any missiles or railguns, being instead armed with two huge staff cannons.

“You will have to change. You may not walk into Ahmose’s palace dressed in Tau’ri clothes.” Teal’c observed after a moment.

“I was kinda hoping the human slave costume would be long and loose enough to cover my
“Female human slaves do not wear loose clothing,” the Jaffa contradicted with mild surprise, as if it was something obvious. “Here, I have brought you this.” And he handed her some folded clothes.

“Thanks. That’s perfect.” Alice’s voice was full of sarcasm, but it didn’t evoke any reaction from Teal’c. “Listen, they’ve given me a GDO, do you know why?”

He raised one of his eyebrows in a very significant way.

“The mission may go wrong. In that case, it’s good to have another way out.”

“I see. If I fumble with the front entry, they gave me keys to use the back door.”

Teal’c just looked at her. Alice sighed. He was even more taciturn than her. That was something.

“Be right back,” she told him and left the cargo bay. She found an empty room just across the corridor and changed into the clothes Teal’c gave her.

It was a midnight blue dress, strapless and close-fitting from the waist up, but with a wonderfully loose skirt that went to her ankles. There was also a pair of sandals and a sort of veil that would cover her face from nose down, leaving only eyes visible. Alice removed the elastic band that’s been keeping her hair in place and let it flow free on her back. Then came the hardest task: she had to somehow fit at least part of her gear beneath the dress. She fastened the zat around her calf and fixed the Beretta to her thigh. That left her with a couple essentials that she couldn’t find a place for: the GDO, locator beacons, radio and spare ammo. She frowned for a moment and then decided to improvise.

The veil she had over her mouth and nose partially covered her hair in the back, too. She figured that part wouldn’t be needed, so she tore it carefully along the seam. Then she fixed the veil in place again – it hung at the front of her face just fine without the back part. She was left with a long piece of light-blue material; she tied it around her waist with difficulty, thanking her stars that she was small and slim enough. An inch or two more and she wouldn’t manage it. Having arranged the material to look like a sort of decorative sash, she hid the GDO, locator beacons and radio in the folds, making sure they wouldn’t fall out. There was just no more place for the spare magazines, so with a sense of foreboding she decided to leave them behind. The gun was only a spare, anyway; she would use the zat if needed so as to not give away her identity right away. A human slave in a commotion of invasion could conceivably be trying to escape with a zat. A Beretta would scream *TAU’RI* to anyone who saw it.

After a moment’s consideration, she also fastened a knife to her other calf. The she stood up, feeling very weird. She was unevenly weighed down; especially the sash around her waist was dragging, but there was nothing to do about it. Alice took her uniform and all the gear she was leaving behind and walked to the ring room. She placed the bundle in the middle and activated the transport; the technician on the *Prometheus* would be surprised, but Bolton would know what to do with her stuff. Then she returned to the cargo bay.

Teal’c gave her an appraising once-over; his expression was inscrutable.

“That will do well. It’s time for you to go now. I have to return to the fleet. Do you need help with the Death Glider?”

“No, I’ll be fine,” Alice assured him with an excess of confidence she didn’t really feel. True, she
did study the Goa’uld fighter’s schematics, but there was a difference between theory and practice. On the other hand, Bolton was right; she did learn new things very quickly. How hard could it be? Besides, flying wasn’t the part of the mission she was afraid of.

There was no ramp, so she had to climb on the Death Glider’s wings and then slid into the cockpit. The dress made it more difficult to get in and settle on the seat properly. The dashboard in front of her was at the same time alien and familiar. She recognized the structure from the plans, and knew what each control was supposed to do; but it was the first time she saw them with her own eyes.

“I wish you success in your mission, Alice Boyd.” Teal’c patted the metal underbelly of the fighter.

“Thanks,” Alice breathed. “Hey, Teal’c? How will I know which one’s Aat?”

Teal’c’s enigmatic expression was deadpan.

“Her eyes will be glowing.”

Alice barked a short, nervous laugh and then pushed the button to start the engine and close the canopy. There was no harness or breathing mask to put on and the fighter was mostly controlled using a large red sphere, with a few additional switches and dials. When Alice lay her hands, hesitatingly, on the sphere, in front of her appeared a Heads Up Display.

“Fuck,” Alice said to herself. All information on HUD was displayed in Goa’uld. “Just perfect.”

She has been studying the language ever since Doctor Jackson sent her some materials for it, but she’s never made it her priority. She was now wishing she had. Thankfully, she’s always been concentrating on technical terms and she now recognized most words and all numbers.

“Oh, let’s get this party started,” she murmured to herself and switched on the communication to a channel used on the *Prometheus*.

“This is Tinkerbell,” she said to the intercom. “How are you reading me?”

“Tinkerbell, this is Prometheus, we read you loud and clear.”

“This is Teal’c. I hear you well.”

“Okay, Teal’c, I’m ready, can you open the cargo bay door for me, please?”

“I will do that now, Lieutenant Boyd.”

Alice revved up the engine, which has been idling up till now, and the Glider slowly rose from the ship’s floor and hovered in mid-air. A scratching sound from behind her announced the bay door opening. She swallowed hard and very carefully turned the fighter around; the tips of its wings were almost touching the walls of the cargo hold. Then equally cautiously she pushed ahead and slipped out of the ship, feeling a sort of muffled jolt when she cleared its artificial gravity field. Then she was out in space, with the Al’kesh behind her and the *Prometheus* several klicks to her left and the planet beneath them all. For a moment she was confused; the HUD’s layout was very different than the one she was used to in her 302. But soon enough she recognized a mass of dots and dashes on the display for what it was: a 2D representation of a three-dimensional space. She remarked her relative position to the other two ships, calculated their respective distances and thus figured out the scale of the map.

“Okay,” she reported through the intercom. “Teal’c, you can get back to your fleet. Thanks for
“I will not be able to communicate with you verbally once I rejoin the fleet,” Teal’c observed causally. “But I will feed you data on our movements so you know how to fly to avoid us.”

“Boyd, it’s imperative that you do not engage any allied Jaffa vessels.” The order came from the *Prometheus* and Alice recognized Pendergast’s voice. “You have permission to engage Ahmose’s forces at will, although keep in mind the objective of the mission.”

“Yes, sir.” Alice shook her head. How the hell was she supposed to tell the difference between the Free Jaffa forces and Ahmose’s defense? They would all fly Gliders. She will have to trust Teal’c’s data and hope that the Goa’uld computer is good enough to tell a friend from foe very quickly.

Not to mention that only Teal’c knew she was one of the good guys; wouldn’t it be just peachy if she got splashed by an allied Jaffa?

“I’m gonna take this baby for a test drive now, if you don’t mind, sir,” she said, trying to sound calm and composed.

“Want to shoot at some space junk? We can eject some scrap.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, that would be great.”

“Okay, watch us fly by.”

The large dot on the HUD’s map suddenly picked up speed and started to approach her. Soon enough her view from the cockpit was obscured by a dark shape of the battleship cruising by. It took only a few seconds for the *Prometheus* to pass her. A few big pieces of crushed scrap floated in its wake.

*Okay now. Concentrate.* A crease appeared on Alice’s forehead as she accelerated to a standard battle speed and made a few sharp turns to feel the machine. Its balance was not what she was used to in a 302; the Glider’s tail was much shorter, its frame more bent, and the engines didn’t operate on a direct thrust, but rather an inertial propulsion system. All that made it more maneuverable than the F-302, but also less stable and more prone to unexpected behavior. She would need to check herself on the stick… well, a sphere, in order not to overshoot it; it could end up badly, with the worst case scenario being her falling into an uncontrollable spin in space or crashing into some inanimate object (such as the ground, for example) inside the planetary atmosphere.

After a few minutes of wild twists and dashes Alice felt confident enough to try the weapons; she veered upwards and left, checked her HUD, targeted a piece of junk floating in range and fired.

“Son of a bitch,” she said out loud before she could help herself. She was still on outgoing call with the *Prometheus*. “Sorry, sir.”

“What happened?”

“This damn thing is about as accurate as a 16th century musket, sir,” Alice puffed. “The targeting system looks like fucking crosshairs. The rate of fire is laudable, not to mention I can only shoot in a straight line!”

“You knew all that, though, didn’t you?” This time it was Bolton who chimed in.

“Yeah, but I didn’t believe,” Alice muttered, exasperated. “I can see why they rely on numeric superiority and wild volley of fire. I’m gonna try to practice some more now.”
It took her more than half an hour to finally splash all three pieces of junk the *Prometheus* had ejected for her. By that time, she felt quite comfortable with the control system, although still frustrated with the armament. It was weird no to be moving a stick to maneuver the fighter; however, the thought-control, although imperfect, was much more efficient. It eliminated the split second the body of the pilot needed to react; the stimulus was going straight to her head and instantly the proper command was being issued directly from her mind to the Glider’s steering and navigation system. Sometimes this fragment of a second was everything that separated a man from becoming a ball of fire.

It was now time to take the proper position over the planet, just outside its atmosphere; the Free Jaffa Nation attack was supposed to come from the opposite direction, so she should be shielded from their radar view by the natural curve of the orbit.

“*Prometheus,* this is *Tinkerbell,* I’m in position.”

“Good luck, *Tinkerbell,*” was all that the ship replied. Alice mentally flicked a switch and the intercom disconnected from outgoing communication. She could swear all she wanted now and no one would hear her until she turned it back on.

The timing wasn’t perfect; she had to wait another twenty nervous minutes before the map on her HUD suddenly flashed with multiple new contacts, their positions and movements fed to her in real time by Teal’c through a direct data stream.

“Here I go,” she said to herself and the Death Glider dived towards the planet. She braced herself; atmospheric reentry was never a fun experience, even with the inertial dampeners taking most of the edge off.

She was some thirty kilometers above the surface when new dots appeared on the map, this time coming from the direction of the palace. Ahmose mounted up an impressive defense: she counted at least five Al’kesh and a dozen Death Gliders. And there was something else, something huge… was that a Ha’tak? She squinted through the canopy, and thought she saw the pyramid-shaped ship rising above the Jaffa settlement adjacent to the palace, but it could be just her imagination – she was still too high to see much on the ground.

Before she achieved an altitude of ten kilometers, the battle begun; she could now see the Free Jaffa vessels flying in at a steep angle, maneuvering wildly, and bursts of light that indicated shots fired. Ha’tak or not, Ahmose’s forces were doomed to fail confronted with the armada coming to get them.

Alice skirted the area of the battle with a wide berth. She’d decided to try and come to the palace from the other side; but as she was just starting to veer towards it, a new squadron of Al’kesh appeared on her radar. It seemed that the Free Jaffa’s tactic was to put Ahmose between two fires. Alice puffed, irritated, and mentally kicked the gear to maximum. She needed to slip in between them before the two opposing forces clashed. Unfortunately the Goa’uld noticed the danger coming for them from the other direction and part of their defense was already turning around. Ten seconds later two Gliders swerved away from the group and were now coming straight onto her.

Alice took a deep breath. Her mind was totally clear, her focus razor-sharp; she was aware of all impulses coming in, her brain was collecting, analyzing and reacting to information within milliseconds. The combat zone as represented on the HUD map was three-dimensional in her mind, even though she couldn’t see it all; the main body of Ahmose’s forces engaged with the Free Jaffa vessels on her two o’clock, the additional aircraft coming from the left, the smaller part of the Goa’uld fleet breaking free and turning towards them, the two hostiles approaching her at supersonic speed, her own little fighter heading straight towards the palace now. The surface of the
planet beneath her was all blurred, the clear skies above deep blue, and the only sound she could hear was the steady beat of her heart. She was high on adrenaline.

Ten seconds passed; the two enemies coming onto her were now no more than a klick out.

*Let’s play, shall we?* She thought. *We’ll see just how much you know about maneuvering.*

A second later, she suddenly dived, reducing speed slightly; the oncoming Gliders came on, firing their cannons, made missed completely and passed her; just as they did, she pulled sharply up into a barrel roll, made a tight inverted loop, effectively turning a hundred and eighty degrees, and just like that she was sitting on the hostiles’ tails; cutting the distance was as easy as increasing speed. The two fighters in front of her broke in opposite directions in wide arches; she chose the left one to pursue, turned after him nose-down, rolling low, and then swung sharply in his direction, immediately climbing up to his plane again. Having thus cut the corner of his turn, she was on his six and within range. Flying just a little above him, she mentally stepped on the gas and her fighter lurched forward, firing from its cannons. She matched the fleeing Glider’s speed and then started to overtake it slowly, creeping closer and closer and readjusting her aim as she went. She could swear it took minutes, but it was actually over within fifteen seconds; she saw a satisfying blast of light and suddenly the enemy was falling behind, dropping from the sky in wild spirals. The other hostile was just returning, still a good ten klicks away; a quick glance onto the HUD map told her she was now closer to the palace than the Glider. It was gaining speed, chasing after her, but she knew it wouldn’t get her anymore. The battle was now being fought on two fronts, on her right and left, and the route to her target was clear. She started descending, reducing speed at the same time, slamming on the brakes in her mind. Nevertheless, she overshot and had to go into a spin over the palace, still slowing down and dropping lower and lower until she finally stopped right atop the inner garden. The Glider hovered in place, more stable than any helicopter she’s ever flown.

“Cool,” she murmured to herself. That was something her 302 couldn’t do. She had to concentrate on the next problem, though; there were armed Jaffa issuing from entrances to the building, their staff weapons trained on her Glider; they were apparently unsure whether she was a friend or foe. Alice frowned; that was a complication, although hardly unforeseen. She turned slightly, readjusted her aim and fired. Energy bursts from her twin staff cannons sent torrents of dirt flying up, Jaffa jumping away behind trees and columns, some falling down on the ground, dead or wounded, she couldn’t say. It was time. She turned the outbound communication back on and fired a few more shots.

“This is *Tinkerbell,*” she said. “Target reached, I’m heading out.”

The down-pointed tips of the Glider’s wings touched the ground lightly and the machine hung over the grass.

“Roger that, *Tinkerbell.* Do a job, will ya?”

“Yes, sir.” The canopy was already opening. She grabbed the edge of the cockpit and swung herself out, landing a few feet down with a graceless thud. Crouched, she stole a quick glance around; there were no Jaffa in her immediate vicinity so she rose and, keeping low, she ran beneath the Glider’s wing and then hid behind a nearby tree. The garden was huge; it didn’t look half as big from above. She knew she didn’t have much time, though; the guards would soon enough reach the fighter. She needed to be inside the palace by then.

She made towards the direction she knew the door was, crossing the garden in long, hurried strides, from tree to tree. The last one had her hiding behind a column supporting the second story of the palace, creating a corridor open to the courtyard. There she saw the door she needed to go through; only it was guarded by two Jaffa with staff weapons and angry expressions.
Alice took a deep breath. This was it. Now it was truly beginning; the dogfight and her slipshod run through the garden was just a preface, the worst was going to come now. Adrenaline whooshing in her ears, she crouched down behind the column – she was slim enough that it hid her entirely – and got the zat from its holster fixed to her right calf. Then she straightened up, inhaled deeply again and swung around the column. The Jaffa didn’t even see her before she had her first shot; the one on the left, farther from her, fell down, swathed in blue sparks. Before the other one had his staff up and aimed, Alice fired again and he joined his comrade on the ground. She turned around quickly to see if there was no danger behind, and then run to the entrance. It was the kind of sliding door she saw before on the Al’kesh, after the Prometheus had been hijacked by Vala Mal Doraan. Thankfully, it wasn’t locked; it was enough to touch a control switch on the right and it slid open. She slipped inside and looked around.

The corridor was poorly lit, but the walls were glowing slightly with reddish gold, much like on the Al’kesh. She didn’t see anyone for the moment. She squatted down again and hid the zat beneath her skirt. Then she went left, initially at a brisk pace, but then she thought better and made herself go slower. Her heart was beating so hard she could swear anyone ten feet away would hear it; there was cold sweat trickling down her back, and her breathing was rugged like she just ran a marathon. But it wouldn’t do to give herself away by running around. She was dressed like one of the human slaves expressly so that anyone who happened to see her on the corridors would think she belonged there; she had to act like it.

The first part of her journey through unfamiliar corridors was uneventful; she didn’t meet anyone, nor see or hear anything. Only her thumping heart, heavy breathing and soft footfalls were audible. Despite having memorized the schematics of the building, finding her way proved more difficult than she’d thought it would be. Everything looked the same to her, walls, doors, twists and turns of corridors. If not for her better-than-ordinary recall, she’d be hopelessly lost. As it was, she almost made it to the throne room, which for Goa’ulds often doubled as control room, where she expected to find both Ahmose and Aat, before a sound of approaching footsteps stopped her in her tracks. For a moment she just stood there, unsure what to do: bolt and hide in one of the corridor’s turns? Go for the zat? Use the disguise? There was no time to dawdle; whoever was coming, he was about to turn the corner. Alice took a deep breath, inclined her head a bit, looking down, and resumed her walk, now even slower. Ten seconds later a Jaffa guard appeared in front of her. She stopped and bent her knees slightly, bowing in his direction. He gave her one perfunctory glance and hurried past her. Soon the sound of his steps died down; Alice was, again, quite alone.

She let out a long breath. Straightening up, she proceeded down the corridor again, picking up the pace a bit now. She was close.

She didn’t meet anyone else on her way; it was weird. She thought there’d be panic, or at least some busy helter-skelter. Instead – dead silence. There weren’t even any guards posted before the throne room’s door. She paused there, standing close, touching the cool metal surface with the tips of her fingers, listening intently. Not one sound came to her from inside. Frowning, she moved to one side and pushed the switch. The door opened and she looked out into the room.

It was grand; tall and wide with walls coated with gold and incrusted with precious stones, a rich carmine carpet spread on the floor from the throne all the way to the main entrance. It was also completely empty.

“Crap,” Alice muttered to herself. This was not good. Now she had to run around the place looking for freaking Goa’ulds.

“Tar Kree!” A sudden booming voice cried behind her. She jumped, turned around and beheld two Jaffa warriors in full armor standing not five feet away. A moment of panic rushed through her and
then adrenaline, already pumping in her veins, kicked her into the next gear; her mind was suddenly clear, fight or flight instinct temporarily suspended. She dropped to her knees and bowed low, almost touching her head to the floor, looking up through her eyelashes.

One of the guards said something to her; her rudimentary Goa’uld did not allow her to understand it fully, but she recognized a few words: *slave, forbidden* and *punishment*.

“*Shek kree, quell shak!*” Alice replied in a low, trembling voice; at the same time, she was slowly moving her hand down. If they started shooting, she’d have no more than a couple of seconds to reach her zat. But the second Jaffa said something to the first one and waved his hand in the direction of the empty throne room. His companion agreed and then addressed Alice. She understood *slave quarters* and nodded wildly, murmuring something incoherent for better effect. The two Jaffa ignored that and walked by her; the one who first spoke to her kicked her in the side as he passed, his metal-covered boot burying itself deeply in her flesh. She moaned, but didn’t get up until their footfalls faded completely away. Then she straightened up with another groan; she’d have a giant bruise. *But I guess I was lucky he didn’t feel like shooting me for good measure,* she thought, standing up and taking a few deep breaths to calm down. She needed to move from there. But where to? Obviously, Ahmose was nowhere near; the lack of guards was indication enough. Where then?

An invasion has just started; any self-respecting commander would make their way to an operations room, as did the Goa’uld, surely. But if not in the throne room, then where such a place could be located? It had to be secure, possibly fortified… maybe like a bunker? That meant underground. Alice recalled the schematics; there was a staircase leading down just at the end of the corridor on the other side of the throne room. So that was probably where the two Jaffa have gone. The idea of following them was not pleasant at the least, but short of abandoning the mission right there and then, Alice didn’t really see any options. So she took another deep, calming breath and crossed the empty throne room.

She proceeded slowly through the corridor, pausing at every turn and listening for footsteps or other sounds before peering ‘round the corner. She saw the first guard planted in front of what she knew was the entrance to the staircase. There was no way he would let her go down, not in the middle of an invasion; she had to neutralize him. Would it be enough to incapacitate him with a zat? Or should she kill him?

She got the zat out and then stood motionless for a moment, eyes half-closed, weighing her options. If she shot him once and then had to retreat the same way, she’d have to face him again; not to mention that he could raise an alarm before she could finish the mission. But could she just kill him in cold blood? She wasn’t sure.

She gritted her teeth and stepped around the corner with the zat ready in her hand. The Jaffa was taken completely by surprise, but she just couldn’t bring herself to make the second shot. She stepped over his body, still sparkling with blue lights and entered the staircase. It looked empty, but she made her way down cautiously, taking time before each turn to listen attentively. About three floors down, she began picking up some muffled sounds, as if coming through a thick wall. Raised voices, machine beeping, fading scream from afar. Then she reached the last landing and a quick glance over the handrail told her there were more guards waiting on the bottom of the stairs. Two Jaffa on the left, standing close to each other, one on the right and one farther away, deeper inside the corridor.

*Here goes nothing*, Alice thought to herself, took off the veil from her face, inhaled and run across the landing, lifting the zat to her eyes. It didn’t have an iron sight like a proper gun, but the decorative part on its head could help in aiming nevertheless. A zat had an additional advantage
over a pistol: it was possible to take out multiple targets with one shot, if they were close enough. The two Jaffa on the left fell with cries of – surprise? pain? Probably both. But it alerted the remaining two guards and when Alice started flying down the last flight of stairs, both of them aimed their staffs at her. She knew how inaccurate these weapons were; she also knew that they were dangerous in the hands of skilled warriors, and any Goa’uld’s private guard must have consisted of the best of the best. So she did the only thing that seemed logical: she launched herself off the stairs, diving down head first. This kind of acrobatics looked cool in movies, but in real life landing on the ground with outstretched arms and legs was very painful and it blew the wind out of Alice for a second. Nevertheless, she instantly rolled to her left, ending up on her back, and an energy burst scorched the floor in the exact spot where she lay a split second before. She rolled again in another direction, narrowly missing another shot, and now lying on her stomach, she took aim and fired. The Jaffa closer to her fell down, but the other one was running to her, his staff trailed on her. Gasping for air, she pushed herself off the ground and jumped to her feet, trying to ignore the sharp pain it caused in her hands and knees. Another energy blast flew so close to her it actually singed her hair on one side; she stepped sideways, fired a shot and missed. The Jaffa was near now, firing again; Alice swerved, narrowly avoiding a hit and finally got the last guard with a rather haphazard shot to the leg. It didn’t matter, though. The blue sparks spread over his entire body and he fell to the ground with a grunt, unconscious like his companions.

Alice stood rooted to her spot for a long while, her heart beating like a fluttering bird in a cage, sweat pouring down her face. The corridor stank of plasma discharges from staff weapons, and she could clearly discern the stench of her own burnt hair.

“Get it together, Boyd,” she mumbled to herself, trying to calm her breathing. She didn’t have much time. At any moment someone could appear in the corridor and the next fight might not go so well. She willed her limbs to move and walk down the corridor. There were doors on both sides, but they appeared to be shut and unused, so she continued until turning the next corner revealed a wider passage, split into three ways a dozen or so paces further. Alice came up to this junction slowly and cautiously, taking care to not make any noise; the sounds she heard before were clearer now. The voices and beeping were coming from the right; she guessed that it was where the Ahmose’s command center must be. But there was also something coming from the left, too; it sounded like a crackle of electricity, muffled voices and low moans. Prison, she thought and an idea struck her at once. What if Aat wasn’t with Ahmose? What if he made her? There was a full Jaffa invasion going on; if Alice were in Aat’s place, she would have wanted to get out. There was no need to keep up the pretense anymore; Ahmose was going down, one way or another. Wouldn’t she try to get out? Possibly. But would she be able to? Probably not. And so if she was caught, wouldn’t she be in a holding cell, here in the dungeon? There was another thing, too. Who else Ahmose would possibly hate enough to continue torturing when there was a full scale attack being launched against him? She was supposed to be his bride; from what she knew about the Goa’uld, Alice guessed they were not forgiving types. Probably even if he knew there was no way for him to get out alive, he’d like to punish the woman who’d betrayed him.

This was only speculation, Alice didn’t have any real reason to think she’d find Aat imprisoned there. But something inside told her she would; some instinct or hunch made her turn left and continue on until she reached the first holding cell. It was empty, but the voices and the moaning were coming from close by. There were no guards in the corridor, though. Slowly, clutching the zat in both her hands, slippery with sweat, she passed cell after cell, nearing the place where the corridor ended with a solid wall. There, however, in the last cell on the left, she finally found her target.

Aat was a pretty blonde with big, blue eyes; she looked thirty, though Alice knew that even the host must have been much older, kept in shape by the Tok’ra symbiote. The way Alice knew it was Aat was because she was spread-eagled on the wall, chained, and a giant of a Jaffa without armor.
poked her with a torturing device Alice knew was called Rod of Anguish; when it touched the woman’s flesh, she cried out, pulling on her manacles, and a white light shone from her mouth and eyes. The moment the stick was clear of her body, she slumped down, visibly exhausted, but she lifted her head defiantly and her eyes glowed.

“Torture me all you want,” she said in a deep, echoing voice. “I will tell you nothing.”

“Good,” the Jaffa answered, lifting the rod again. “My Lord Ahmose does not require your cooperation. He only wants your pain.” And he stabbed her again. The light flashed and she let out a long, agonizing wail. Alice, hidden behind the corner of the wall, squeezed the zat slightly, but she didn’t shoot. She didn’t know if the energy from the zat could travel through the Rod of Anguish and hurt Aat, too, but she thought she’d better not take a chance. Watching the torture was difficult, though; it seemed to last and last, and all she could do was avert her eyes and screw her face up. Finally, it stopped; the Jaffa took away the stick and allowed Aat a moment of rest.

“Did you have enough?” He said with a perverse pleasure in his voice. “I am not supposed to kill you… yet, but I love testing my subjects’ strength. I, ah… enjoy my work.”

Alice emerged from behind the corner, put the zat between the bars of the cell door and aimed at the Jaffa.

“Oh, yeah?” She said, cold fury sweeping over her. “Well, enjoy that, you son of a bitch.” And she shot him, twice in quick succession. He fell to the ground and behind him, Aat was looking at her with an expression of vengeful satisfaction mixed with surprise.

Alice stood motionless for a moment, just looking; realization of what she’d just done was dawning on her. She killed someone. She killed him in cold blood, while he had his back to her. He was alive ten seconds ago, and now he lay there, quite dead. She killed someone. No; she murdered someone. She didn’t need to do that; she could have shot him once, only to incapacitate him; but she saw him torturing this poor woman, and something in her broke. She murdered him. It wasn’t necessary; it wasn’t a hostile sitting on her tail, looking for an opening to blast her out of the sky. It wasn’t an enemy shooting at her with a weapon, trying to kill her. He had his back to her. She could have just stunned him. But she got so angry that she murdered him. It wasn’t defense; it wasn’t even justice; it was revenge.

“Are you just gonna stand there and wait for others to come?” Aat’s voice broke through the haze and Alice blinked wildly. It wasn’t the deep, echoing double with which the Tok’ra spoke before; it sounded normal, human. Was it the host talking?

“Sorry,” Alice mumbled and stepped over to the cell door. It wasn’t locked, so she just swung it open and stepped inside. Trying to avoid looking at the dead body on the ground, she walked up to the prisoner and eyed her shackles. They were secured in a way that didn’t require a key and could be easily opened – unless you were the one chained to the wall. Alice unlocked one and had to catch Aat before she slid to the ground; she was very weak. Supporting her with one hand, Alice fumbled with the other manacle for a minute before this one, too, cracked open. Both women took a few steps and Alice helped the Tok’ra sit on the ground for a moment, to gather her strength.

“Thank you,” the woman said, still in a human voice. “But who are you? Are you one of the slaves here?”

Alice didn’t respond at once; she looked out the cell into the corridor to make sure they were still quite alone.

“I’m Lieutenant Alice Boyd, United States Air Force,” she said then, turning to Aat. “A Tau’ri,”
she added by way of explanation. “I was sent here to rescue you. That is, if my presumption is correct and you truly are a Tok’ra named Aat.”

The woman raised her eyebrows; her previously rapid, shallow breathing was calming a little.

“I am Mona. I share a body with Aat.”

“So you’re her… host?” It felt odd to be talking to one woman, knowing that there are in fact two minds in there.

“I am. We have suffered greatly at the hand of this brute.” Mona waved her hand towards the dead Jaffa. “Aat took a step back to put us back into order. At least enough to walk and leave here. I presume you have a plan?”

“I do.” Alice nodded, checking the corridor again. Still empty. “Although I expected to find you sooner. By now surely Ahmose knows there’s an intruder in the palace.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much.” Mona shook her head and let a short moan slip. “Our whole body still hurts… anyway, Ahmose is more preoccupied with the invasion right now than a single intruder penetrating his precious palace. I wouldn’t be surprised if he boarded his Ha’tak and tried to leave the planet altogether.”

“He wouldn’t fly away far,” Alice remarked, remembering the Free Jaffa fleet. “Anyway, my ship is orbiting the planet and they can beam us up, but the palace is shielded. We must get clear of the affected area first, and that means we need to make our way out of the palace and through the surrounding grounds until we’re well and far enough. It won’t be easy.”

“We don’t need to go that far,” Mona contradicted. “It’s true that Ba’al installed a jamming device here in the palace after the Tau’ri started using the Asgard beaming technology. But Aat and I know where it is and how to turn it off. If we deactivate it, your people can transport us from here right away, correct?”

“Yes.” Alice arched her eyebrow. “But won’t it be heavily guarded?”

“Yes.” This time the woman’s voice sounded deeper again, and her eyes flashed at the same time. “But we still have a better chance of surviving if we go after the jamming device.”

Alice nodded.

“Aat, I presume?”

“Yes.” The Tok’ra got to her feet; she still looked frail and hurt, but apparently she was well enough to walk again. “I believe I owe you a debt of gratitude, Tau’ri. It is not something I ever thought I’d say, but… thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We may still end up dead.” Alice waved her hand dismissively. “If you’re well enough, we should move out. The sooner we get the hell outta here, the better.”

“Yes.” Aat bent over the body of the dead Jaffa and took his zat. “The jamming device will be installed in the power generator room. Follow me and I’ll show you.”

Alice shook her head.

“No, I’ll go first, you tell me where to go and cover my back. Come on, let’s go.” And she walked out the cell door.
As you wish.” The Tok’ra said from behind her, just a shade of disapproval in her voice. She probably didn’t enjoy being ordered around by a Tau’ri, but Alice didn’t trust her strength enough to let her go first just yet.

They got to the junction of the corridors without any issues, but Alice knew it was about to change.

“Left,” Mona breathed behind her and Alice nodded appreciatively. Aat’s deeper tones were much more audible; it made sense for the host to speak.

They turned into the middle passage; if they proceeded straight ahead, they’d get to Ahmose’s command center, but as it was, they were crossing an empty corridor, going slowly and pausing every few feet to listen. After a few minutes they reached a huge double door; Alice touched the control switch to open it, but nothing happened.

“It’s shut,” Aat stated the obvious. “Let me try, if we’re lucky Ahmose hasn’t changed the codes yet…” She put her hand on the switch, waited for a moment, frowning, and then the door slid open.

Alice stepped sideways to hide behind the wall, but it was too late; someone inside spotted her and an energy burst whooshed past her as she moved. She managed to take cover, however, and subsequent shots couldn’t reach her. As they died down, Alice risked a quick look behind the corner into the room.

It was round and huge; bigger than the 302 bay on the Prometheus. There was an enormous machine standing in the middle, shaped like a trunk of a tree, wider at the bottom and split into several parts beneath the ceiling; a number of pipes and cables were issuing from them. Crystal control stations and other machines were lined up against the walls. Of more vital importance at that moment, however, were about a dozen Jaffa planted all over the room, all of them with staff weapons trailed on the entrance. The moment they saw Alice’s head emerging from behind the wall, they took aim and fired; she just managed to avoid getting shot by a hair.

“Not good,” she said to Aat, who was hiding on the other side of the door. “I counted thirteen hostiles.” The aviator terminology permeated into her speech when she was stressed, apparently. “This seems to be the only entrance, so if we’re going in, it’s through here.”

“I only said we would have a chance at surviving this,” Aat commented. “It’s too late now to go back. The Jaffa would have warned Ahmose that we’re trying to get into the generator room by now and more troops are going to come after us.”

“Now or never then.” Alice took a deep breath and looked straight at the Tok’ra who nodded and they both swung around their respective corners with zats in their hands.

Alice’s first shot got the closest Jaffa, but then she had to swerve hard to avoid getting hit by a plasma blast from a staff weapon. She literally twirled sideways and got another accurate shot. On the other side of the room Aat was firing rapidly, but she was more stationery; by the time her third victim fell, another Jaffa scored a hit. The Tok’ra landed on the ground with a scorched wound on her shoulder, but it didn’t immobilize her. A human wouldn’t get up after such an injury, but she wasn’t exactly human; she rolled over, avoiding another shot, fired again and jumped back to her feet, teetering a bit, which actually saved her from a hit.

At the same time Alice was dancing around the room, moving fast and changing directions of her steps often. She didn’t have the same kind of luxury as Aat; one direct hit from the staff weapon was probably all it would take to kill her. She was shooting less frequently, too, and so by the time the Tok’ra dispensed with her sixth target, Alice still only scored three. They were fighting in close
quarters now, too; a little more and they would be able to club her over the head with their staffs. Four Jaffa were left; Alice got one with a fluky shot to the head, but another flanked her from the other direction. He fired, she dropped to the ground, landing on her already sore palms and knees, her hair singed again. She raised her zat and squeezed, but missed; another energy blast burst right next to her hand. She pushed herself up to a kneeling position, shot and scored a hit this time. She was so preoccupied with the Jaffa on her flank, however, that she neglected to observe the remaining two; one was dodging Aat’s rapid fire, but the other Jaffa came up to her from behind and struck her on the back with his staff. Pain exploded somewhere over her collarbone and she was sure it broke; the force of the blow threw her down on the floor and knocked the wind out of her. The zat flew from her hand and slid somewhere under a crystal control station nearby. For a second Alice felt as if she was unable to move; she didn’t know if it was the pain or the suddenness of the experience, but it overwhelmed her. But she heard approaching steps of the Jaffa’s heavy boots and her adrenaline spiked again, triggering the fight or flight response. She managed to roll over to her back, even though it sent another wave of pain to her brain; the Jaffa’s staff was coming down again, aimed at her head now. She knew there was no way for her to par such a blow; she just wasn’t strong enough. So she rolled again and the staff struck the floor with an audible crack. Alice tried to get up, but her body was protesting and she fell again. The Jaffa was raising the staff again and this time he’d get her, she was sure; he just needed to take a wider swing. But he never got the chance; the moment the staff started moving down again, a blast of blue light enveloped the Jaffa, he cried out in surprise and pain, and fell right next to where Alice was lying. Few feet away, Aat was standing with her zat raised, breathing hard, the wound in her shoulder blackened and bloody. There were no more Jaffa in line of sight now.

“Thanks,” Alice squeaked, her voice even higher than usual.

Aat dropped her arm, walked up to Alice and offered her hand to help her up.

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said with a ghost of a smile; it looked weird coupled with her deep, echoing voice. “We still have to get out of here.”

Alice just moaned in reply. Her entire body felt as if it had been through a close encounter with a press machine. Or a lawn mower. She slowly straightened her back and it felt as if her bones were on fire; but she didn’t think she had anything broken, after all. She wanted to tell Aat to get on with it and turn the damn jamming device off, but didn’t get the chance.

The first energy blast burst two feet from where the Tok’ra was standing. They both turned and stared at half a dozen Jaffa running through the corridor towards the entrance to the generator room.

“The door,” Alice choked, diving in the direction of the entrance. “Get the door!”

They both run, but Aat was closer and got there first. She smashed the control switch and the door slid into place, but not before two of the Jaffa got through. The Tok’ra could have taken at least one of them, but instead she pointed her zat at the switch and fired. Blue sparks danced over it for a moment and narrow columns of smoke began issuing from the crevices. The five seconds lost were all that the Jaffa needed to get to Aat. Two staffs came down on her, she blocked one of them but the other buried itself in her side, pinning her to the wall.

And then two rapid shots ringed in the closed room and blood and brain fragments splashed the wall and Aat’s face; Alice had gotten her Beretta from the holster fixed to her thigh and fired two quick rounds, making 9 millimeter holes in Jaffa heads. The guards slid down on the floor.

Alice breathed and dropped down the gun. Aat looked at her and wiped her face with her hand.
“I short-circuited the door switch, but it won’t hold for long,” she said as if nothing happened. “We better get on with it.”

“Yeah.” Alice’s voice was very low, almost a whisper. She blinked a couple of times and averted her eyes. So much blood. She couldn’t swallow and there was something wrong with her hearing; she could swear the shot still rang in her ears, while all other sounds were muffled.

Aat walked to one of the crystal control stations, contemplated the shelves for a moment and then pulled one out. A line of crystals glowed slightly. She removed one of them and threw it on the ground, where it broke into pieces.

“Should be all,” she said to Alice, who still stood rooted to the spot.

“What?”

“Your people can beam us out of here now.” There was impatience in the Tok’ra’s voice now. From behind the door came sounds of energy blasts; the Jaffa were trying to get in.

“Right.” Alice blinked rapidly again and reached to her sash, fumbling with the knot for a moment. Her fingers seemed numb, like when it was too cold and she had no gloves. At last she got the locator beacons and the radio out. “Here, take this.” She handed one of the beacons to Aat and then flipped the radio on. “Prometheus, this is Boyd, over.”

“Lieutenant!” A crackled, distorted voice came out from the speaker. “We were beginning to worry. What’s your status?”

“Sir, I have the target and we’re ready for evac.” Alice looked at Aat and frowned. “Be advised, we’re both a bit roughed up.”

“We have a medical team standing by,” came the response. “Beaming you up… now.”

Alice closed her eyes, but the flash of white light penetrated through her eyelids anyway. A moment later it was gone; the air around was colder and it smelled fresher, though with a tint of something that made her think of machines. She opened her eyes.

They were back on the bridge of the Prometheus. Pendergast and Bolton were both standing in front of them, and behind lurked a couple of EMTs.

“Welcome back, Lieutenant,” Bolton said, smiling widely at her. “Fucking good job!”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Aat, I presume?” Pendergast stepped closer and extended his hand. The Tok’ra shook it. “I am Colonel Pendergast, the commander of this ship. Welcome aboard the Prometheus.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was now human again. “I am Mona, Aat’s host. Aat took a step back to heal us.”

“Why don’t we help her, then? Our medics will take care of you now. Both of you.” Pendergast nodded to Alice. “We’ll talk when you’ve rested a bit.”

“Thank you, Colonel. That will be adequate.” Mona inclined her head. One of the EMTs approached and gestured for her to follow him. Alice half turned to go after her, then hesitated and looked at her squadron commander.
“Report to the infirmary now, Lieutenant,” Bolton ordered. “We’ll have a debriefing later.”

“Thank you, sir.” Alice nodded and left the bridge. It felt odd, this sudden passage from fighting for her life down there to inaction here. Every step she took seemed harder, as if her body was going stale; she knew it was the effect of adrenaline wearing off, perhaps even shock setting in, but knowing didn’t make it any better. She felt empty inside; like all the energy was suddenly sucked out of her. She went through the doctor’s examination in a haze, not remembering half of her answers, and only reacting more lively when he checked her collarbone for fractures and then bandaged her palms and knees. When she was finally allowed to lie down, she welcomed the nothingness that enveloped her instantly and plunged into a dreamless sleep.

* *

The debriefing lasted several hours. Aat wasn’t very chatty and considered the whole thing beneath her, but cooperated in her own reluctant way, maybe moved by gratitude at being rescued from certain death. The *Prometheus* dropped her off on a planet with a Gate and returned to patrolling the Solar System. Alice, of course, couldn’t avoid being thoroughly grilled about the events on P2K-254 and by the end of the day she was utterly fed up with the entire proceedings. It wasn’t wholly bad, though; she had to admit that it was quite nice to hear variants of “good job” coming from Bolton at several points during the debriefing.

“And how do you feel now, Boyd?” He asked eventually, at the very end of their meeting.

“I’m okay,” she replied, keeping her eyes cast down. “Sore. Bit tired.”

“Well, good. I’m letting you off the hook now. You can go get some well-earned rest, Lieutenant.”

She nodded in thanks, saluted and left the briefing room. It was mealtime and she hoped Fiona would be in the mess, or otherwise not in their room. Alice needed a moment alone. She had just lied to her squadron commander.

She wasn’t okay. She was alright physically; though her entire body was aching, it wasn’t anything worse than she’s had after some heavy-duty hand-to-hand combat training. It was her soul that was bleeding.

She got to her room – empty, thankfully – and sat down on her bunk. She looked at her bandaged hands, remembering how it felt when she landed on them, tearing off her skin, the burning pain; she remembered the excruciating spasm going through her as the staff came down on her back; the stench of scorched plasma and tinged her; the agonizing moans of Aat, the sudden stillness of her torturer after she, Alice, shot him twice in the back; and the twitching corpses of the two Jaffa in a pool of their own blood. That last image made her shiver.

She killed three people. She had killed more in air combat, but that was different. When you shoot a missile into a fighter, that’s it: a weapon striking a machine. You may know that there’s a driver inside, you may feel bad about killing him, but you can rationalize it. You killed an enemy, someone who would have killed you if you didn’t get him first. It was so easy to dismiss them when you haven’t seen their faces. But the three Jaffa she’s killed yesterday weren’t just some obscure representations of some vague enemy. They were real people, creatures walking, talking, thinking, *feeling*. Yes, they were enemies; but they were also someone’s sons and brothers and husbands and fathers. And the worst were their faces; each of them was now burnt in Alice’s near-
perfect memory.

They didn’t need to die. The Jaffa from the cell, she could have just stunned him. The other two, she could have aimed at their legs or arms. She could have just stopped them. They didn’t need to die. They had their backs turned to her. She literally shot them in the backs. She was a murderer. And she was praised for that today! Bolton actually applauded when she described the struggle in the generator room! She felt sick.

How did other people do this? How did her brother do it? She knew he had to have killed people before. He’s been over in Iraq for a tour just after the invasion. He rarely talked about it, but always made light of it. Kind of like pilots joked around and bragged about how many hostiles they splashed. But this wasn’t like that. This wasn’t war. It was murder.

She bowed down, putting her head between her legs, her arms wrapped tightly around her chest. Her breathing became quick and shallow, adrenaline rising. She wasn’t just a killer now; she was a murderer. She shot people in their backs for no reason at all.

The door clicked. Alice straightened up quickly, trying to wipe her face from the sea of emotion that was overwhelming her. She looked at Fiona who’s just entered the room.

“Hey,” the major said to her. “I heard some rumors about what you did down on the planet yesterday. Nice job.”

Alice felt like her face muscles were frozen, but she willed herself to give her roommate a ghost of a smile.

“Thanks.” She rose and turned to the door. “I’m gonna grab something to eat.”

“Sure, sure.”

Alice fled the room, but instead of the chow hall, she went to the engine room. Hicks was on duty and for the first time in her life, she was glad for it. He tolerated her because she outranked him, but they didn’t really get along so after a few courtesy words, they could lapse into – albeit slightly uncomfortable – silence. Alice forced herself to focus on work. She needed to keep busy, or she would start thinking – and *feeling* – again. She couldn’t let herself do that; someone might notice and she couldn’t let anybody see her fall apart. She had to deal with this… whatever this was. This weakness. She had to get over it somehow. She just didn’t know how.
They finished their deployment three days after Alice’s adventure on P2K-254. The *Prometheus* then landed in its dock in Groom Lake for restocking and maintenance and most of the crew got two days of special time off. It coincided with a weekend, so really they had four days free of duty. Alice spent them in the base, hanging out with Archer and Spinner and visiting the *Daedalus*.

The ship was finished. It was fully equipped, furnished, pristine. Twelve 302s were awaiting their maiden voyage in the bay, the masterpiece of alien and human technology hummed ceaselessly in the engine room with last-minute diagnostics, the crew was moving in with their personal effects. It was a matter of days, two weeks tops, before they would finally begin the farthest journey any Earth ship has ever made. They calculated that getting to the Pegasus galaxy would take around eighteen days. Eighteen days! Just three months before, the *Prometheus* attempted to make its way across the galaxies and it was supposed to take her *months* to get there. The jump in technology between the BC-303 and X-304 – or rather, as it was about to be renamed, BC-304 – was incredible.

“I wish I was coming with you,” Alice told Doctor Novak during one of her visits in the ship’s engine room. “I know we know nothing about what you’ll find there, but… I don’t know. Maybe it’s the calling of the unknown and undiscovered.”

“You have something of a scientist in you.” Novak smiled nervously. “Me, I’m just an engineer. I think I’d rather stay in the Milky Way.”

“And yet you’re going.”

The civilian shrugged, half-raising her arms in a *what can I do?* gesture. But Alice could see that even she was excited with the prospect. And Archer and Spinner wouldn’t shut up about it at all.

“Who knows what we’re going to find there?” Archer mused one evening when they sat around a bar table, sipping beer. “I mean, maybe we’ll find living Ancients? How cool would that be?”

“Very,” Alice admitted. “But equally unlikely. Don’t you think if there were living Ancients in the galaxy next door, there would be some trace of them here? I mean, these are the people who built the Stargates. They actually started all life in the Milky Way. Wouldn’t you drop by every now and then to check up on your legacy?”

“Buzzkill.” Archer frowned. “I do hope though that we’ll find Atlantis. Or wherever our expedition had gone to. Not sure if they’ll be alive, of course, but still… ’d be nice to know what happened to them, y’know?”

“I am willing to bet at least some of them survived,” Spinner put in. “I knew one of them who went, a helo pilot named John Sheppard. A good guy. One of those who’d rather disobey orders than leave a man behind.”

“Here’s to those asshats.” Archer raised his glass in salute. Spinner toasted, too, but Alice just rolled her eyes.

“More likely he’s long gone,” she snapped. “You’ll probably find a barren planet in an empty galaxy.”

“Oh, don’t be like that!”
“It’s called being a realist.”

“Sure, Ms. Glass Half Empty.” Archer shook his head. “What’s gotten into you?”

Alice raised her eyebrows.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been on edge since you got back. What’s wrong?”

She waved her hand.

“Nothing is wrong,” she lied. “I’m fine.”

“She’s just grumpy ’cause she ain’t coming with us,” Spinner opined, but Archer kept a thoughtful gaze on her face for a while after that, even though they’ve changed the topic. And anyway Alice didn’t talk much for the rest of the evening and left early.

The truth was, of course, that she wasn’t fine. She couldn’t sleep at night. She lay awake in her bed until wee hours of the morning and only got an hour or two of shut-eye per day, if any. That made her tired and cranky, but more than anything, it was emotionally exhausting. Because it wasn’t unicorns and rainbows she was seeing at night. She was reliving the events on the P2K-254. Specifically the moments when she killed the Jaffa in Aat’s cell, and the two in the generator room. Their faces kept flashing in her memory, she saw them each time she closed her eyes, and even when she managed to fall asleep, it was always restless and filled with nightmares. And inevitably, the next day, she felt worse, always worse. So much so that people around her started noticing. Archer and Spinner didn’t say anything, but she saw their concerned expressions. And even on the phone, she couldn’t hide that something was wrong.

“Has something happened, honey?” Her mom asked when Alice called her a couple days after touching down in Groom Lake. “You sound stressed.”

Alice sighed and closed her eyes. Of course there was no escaping mom. Denying everything would be futile. The woman might have paranoid schizophrenia, but she knew her daughter inside out. Alice would try to cover it up, mom would pretend to believe, but she’d know anyway.


There was silence on the other side of the phone for maybe two heartbeats.

“Did you have to kill someone, sweetie?”

Alice smiled in spite of herself. Her mother’s instinct was spot-on, as always. She didn’t reply, though. But mom knew.

“You’re just like your dad,” she said in a low voice. “He couldn’t talk about it either, but I knew as soon as he came home. It haunted him, I could see. There was something…” Mom stopped suddenly, as if suspending the phrase in the air. Alice knew she probably checked out for a moment, but this time she didn’t press, didn’t remind her of the topic. And so she was surprised when her mother picked up her own thought after a moment. “Something he said to me once. It was years later, you were in school by then, I think. He said that there was a moment after he woke up, just before he opened his eyes, when everything was perfect. And then he remembered and everything just went dark.”
Alice bit her lip. So dad was conflicted, too? But dad never had to shoot anyone in the face, much less in the back. He only shot hostiles with his Tomcat’s missiles.

“It was very depressing, I thought then. But then he said the most amazing thing,” mom continued. “He said, ‘And then I open my eyes and I see you by my side, and there’s Allie’s and Jake’s laughter coming from their playroom, and everything is perfect again’. Romantic, eh?”

Alice bit her lip harder, trying to suppress a sob. That was… that was so dad. Sweet, and genuine, and so damn wise. Except she didn’t have an antidote, a family that would give her some reprieve. She did have a nearly perfect memory, though. The faces she saw in her dreams didn’t disappear when she opened her eyes.

“I miss dad,” she choked, silent tears streaming down her face now.

“He’ll be back, honey,” mom replied. “He’s just away on deployment. He’ll be back in a couple of months.” She suddenly sounded confused. Alice’s heart felt even heavier. She couldn’t bring herself to correct her mom, so she asked an unrelated question and the conversation steered into happier regions. But when they finished, Alice sat on her bed, gaping at the cellphone with an empty stare, tears drying on her cheeks.

This wasn’t helpful. This was opposite of helpful. She didn’t need reminders of what she’d lost, she needed cheering up. Yes, that was it. And so she selected another number from her contact list and pressed send.

“Aaron Starr speaking!” Her best friend’s voice was a bit out of breath, but perky enough. Alice willed herself to sound cheerful.

“Either you haven’t looked at your caller ID, or you’ve removed me from your contacts,” she said. “Now, which is it? Admit!”

“Hi, Allie.” Aaron laughed. “I was just doing my morning jog, I have a headset on.”

“Morning jog? It’s almost ten AM!”

“Yes, exactly. It’s morning to normal people,” he teased. “Nice of you to call me up finally. I’ve left you some dozen messages.”

“Why?” Alice rolled her eyes, though obviously he couldn’t see that. “You knew I was busy. I told you I’d be.”

“Did you just roll your eyes on me?” Aaron pretended to be offended. “You did, I heard you do it!”

“Oh, please.”

“What’s with that, though? Busy ain’t the same as unreachable, is it? I mean, even in the most remote parts of the world, there have to be phones and stuff, right?”

“Oh, Aaron, don’t start. Can’t you just take it at a face value?” She snapped. She still hasn’t figured out how to explain her long absences to her family and friends.

“Me? Never. But you know that.” He sounded a bit angry now. “Allie, how long have we been friends? Twenty years?”

“Nineteen, I think.”
“Nineteen. That’s quite a while don’t you think?” He paused for a moment, but Alice didn’t reply. “So don’t try to sell me that crap. You’re better than that.” She still wasn’t saying anything, so he continued: “If you want out of this friendship, have the balls to tell it to me outright.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Alice snarled, but she could feel a drop of panic seep into her voice. “When I say I’m busy, I’m busy. And yes, unreachable.” She stood up and began pacing the room. “For fuck’s sake! I’m trying here not to lie to you, asshat!”

That actually rattled him. “What?”

Alice took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. This confrontation was long overdue, but it didn’t make it any less difficult.

“I am in the Air Force, you moron. Ever heard of it? And I’m an officer. I’m doing important stuff. If I am not telling you something, it’s not that I want to pull one on you! Can’t you see?”

“You’re saying that what you do is so freaking secret you can’t even make a damn phone call?”

“I am not saying anything. And the term is classified. Secrets are things schoolgirls fail at keeping.”

Aaron was silent for a moment and she could almost see him, frowning, cogs turning in his head.

“You can’t even say where you are when you’re not there?” He said finally. “Everything about your job is classified?”

“I’m saying I can’t confirm how much of it is classified.”

“That’s insane.”

“That’s the U.S. government, darling,” she sneered. “Even now, I’m breaking the rules. I’m supposed to sell you a cover story, you know, but I don’t want to lie to you.” She paused. “So don’t make me.”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t ask any questions.”

“I’m saying you can ask whatever you want, but don’t press me. If I can, I’ll answer. If I can’t, I won’t.”

He deliberated for a moment.

“Sounds fair. No lying, then?”

“No lying,” she promised. “But be prepared, it may be somewhat frustrating for you. I won’t be able to say much.”

“Like what’s got you on edge?”

Alice groaned. “Not you too!”

“Not the first to catch it, huh?” Aaron said with a dry chuckle. “You’re not that hard to read, Allie. You’re normally so nice and complacent, it’s really visible when you get angry.”

“I’m not angry, not really,” she sighed. “More like… bitter.”

“So what happened? Can you tell me?”
“No.” Alice plopped down on her bed again. “But it was pretty gruesome.”

“It’s eating at you now, isn’t it? Keeping you up at night?”

“Yeah. I can’t… I see it in my head all the time.” Alice lay down and stared at the ceiling. “Not the highlight of my life.”

“Well, I’m sure whatever it was, you did the right thing.” Aaron assured her. It stung; his confidence in her was so completely misguided. How couldn’t it be? She never thought she’d be able to shoot someone in the back. It was new to her, let alone him.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” she mumbled, but because she couldn’t elaborate, she decided it was best to change the topic. “What about you? How’s the whole Jeanie situation going?”

Aaron exhaled audibly into the receiver.

“Well, Jeanie is no longer part of my life,” he confessed with a tinge of sorrow in his voice. “We split.”

“And how do you feel about it?”

“Crappy, that’s how I feel. I miss her, but I can’t be with someone I can’t trust. And, you know… if she told me from the start that she had a kid, we may have been able to become, I don’t know, a family of sorts… I don’t know. But clearly she didn’t trust me enough to tell the fucking truth, either, so I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

“I’m sorry,” Alice professed. She truly was. Aaron seemed so happy with Jeanie. “I hate to see you sad.”

“Yeah, back at ya.” Despite his sentiment, she heard a smile in his voice. “I’ll be fine eventually. That’s the beauty of the human condition, you know. We heal.”

“I hope so,” Alice sighed. “Anyway, what about the band? Are you guys done with the tour?”

“Nah, we still have about a month of traveling through the bitter colds of the North.” Aaron sounded tired now. “It’s been fun, but with all that’s been going on, I’m kinda glad it’s almost over. Of course, as soon as we’re back to LA, we’re gonna lock ourselves up in a recording studio to prepare the new album, but at least we’ll be staying in one place.”

“Must be nice to have a home to go back to,” Alice mused. She didn’t really have one since going off to college. There was her parents’ house, of course, but it was not a home. It was a place she stayed at when she was in town.

“It is. You should get one,” Aaron joked, but there was an undertone of concern in his voice, too. He never really accepted her choice to enter the service. He never said it out loud, not in so many words; but she knew anyway. She wondered if he genuinely thought she didn’t fit into the military life, or was it more of a being a girl in a man’s job thing. He didn’t seem to have the same issue with Jake, even though Jake enlisting meant losing him from Aaron’s band.

“Yeah, someday, maybe,” she agreed.

“I need to go now, I’m almost home,” he said. “Walked half of my usual jogging route. I blame it on you.”

“Oh please, your jogging is more like walking anyway,” Alice teased and they both laughed.
Aaron couldn’t get over the fact that she was in better physical condition than him. Maybe there was a teeny tiny bit of a sexist in him, after all.

“If you say so.” She heard the tinkling of his keys and the sound of door opening. “Gotta go. Call me before you go AWOL again, okay?”

“Sure, Aaron. Take care.”

“You too. Bye.”

“Bye.” Alice pressed the red button on her cellphone and let her hand fall down on the bedsheets. She wasn’t sure if she felt better after that conversation. It was undeniably good to talk with her friend, and clearing the atmosphere a bit helped, too. But his blind faith in her, while flattering, made her feel worse about herself. It was proof that she did something unlike herself, something that didn’t measure up to what she always claimed to be: a good person. A good person doesn’t shoot others in the back.

Her phone rang. Alice sat up and looked at the caller ID. Jake.

“Hi, Jake,” she answered it. “I was just about to call you.”

“I figured. I just talked to mom. What’s going on, Allie?” Jake didn’t beat around the bush.

“What did mom tell you?”

“That you weren’t feeling well because of something you did.”

Alice sighed. “Well, it’s true.”

“What’d you do?”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can.”

“Don’t be a prat, Jake.” She frowned. “I’m telling you that I can’t.”

“Did you have to splash someone?”

“Yeah, but it’s not about that.”

“Oh?” Jake was audibly surprised. Well, there was no reason for him or anyone else to think she’d ever be in anything other than air combat. She was a pilot, after all. “But I thought…”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“You have to.”

“Jake…”

“I mean it, Allie. Don’t you think I know what you’re feeling right now?”

He had a point, of course. Jake spent eleven months in Iraq, right up until he got hurt and was shipped back home. After his wounds healed up and he was deemed fit for duty, he was assigned to Twentynine Palms, a Marine training center that prepared troops for deployment in the Middle East. He’d know about shooting people.
“I can see their faces,” she said in a small voice, for a moment forgetting that she wasn’t supposed to say anything. “When I close my eyes, I see their faces.”

Jake was silent for a moment.

“Yeah, that sucks. I know.”

“When does it stop? When did it stop for you?”

“It didn’t yet,” he admitted. “I don’t think it ever stops, not entirely.”

“Then how do you cope? How do you go on?”

“You go on.” Jake’s voice was unusually soft. “You wake up in the morning and go to work. And you let it make you a better soldier, a better person.”

“How?”

“Any way you can.” He paused for a moment. “In the midst of a fight, there’s no time to think, to wonder whether you have to shoot to kill or only incapacitate. In a fight, you always shoot to kill.”

“Is that so?”

“It is,” he assured her forcefully. “Of course that depends on the parameters of your mission. If you intend to question your target, killing them will be a last resort, but that’s pretty specific and doesn’t happen that often. Tell me, if you’re in air combat, do you aim your missiles to disable the enemy or to take him down?”

“Take him down,” Alice conceded. “But I always hope the pilot will have the wherewithal to eject safely.”

“You may hope that, but you still aim to kill.”

“Okay, but what if the enemy has his back on me?” Alice asked. “Hypothetically speaking,” she added, though she knew it wouldn’t fool her brother.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jake replied gravely. “You take the shot.”

“But that’s murder.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he snapped at her. It took her aback. “There’s no such thing in a battle. An enemy is an enemy, and you do everything to eliminate him and you use whatever advantage you have. Haven’t they taught you that in that officer school of yours?”

“It’s different with fighters.”

“No, it’s not. It’s the same exact thing. It’s you or them. Don’t ever think for a moment they would hesitate if the roles were reversed. They’re out to get you.” She didn’t reply, so he continued: “That’s what being a professional soldier is about. I don’t care what branch you are, it’s always the same. You or them. You achieve the objective, you survive the mission, you keep the collateral damage down to the minimum.”

“You mean civilian casualties?”

“Civilian and allied military both. At some point you’ll have to cope with losing friends and teammates, too. It’s going to be worse for you ‘cause you’re an officer, you actually lead people
Alice smiled in spite of her mood. “I really don’t.”

“Right,” Jake puffed. “I forget. You just a pilot. But someday you’re probably going to be a… what do you call it? A flight leader? You know, like the one who calls the shots in a formation.”

“Yeah.” That was true. For now, she was merely a lieutenant, but if she survived long enough and kept getting promoted, at some point she’d be leading a flight, and then maybe even a squadron, who knew?

“It’s not an easy life you’ve chosen, Allie,” Jake said in a serious tone. “It’s not all flying around and being clever. You knew that when you joined up. I don’t know what were you doing shooting people on the ground, but if it happened once, it probably will happen again. You’ve gotta ask yourself if you can pull it off.”

“I don’t know,” she confessed, her voice so low it was barely audible.

“If that’s any consolation, I think you can,” he told her confidently. “I’m not saying it will be easy, but you’re smart enough to make it through the toughest parts.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“You’re never sure, that’s your problem,” he pointed out. If anyone knew about her confidence issues, it was Jake. “So let me say it in a different way: if you want it hard enough, you’ll find a way. You always do. It’s challenging, I know, but… it’s that or quit the show.”

He said the magic word: challenge. Of course, he knew exactly what buttons to push with her. He knew exactly what made her tick. There wasn’t another soul on the planet – or in the universe, really – who knew her as well as Jake did, not even Aaron or mom.

It was a challenge. And she wouldn’t let it beat her. She wasn’t a quitter. She still didn’t know how to fight her own emotional distress, but she was sure she’d do anything that proved necessary. She would not quit. She would go on.

“For what it’s worth, it does get better with time,” Jake added in a softer tone. “Never really goes away, but you learn to live with it. Makes you stronger in the long run.”

“I believe you,” she said, and she really did.

“Good,” Jake declared. “Now, tell me, how long are you going to be on the base?”

“Who says I’m ever leaving the base?” She asked innocently.

“Right,” Jake scoffed, but didn’t push her. “Call me up before you not go, though, ok?”

“I will,” she promised. “And Jake… thank you.”

“Always at your service, lil’ sis,” he chuckled. “Bye.”

“Bye.” He was first to hang up. Alice sat on her bed for a while afterwards, her mind occupied with what she just heard. She realized the impossible happened: talking with Jake has actually cheered her up. Not exactly banished all the ghosts, but just like that, it was suddenly easier to endure. There was new determination to get through it in her now. And all that he said about it being no different than fighting an air battle was actually pretty reasonable and logical. Something she could
understand. The tangled mess that were her emotions and beliefs seemed clearer and more unequivocal now. She knew she’d continue to feel bad about what she’d done, but she also knew she’d be able to function normally again.

That night she was finally able to fall asleep and slept soundly, without waking up, until morning.

*

It was Monday and they were back to work, on Earth duty for now. Alice still acted as an auxiliary engineer for the Prometheus; however, she was relegated from the engine room to the bridge to help run diagnostics on some of the secondary systems. It was boring and monotonous, requiring only sporadic attention when the program produced updates on the ongoing results. Alice chatted lazily with Major Davidson, the only other person on deck. The Vice Commander oversaw the maintenance checkup of the ship, but at that moment he didn’t have much to do, either. Alice quite liked him; he wasn’t pompous or anything, and although he wasn’t necessarily the sharpest tool in the shed, he did his work properly and he respected his crew. They were just comparing notes on the newest movie hit that smashed the box office – which Alice actually saw because it was based on a comic she’d read when she was little – when an airman entered the bridge and stood at attention.

“Sir, you’re required in the command center immediately,” he gasped. Judging by his trouble breathing, he must have run all the way there. Davidson stood up at once.

“Lieutenant, shut down all diagnostics and tests ship-wide, bring her as close to deployment-ready as possible without restocking,” he ordered Alice and then he was gone. The airman saluted to Alice and ran after him. She raised her eyebrows and began the procedure of shutting her programs down – which was more complicated than it seemed if she wanted to do it properly. Then she got ahold of the ship’s intercom and broadcast the CV’s orders to everybody on board. She waited for all teams to report back and then left the ship and walked to the little room just outside its dock, which held a small office staffed by two sergeants. She told them to page all crew of the Prometheus and warn them they may get called in for immediate deployment at any time. They were, after all, a combat-ready unit. That done, she didn’t really have anything more to do, so she went to the only place she thought she could get some more information: the chow hall in the main office building. That was where all commanders – and head scientists from Groom Lake lab facilities – had their offices, so it would be the easiest to pick up any news there.

She wasn’t the only one who had the same idea. At least ten other pilots were perched up around one of the tables, an excited buzz of their voices drowned in the general noise of the room. Alice walked up to them to listen in; Archer and Fiona Trove were there, but she didn’t see Spinner.

“What’s going on?” She asked quietly when she reached them.

“I wish we had made the bet,” Archer answered her. “You’d lose. We’ve got news from Atlantis and they’re alive!”

“What?” That was probably the last thing she expected to hear. It was impossible. After nearly a year of total silence, two weeks before the Daedalus’s scheduled departure for Pegasus, news from the Atlantis expedition? Fuck. How could that be?

“They’ve managed to open the Gate and send a message through,” one of the other pilots said;
Alice thought his name was Widenberg. “I heard it only lasted like a second, but it was all that was needed.”

“What kind of message can you send in a second?” Another person wondered. “S.O.S?”

“Please.” Alice rolled her eyes. “With the right compression rate, you could send tons of data in one second. What did they say, though? What’s their status? What’d they find?”

“Atlantis.” Archer’s eyes were glowing with excitement. “Actual freaking city of the Ancients!” Then he chortled. “Minus the Ancients. It was empty when they arrived.”

“I heard it was sunk underwater when they came there,” Widenberg added. “It resurfaced upon their arrival. But apparently it drained the power or something, because they are without the shield and they cannot use the control chair, same as the one that shoots those Drones that took out Anubis’ ship over the Antarctica.”

“How do you know all this?” Someone asked. Good question, pal, Alice thought, curious as well.

“I have a buddy in Stargate Command.” Widenberg grinned. “Anyway, their situation is crappy, because without the shield and the Drones, they can’t really defend themselves, and they need to, immediately.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Apparently there’s this human-eating species spread over the Pegasus galaxy.” Widenberg’s voice grew grave, although there was still an excited undertone audible in it. “I don’t know much about them except that they are the ones that drove the Ancients out of Atlantis.”

A reverent hush fell on the group; any enemy that could defeat the Ancients must surely be reckoned with.

“And they’re coming to get them now,” Widenberg continued after a small pause. “There are a few ships on their way to Atlantis as we speak. Our guys don’t have the ZPM to dial home for long enough to get back, but they managed to open the wormhole for the second it took to pass the message.”

“So what do they expect?”

“I don’t know. I think they just wanted us to know what happened to them.” Widenberg shrugged. “There’s no way in hell we’re going to be able to help them, though. The best we can do is to bring back the bodies once the bad guys finish with them. Even if we go now, it’s eighteen days to get to Atlantis. By the time we show up, the city might be gone.”

“Or maybe not,” Espinoza’s voice pulled all of them upright. He was standing with Bolton and another man with lieutenant colonel insignia a couple paces away. They all looked grave, but there was determination in their expressions, too. “We have our orders, ladies and gentlemen. We’re leaving in six hours. I want my squadron ready to roll in five. We meet in the main conference room in twenty for a brief, that’s when you get details.”

The pilots assigned to the Daedalus dispersed immediately, leaving just a handful of people who were either from the Prometheus’s squadron or the local Groom Lake one.

“I’ll catch up with you before we go,” Archer promised Alice before leaving.

“Make sure that you do.” She nodded and watched him go until Bolton cleared his throat, attracting
the attention of those who stayed behind.

“It’s no official introduction yet,” he said to them, “but since Espinoza is leaving earlier than predicted, I guess we can make an unofficial one. Everyone, this is Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Clarke, he will take over those of you who stay in the Groom Lake base, while the Daedalus crew goes off to Pegasus with Espinoza.”

Clarke was tall and bulky, not in the body-building way, though, but rather sitting-job-without-much-exercise kind of way. His blonde hair was so thin and cut so short that he looked almost bald. To Alice he seemed vaguely familiar, although she couldn’t exactly place where from.

“Hi, nice to meet y’all,” Clarke said in a deep bass voice. It sounded like a thunder and was so peculiar that instantly Alice knew where she met him before: he was one of her teachers in the Officer Training School. She remembered that he had a busted leg, which was why he was put on teaching duty until it healed up. She also remembered that he didn’t particularly like her; he was always trying to prove to her that she didn’t belong in the Air Force. *Jerk.*

_Wonder if he remembers me?_ She thought, but deemed it unlikely. Probably had lots of cadets whom he didn’t like, right?

“Oh, but I know you!” His booming voice contradicted her five seconds later, when Clarke lied eyes on her. “Alice what-was-it, Bones or something?”

“Boyd, sir,” she answered, suppressing a sigh and smiling politely instead. “I’m surprised you remember me. I was a cadet at the Officer Training School when Colonel Clarke taught there,” she explained to the other pilots gathered.

“Oh really?” Bolton picked it up immediately. “And what did you think about our little star here, Matt?”

Clarke’s smile was rather tight and didn’t reach his eyes.

“Well, let’s just say that I’m as surprised to see her here as she is to see me, I’m sure.”

Alice replied only with a steady gaze. *What an asshole.*

“Colonel Bolton, sir, can you tell us anything about the Atlantis mission?” Fiona came to her rescue and redirected the conversation to something everyone was interested in.

He deliberated for a moment.

“I guess there’s not really much sense keeping it from you,” he decided. “Your colleagues from the Daedalus squadron would make sure to inform you anyway.” He waved his hand dismissively, narrowly missing Clarke’s arm. They looked pretty comical against each other – Bolton dark and short, although my no means insubstantial; and Clarke tall, burly, with very light skin and hair.

The pilots gathered more closely around him; it seemed to Alice that there were more of them now. News traveled fast.

“So you know already that we’ve had communication from our expedition to the Pegasus galaxy. They have found Atlantis, the city of the Ancients, empty and desolate, on the bottom of an ocean. It rose on the surface when the shield that kept it safe for millennia gave way. That left them vulnerable, though. With no ZPM, they couldn’t dial home or power up the shield, and it turns out Pegasus is inhabited by what they called Wraith in their comms. It’s a sort of humanoid species that literally feeds on human life energy.”
“How does it do it?” Someone asked.

“I don’t know, it’s not like we’ve had that much time for details,” Bolton shrugged. “Anyway, Atlantis expedition was able to open a wormhole to Earth for exactly 1.3 seconds. The data burst that we received included their situation and mission reports, tactical assessment, city specs and a small portion of the Ancient database.”

“Really?” Alice breathed, her eyes glowing with excitement. “What sort of information was there in the database?”

Bolton chuckled. “Figured you’d be the one to get excited about that. But I don’t have any specifics. What I do know is that Atlantis’ situation is not so good. There are Wraith ships en route and without the shield and the Ancient control chair, the city stands no chance of defending itself. Doctor Weir decided to evacuate her people and set up a self-destruct so that the Wraith don’t get Atlantis in their hands.”

The still-growing crowd of people gathered let out a collective gasp of shock. Alice herself felt as if someone punched her in the gut. What the fuck? After all this time, they finally know that the city of the Ancients truly exists, and just like that they’re going to destroy it? All that knowledge, all that legacy… just gone?

“But it’s not going to happen,” Bolton continued after a moment’s pause. “General O’Neill devised a plan to save the city, and it was green-lighted far above. A confluence of things allowed it to happen, really. Apparently we’ve just recovered a ZPM from a dig in Giza. Don’t ask me how, though, ‘cause I know nothing of that.”

“A working ZPM?” Fiona whistled. Alice nodded her surprise, too. Damn! All this time, there was a ZPM on Earth! Kind of hard to believe.

“Yeah. So the plan is to install the ZPM on the Daedalus and fly to Pegasus. It should shorten the journey considerably.”

“Eighteen days to what? Three or four?” Alice mused. ZPM was incredibly powerful and could possibly propel the ship even faster than that, but not even the Asgard upgrades on the Daedalus could allow for it.

“Three days.” Bolton nodded. “Of course that alone wouldn’t change anything for our Atlantis expedition. They have hours, not days.”

“But we can use the ZPM to open a wormhole from Earth and send them reinforcements,” Alice interposed wonderingly. “Can’t we? Once the troops are through, we take the ZPM, install it on the Daedalus, and go full throttle on it to get to Pegasus and save the day.”

For a moment there was silence where all gathered pilots gaped at her.

“Wow. That’s exactly what the plan is,” Bolton admitted. “The reinforcements are about to go through.” He checked his watch. “In less than an hour. Then the X-304 gets the ZPM, they make a short test run and in five and a half hours, out they go.”

“Truth be told, the chances of success are quite small,” Clarke interjected, his face screwed up just a smidgen. “But General O’Neill was adamant about not leaving our people behind. And about saving Atlantis itself.”

That’s because General O’Neill is one of the good guys, Alice thought. Unlike you, dickhead.
It was a crazy plan, of course. Half a dozen things could go horribly wrong and not only prevent them from achieving the objective, but dooming either the Atlantis expedition, or the reinforcements, or the Daedalus crew, or all of them at once. Still, it was the right thing to do. Alice felt herself tremble with excitement. Atlantis! Real, actual city of the Ancients. How much knowledge, how much data, what wealth of information could await them there!

“Well, now you know,” Bolton summed up, gesturing around. “And with that, you’re all dismissed.” He and Clarke turned to leave immediately, but the others stayed behind to talk some more. Alice checked her watch and decided to use the time when all the Daedalus crew was on a briefing to go visit the ship one last time before it flies out god knows where and for how long.

The X-304 was completely empty when she entered it. The silence was actually a little eerie, especially when one knew that in a few short hours the ship would be flying off to another galaxy. It gave her a thrill just to think about it, even though she herself was staying behind. She went to the engine room, where she spent so much time in past few months. She didn’t touch anything anymore, just stood there for a while, feeling slightly bereft, knowing that she was missing out on an incredible opportunity. Alas, there was nothing she could do to change that and so after a few minutes she turned away and left.

She wandered about the main facility for a while, waiting for the X-304 crew to finish up their briefing. Then the doors of the main conference room opened and the crowd of almost two hundred people spilled into the corridors. She fished out Spinner and Archer from the throng to say goodbye.

They both looked uncharacteristically serious, but their eyes were glowing with excitement, and she saw that they were raring to go. They didn’t talk long; the two senior officers had to prepare for the journey and didn’t have much time to do it.

“I wish I were leaving with you,” Alice told them. “It sucks to see you go when I have to stay behind.”

“Judging by your track record, I don’t think you’re going to be bored on the Prometheus either, you know,” Archer said. “We’ve been idling by in this base for way too long while you were having all sorts of fun out there.”

Fun wasn’t exactly how she would put it; the faces of the three Jaffa she’s killed on P2K-254 flashed before her eyes, but she dismissed it for the moment.

“Well, now it’s your turn.” She shrugged. “Just… be careful. Come back in one piece, both of you, okay?”

“Yes, mommy.” Archer actually rolled his eyes at her.

Spinner just smiled. “We’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“Sure.”

“Take care of yourself, Alice.” Archer for once sounded quite serious; the effect was kind of spoiled, however, because he then impulsively bent forwards and gave her a bear hug. And Alice, for once, didn’t cringe away, but actually returned the hug.

“You too. Come back safely.”

“We’ll come with scores of great bar stories to tell,” Archer chortled, pulling away.
“I’ll try to get some, too.”

“Just not too flashy, huh? I won’t stand being overshadowed by a freaking infant.”

Alice pretended to get mad, but couldn’t help snickering, too.

“Oh, no, she’s at least a toddler now,” Spinner put in with a chuckle. “Take care.” He patted her arm affectionately.

“See you around, guys.”

They both sent her one last smile and went on their way. Now she felt really abandoned. There was no way of knowing what they would find in the Pegasus galaxy. What if the Wraith were so powerful that even the Daedalus couldn’t take them? What if they had to deploy the 302s and one of them – or both – would get hit, get shot down? They have become her friends, despite their age and rank differences. True friends; and she didn’t use that word lightly. Before them, she only had Aaron and Jake. There were Aaron bandmates, too, but they weren’t so close; they didn’t keep in touch except when they met at gigs and parties. Archer and Spinner were the first people she really felt she had the same kind of intimate connection as with Aaron; maybe not as deep – they didn’t know each other quite that long, and there’s something about growing up together that changes the dynamic between two people forever – but true and strong nonetheless. She couldn’t stand the possibility of losing either of them. With such unpleasant musings, she returned to her apartment to wait out the remaining five hours before the Daedalus would launch.

*

It was going on four o’clock when the tapping on the door interrupted her reading. She had been trying to kill time before the scheduled launch of the Daedalus. Alice put down her book and opened the door, expecting to see Archer or Spinner on her doorstep, perhaps come to say goodbye again. She did not expect Espinoza.

“Colonel,” she exclaimed in surprise.

“Hi Boyd,” he said with a warm smile. Alice moved to make way and gestured for him to get inside. Then closed the door behind him and stepped back.

“I didn’t expect you,” she said, not knowing what else to say. She was often lost in the intricacies of social life in the military, but she was quite positive that it was not normal for an ex-commander to visit his ex-subordinate before going off for a mission. But then again, their excursion to a gig in Las Vegas wasn’t either. Could that mean that Espinoza thought of her as a friend, too? She wasn’t exactly sure if they were friends, what with the age and rank gap, and the fact that they didn’t hang out all that much. But maybe he did count her as a friend – or at least something more than an ex-member of his squad.

“We are leaving in three hours,” he said a bit wistfully. “I came to say goodbye. No idea when, if ever, we’re going back.”

Alice pondered that statement for a moment. After coming back to her apartment, left to wonder, she had grown more and more worried. The mission was fucking insane, all of it – sending troops through Stargate to help the defense and then the mad flight through space across galaxies to rescue the remainder of the expedition and those additional troops from an enemy they knew next to nothing about! Granted, the Daedalus was a formidable ship, but there was no guarantee it would be any match to the alien vessels. And even if so, it was more likely than not that they’d find only smoking debris of the city, nothing left to rescue. But if not, if there was a fight, if they sent
out the F-302s... Alice’s heart constricted at the thought of possibly losing Archer and Spinner, and, yes, Espinoza too. How likely was she ever to find friends like that ever again?

“I don’t want you to go,” she summed up her musings, looking down at her feet, instantly embarrassed. If the roles were reversed, she would not have hesitated. She’d be raring to go.

She felt Espinoza’s eyes on her. Suddenly, he crossed the room in three long strides and he was touching her, taking her chin between his index finger and thumb and tipping her head up so she had to look at him. His face was a strange, unfamiliar mask of intensity. She realized what he was about to do a split second before he bent down and started kissing her fervently.

She froze.

Within a few seconds, a billion thoughts and feelings galloped through her mind. He was kissing her – but he was a superior officer – and he was married, for fuck’s sake – and he was old enough to be her father – but he was handsome – and smart – and very charismatic – she felt the kiss in the tips of her toes and the roots of her hair – there must have been a spark of electrical current traveling between their skin in the spots where their lips were touching – his right hand was now cupping the side of her face – maybe three seconds have passed – and now all other thought was pushed back from her brain – and she was kissing him back, wrapping her hands around his head, weaving her fingers in his hair – his left hand touched the small of her back – they were both pulling each other closer – her lips parted wider as she explored his mouth with her tongue – her face was flushed and her breathing was getting rugged – she felt slightly dizzy – his right hand left her cheek and was traveling down, caressing her neck and shoulder blade – down still, he cupped her breast, and she felt her breath catch in her throat – and then he broke the kiss.

They were staring at each other, panting, his eyes bright, an uncanny expression of hunger on his face. Doubt has crept back into Alice’s head, a sense of wrongness threatening to overwhelm her at any moment, and she remembered all the regulations and conventions they were now breaking. Then he spoke in a raspy whisper.

“Oh, to hell with the rules!”

He bent down again, his lips now more urgent than before, and a heady feeling chased away all her hesitation. His left hand still on the small of her back, he dropped his right to her thigh and, supporting her, he pulled her up, so that she instinctively wrapped her legs around him. He started to the door to her bedroom and as they fell together, still linked, onto the soft cotton covers, all question of properness, all sense of wrongness, all doubt and thought about the future were forgotten and swallowed up in an overpowering sensations of the present.

For the first time in her life, Alice’s usually well-organized and reasonable brain has ceded precedence to the chaos of feeling and desire. And it was grand.

* 

After, they were lying in bed, him stretched on his back, a lazy, sort of triumphant smile on his lips, her on her side, propped up on her arm, supporting her head with one hand, the other resting on Espinoza’s chest. His breathing was steady and deep, his eyes half-closed. Alice was biting her lower lip, her heart still beating hard, slowing only ever so slightly.

Her mind was strangely blank. She knew she should be panicking, or at least worried about consequences, outraged at herself for crossing a moral line, anything. Instead, she felt… good. Sort of pumped but tired at the same time. Pleasantly empty inside, like all the concerns of the world receded and were no longer important. She was… satisfied. Or maybe fulfilled would be a
He’d said it was good for him. She’d confessed it was her first time. He’d admitted he had an inkling, but deemed her a natural. It felt nice to hear that, even though she had to wonder at the veracity of his statement. But he was... good. Passionate yet gentle, sort of focused. As if he was trying to initiate her into this world of unthinkable closeness in her way. She’s never been a touchy-feely type, and she liked her personal space. She had to let other people in from time to time, but it was never really pleasant for her – even the hugs with friends and family she mostly tolerated rather than enjoyed. Longing for human contact, for intimacy, and fearing it at the same time was one of her eternal conundrums. Now, lying side by side with her first, she finally admitted to herself that all these years she had been scared. Scared to get too close, to become vulnerable, to open her soul to someone. In her mind, relationship and sex were intrinsically linked; and right along her fear of commitments rode her fear of being touched or kissed or stroked or caressed. She had been terrified of sex.

What good is all that brain to you if it keeps you from the most natural thing in the world, dumbass? She thought lazily to herself. You think too much, foolish girl.

But as minutes slipped by while she was watching the specks of light play on Espinoza’s eyelashes – she’s never noticed before how dark and long they were – and her heart slowly regained its normal rhythm, other, more alarming thoughts found their way into her head.

What the hell has she just done? Espinoza was almost twice her age, her previous commander and still a superior officer – by three ranks. He was married, for fuck’s sake. And she just slept with him. She made him cheat on his wife. That was just wrong. If she hadn’t known, then maybe – but she did know, and she slept with him anyway. How could she do that? She felt a wave of panic sweeping over her, still dulled by the previous feelings, but rising. What she did was wrong, just wrong. Not to mention unprofessional. Relationships between officers were not strictly prohibited, unless they existed within the same chain of command, which, thank god, wasn’t the case here. If it were, they could be both punished, even discharged dishonorably. As it was, however, it would still be frowned upon if it became known (even setting aside the whole cheating thing). Espinoza wasn’t her direct superior, but he still exercised some amount of power over her, and could influence her assignments, rewards and such. Their... relationship or whatever it was would definitely be deemed unprofessional, and that could have some unpleasant consequences too.

And speaking of consequences… Espinoza came prepared. She didn’t pay any attention to that fact then, but now it made her wonder. Did he always carry a condom with him, just in case, like some men are wont to do? But that would mean that he expected to have sex outside of his own house, wouldn’t it? Of course it was entirely possible that he and Mrs. Espinoza liked to fool around not only in their bedroom, but how likely that was? Espinoza didn’t look like that sort of a guy.

Then again, an hour ago she wouldn’t say he looked like a guy who would cheat on his wife, and yet here they were.

Assuming that the condom wasn’t for his wife, though… why did Espinoza carry a condom? Alice could think of only two viable options: either he was sleeping with more women, in which case it would make perfect sense to always be prepared… or he brought one specifically for her.

Which would mean that he came to her apartment knowing they would have sex.

Which would mean he had wanted to have sex with her before coming.

Which would mean that he... what? Was in love with her?
She immediately dismissed that idea. Impossible.

Wasn’t it?

He didn’t act in love. He acted normally. Could he be in love with her?

She remembered him questioning her about her relationship with Aaron, and it dawned on her: he saw her being much more affectionate with Aaron than he’s ever seen her be with anyone else. Of course he jumped to conclusions. Did that mean that he was in love with her?

Or did he just want her?

Where was the line between simple carnal desire and love?

Did love even exist? Could it exist between two people who essentially didn’t know each other? Could she be in love with him?

She felt her head spinning with all the unanswered questions, and she let herself fall on her back, withdrawing her hand from his chest. She stared at the ceiling for a minute or so.

She didn’t know what to think. Was it just a one-night stand for him? Was it a friends with benefits thing? Was she one of many? Was she unique? Was she the one? Was he in love with her?

Did he still love his wife?

“What are you thinking about?” He interrupted her musings with his strangely cadenced voice. This time it was him getting up on his side, propped on one hand, to stare at her some.

She looked him in the eye, not sure if she could voice any of what she was truly thinking about. It was such a tangled mess it would take her days or weeks to come to terms with her own feelings. And until she did, she wasn’t sure if she could deal with a declaration of his; whichever option it was, she wouldn’t know how to react. She felt sort of numb. Why was it all that complicated? Fifteen minutes ago it was all so pleasant and simple and blank. Was she thinking too much again?

“That you’re about to leave,” she managed eventually. Yes, he would leave in less than two hours now. And she would stay here, still confused and unsure of anything now. Waiting for him to get back. To see, when he did, where it would lead them, if anywhere. But maybe that was good. It would give her time to sort out her own thoughts and emotions, and allow her to face him later with a clear head.

That assuming that he would get back, of course.

“Are you going to miss me?” A playful smile appeared on his lips now. In the last hour she has seen an entirely new side to him. Passionate, fervent, triumphant, playful. As opposed to composed, laid-back, quiet, thoughtful that she knew before. Wow, you really don’t know a person until you sleep with them.

“I’m going to miss all of you,” she hedged. “I need you to get back in one piece.”

He leaned in and kissed her gently on the lips.

“I will, I promise,” he whispered, and pushed himself up and off the bed. Then he added in his normal voice: “But, speaking of leaving, it’s time for me to go. I need to oversee my men, check if preparations go as planned.” He stood up and marched off to the bathroom, stark naked. He had an old, jagged scar on the small of his back. Alice wondered what had happened to him. It was
another proof of how little she knew about him.

Was this really a good person to have her first time with?

He came back and started pulling his clothes on, still chatting about the launch and what he still needed to do and check before they go. Alice didn’t move from her bed, watching him and nodding in the right places, but not really paying attention. As he was becoming the Lieutenant Colonel Espinoza again, uniform and all, it was as if she was seeing him for the first time. His dark hair, a little too long to call it a buzz cut. His brown eyes just slightly angled upwards. His long lashes casting shadows on his pale cheeks. Light skin darkened on his arms and chest by thick body hair. His nails clipped evenly. His Adam's apple very visible in the fading daylight. His freakishly white teeth.

Fully clothed, he came up to the bed, bent over and kissed her once again. She returned the kiss without much conviction now.

“Goodbye, Alice,” he said in his serious voice and held her gaze for a moment.

“I’ll come down before launch,” she remarked. “But in case I don’t see you anymore… take care. Come back.”

He nodded gravely.

“You take care of yourself too.” And with that he was gone. Alice lay in bed for another half hour, trying to untangle the horrible mess of her feelings, but eventually she had to give up and get up. She showered and dressed, changed the bedsheets – marked with her blood – and feeling very inadequate (and somewhat achy), left her apartment to go see the Daedalus launch, her two good friends and her first sexual partner – for lack of a better term – going off to another galaxy to meet their fate. What would it be? Would they be coming back? And if and when they did – what would happen then? She didn’t know, but standing on the ground, looking at the fading dot in the sky, her confusion gave way to overwhelming sadness and a sense of foreboding. Whatever was to come, she doubted it would be good.
Chapter 8

Even though the crew of the *Daedalus* consisted of only about two hundred men and women (and one Asgard), their absence seemed to make a visible dent in the Groom Lake community. Or at least it seemed so to Alice, who, with Archer, Spinner and Espinoza gone, was left virtually alone. That evening she found herself in the club, drinking margaritas and feeling more out of place than ever before. Fiona had sat with her and drank a beer for a while, but she left early to get back to her toddler son. They were scheduled to board the *Prometheus* the next day in the afternoon and she wanted to spend as much time as possible with her family.

It wasn’t until at least an hour later when a man sat down at Alice’s table, with a beer in hand and a sleazy smile on his lips. Alice knew him from the *Daedalus* construction, he was one of the civilian engineers contracted to install the electrical wiring on the ship. She didn’t remember his name.

“Hey, angel,” he said to her. Alice raised an eyebrow, but didn’t reply, just took a sip of her margarita. “D’you know who I am?” When she still didn’t respond, he continued in a slurred voice: “I am your savior! I will rescue you from this horrible dive bar and provide entertainment for…”

“Thanks, I don’t need saving,” she cut him off, stood up and left without another word, her drink still on the table.

“Bitch!” He yelled after her.

That wasn’t unfamiliar to her. Both civilians and service members hit on her a lot, ever since she joined the Air Force. She didn’t really think of herself as particularly beautiful, but neither was she embarrassed by her own looks. After all she was young, fit and she had long, coppery-orange hair that seemed to work on men like a honey trap on a bear.

She learned to brush off the unsavory remarks and pick up lines. Usually she didn’t even care much anymore. But this time she felt rattled. Why? The answer was obvious to her: Espinoza. She was still trying to sort out her feelings about what happened, and she suspected it would take her the better part of their next deployment to get to some conclusions. The next day, however, it turned out that the process was going to be marred by an unexpected interference.

It was almost ten in the morning. Alice was at her apartment, packing her few essentials. They were supposed to report on board of the *Prometheus* at two o’clock, right after lunch. The rapping on her door interrupted her. She opened, not knowing whom to expect, and froze.

There, in an elegant blue dress and high heels, stood a handsome, forty-something woman whom Alice knew to be Mrs. Espinoza. On her doorstep. The day after she had sex with her husband.

“May I come in?” The cheated wife didn’t bother with greetings or presentation. Alice felt her throat go dry as she moved away to allow the woman to pass. For a moment they both stood motionless, just looking at each other. Alice didn’t know what to say or do. *Awkward* didn’t even begin to describe it. She felt literally nauseated under the steady mocking stare of Mrs. Espinoza. The woman’s lips were slightly twisted in a half-formed sneer.

“He smelled of your perfume when he came to say goodbye to me yesterday,” she stated calmly, her voice cold and untrembling. “I wasn’t sure it was you before I came here. Your whole place reeks of that stench.”
Alice felt her cheeks burning scarlet red. She wanted to squirm under that gaze, or better yet – run away somewhere far and lonely. What an ordeal! If the ground beneath her feet parted at that moment and she fell straight into hell, it would be a welcome change. No such luck.

Mrs. Espinoza was sizing her up as they stood on the opposite ends of the room, in exactly the same spots as Alice and Colonel Espinoza did the day before. Alice looked down, avoiding her eyes.

“You’re pretty,” the woman announced disdainfully after a few long seconds of silence. “I didn’t know he liked redheads. I would have dyed my hair if I knew.”

From under her lashes, Alice saw a shadow of feeling pass through Mrs. Espinoza’s face. Sorrow? Regret? She wasn’t sure.

“But then again you are young and I cannot do anything about my age”, she continued musingly, the ghost of a sneer still on her lips. “How old are you, twenty? Answer me.”

Alice couldn’t. Her mouth was totally dry, her cheeks burning, her throat closed up. Part of her wasn’t believing in what was happening; it couldn’t have been happening, not to her. Those things happened to other people. She sometimes thought about death or crippling injury that so often ended military careers. But never in her wildest dreams has she ever imagined herself having to face a scorned wife of a cheating husband – a husband who cheated with her, Alice. She felt sick to her stomach again. She deserved all the worst Mrs. Espinoza said or thought about her. She deserved to be found out and accused. She thought facing a court-martial would be easier than having to go through this conversation.

“You don’t even think I deserve an answer from you?” Mrs. Espinoza prompted again.

“I’m twenty-two,” Alice mouthed, unable even to whisper.

The woman barked a short, derisive laugh.

“He could be your father,” she said haughtily. Somehow this remark rubbed Alice the wrong way and, in consequence, broke her out a bit from the shell of shame and self-hate. What she did was wrong on many levels, but age difference was the least of her offenses – if you could call it at all.

“But he’s not,” she managed to get out, though her voice was still small and trembling.

“Did you know he was married?” Alice thought she heard a pleading note in the question.

“Yes.” She closed her eyes for a moment, because that was what made it all so bad. If only he wasn’t married, she could have somehow rationalize it to herself – overlook ranks, age, all the impropriety. But that he had a wife… and he loved her, it was quite obvious whenever he spoke of her. Or was he just that good of an actor?

“I knew he had other women,” Mrs. Espinoza spewed with disdain. “When he was away, I always knew he had other women. I told myself, he was only a man. He needed a distraction on long deployments, when he couldn’t have me. But he would always come back to me. Them other women didn’t mean anything. And you don’t mean anything.”

Alice still couldn’t bear to look her in the eyes. She thought she knew what was coming. A logical conclusion to be drawn from Mrs. Espinoza’s line of thinking.

“But you’re here,” she continued, confirming Alice’s presumption. “Right here. Not somewhere
far away where there’s no me. He has a wife here and yet it was you who got him right before he went off on deployment. What did you do? What did you do?!” The woman’s voice became a little hysterical at the end.

Alice set her jaw tight, gritting her teeth, looking away. Was there any way out of this?

“Answer me!”

“I didn’t do anything,” Alice answered, her voice barely more than a whisper. “He came to me.”

“You seduced him!” Mrs. Espinoza accused, now close to tears. Alice finally looked up at her. The older woman’s face was screwed up in a pained expression.

“No.” The young lieutenant said more forcefully than before. She would not stand there and take the blame. Yes, she knew he was married, but it wasn’t her idea. He knew perfectly well what he was doing. He was not the young, confused and inexperienced one. “He came to me. I never gave him any indication… I didn’t do anything. He came to me.”

They stood there for a while, staring at each other. Mrs. Espinoza’s eyes were glistening, but her cheeks were dry. Alice tried to keep her breathing calm.

“You should have refused.”

“He shouldn’t have offered.”

They were at an impasse; Mrs. Espinoza desperately trying to find a way to blame her, Alice now determined to rebuke the accusations.

“You’re young and pretty.” Mrs. Espinoza pointed her finger at her.

“I can’t help that.” Alice shrugged.

“You took advantage of him.”

“He came at me.” Alice felt her cheeks burning again. It was hard to talk about it with anyone, in any situation, much less now with the cheated wife. “I merely… surrendered.”

Mrs. Espinoza scoffed.

“You wanted to use his rank and position!”

“I could be court-martialed because of his rank and position,” Alice shook her head vehemently. Then she saw the woman’s eyes narrowing, so she added: “He could be, too.”

They were both breathing hard, as if they just ran a sprint. Pinned to their places on the opposite sides of the room, Mrs. Espinoza visibly seething, Alice outwardly calm, but boiling inside just as much.

“He loves me,” the wife said eventually, the pleading note again audible in her voice.

Alice looked down.

“I know he does.”

Another moment of silence followed.
“Why you?”

Alice lifted her gaze and saw that, finally, tears were streaming down Mrs. Espinoza’s face.

“I don’t know,” the girl admitted. “Because it was easy?”

“You like him.” It wasn’t a question, rather a statement.

“I did,” she acknowledged. “I thought he was my friend. And I don’t have that many of them.”

Espinoza’s eyes slid down to Alice’s shoulders and noted the single silver bar on her epaulettes.

“You seem too young for your rank.”

“I’m beginning to think that I am too young.”

“He came to you?”

“I didn’t know what was going on. It just… happened. I didn’t think.”

“Yeah, he has that effect on people.” Mrs. Espinoza acquiesced. Then she frowned and shot Alice a warning look. “You stay away from him. He’s mine.”

Alice raised her hands. “No argument here.” She sighed. “I wish I could take it back.”

“Would you?” The woman seemed strangely interested.

Alice thought for a moment. This whole showdown with the cheated wife was awful, but… she wasn’t sure. Somehow she felt different now. Like something, some wall inside her was shattered, a barrier breached.

“I don’t know”, she admitted. And then, with difficulty, and her cheeks flaring up crimson red again, she added: “It wasn’t bad for a first time.”

She expected Mrs. Espinoza to laugh or mock her, but she did neither. Instead, she just hung her head and stood motionless for a moment, as if deciding something.

“I won’t report you,” she said finally. “But you get anywhere near my husband again and it will be your own fault.”

“Understood.”

Mrs. Espinoza looked at her for a moment longer, then turned around and, wiping tears off her face, let herself out of the apartment and disappeared without another word, leaving Alice standing still in her place, confused, embarrassed, but also feeling strangely empowered. It was a weird conversation, emotionally charged and intense, and awkward as hell, but in the end she felt like she stood her ground and, if not won, then at least defended herself well. She knew, though, she wouldn’t be having any more relations with married men anymore. It was not worth all this. Was it?

*
The *Prometheus* deployed that day. Going off into space came as a relief to Alice. She needed time to process all that happened, and did not need to see Mrs. Espinoza anymore, at least for a while – and despite the size of the Groom Lake base, it wasn’t that hard to accidentally run into someone. There, in space, the routine set in. Everything had its time and place, and there were no surprises – unless there was a job to do. The galaxy seemed quiet for the moment, though. The free Jaffa were still consolidating their Nation, but humans of Earth stayed out of their affairs, mostly. The remaining Goa’uld kept a low profile, and even Lucian Alliance didn’t kick up any fuss. Everybody was taking a deep breath after a long time in shackles, in constant danger. And so their deployment passed without any confrontations or missions. For the F-302 drivers it meant mostly focusing on their secondary work – in Alice’s case it was engine room duty – with regular practice sorties. By the time they got back to Earth for another resupply and maintenance, half of the pilots were complaining that there was nothing to do for them. Alice, on her part, was rather glad to have at least one uneventful deployment. She dreaded coming back to the base.

The month she spent on the *Prometheus* did not bring her any substantial wisdom. She thought through all the events thoroughly, but didn’t come up with any brilliant ideas about how to deal with them. With the benefit of hindsight, she came to the conclusion that Espinoza must have liked her (or desired her?) for quite some time. He was always the nice one, even back when they were just in training; and now that she examined it, she saw that he treated her differently than other people in the squadron. She had assumed, at that time, that it was simple sympathy, or maybe that she was really *that* good at her job… instead, she mused, he was just preparing the ground. That seemed callous if he only wanted sex; but kinda thoughtful if he really cared about her. She couldn’t figure out which it was, though. She would need to talk to him about it… but she knew she wouldn’t. Not after the showdown with Mrs. Espinoza, not after she expressly told her to keep away from her husband. She resolved not to dwell on the subject anymore.

She couldn’t pretend that it didn’t affect her, though. The whole thing: the sex, the tangled emotions, the cringe-worthy conversation with Mrs. Espinoza, all of it made her feel *different* . She wasn’t afraid anymore; she had always feared showing her emotions because it made you vulnerable, and that was dangerous. Opening yourself up to attack like that? But being vulnerable meant also opening yourself up to new experiences, to pleasure and joy of human closeness, in both literal and figurative sense; something she has always longed for, while being scared of it at the same time. You had to allow people in if you didn’t want to be alone. People hurt you, but people also saved you from yourself. Nobody could betray you if you didn’t trust anyone, but it wasn’t an excuse to never trust at all. *Right?*

The day they returned from deployment, Alice walked bravely into the chow hall in the main building and looked for a familiar face. A few people she knew from *Daedalus* construction waved or smiled to her, but she resolved to sit at one of the tables traditionally occupied by 302 pilots. She knew most of them by name, but wasn’t close to anyone. Nevertheless, they accepted her as one of them and she ate her lunch with them, listening to the news. And there was news indeed. *Daedalus* has returned!

“They’ve been on Earth only three days or so,” one of the female pilots told her when she asked. “They were whisked away to Stargate Command the moment they arrived, though. Extensive debriefing, I’d imagine.”

“I hear they’re coming back this afternoon,” someone else added. “There’s gonna be a memorial service at the chapel tomorrow morning...”

Not everybody made it back from the Pegasus galaxy. The *Prometheus* was far away when the news came, but they did receive a subspace communication saying that Atlantis was saved, but at the cost of many lives. There were no specifics as to who and how, though. Alice even asked
Bolton, and he promised to check, but he never came back with the information. Alice took that as a bad omen and didn’t press him further; she was too scared to find out.

After that there was not much chatter at the table. Pilots were used to losing friends and comrades in battle, but it was never easy. Much less to Alice, who’s never lost anyone close to her since that day almost nine years ago when the news about her father’s death came.

She was on her way out of the building when someone’s voice held her in her tracks. She recognized it instantly, squared her shoulders, took a deep breath and faced her former commander.

“Alice,” Espinoza said, trotting towards her. He came to a stop uncomfortably close so she took a step back.

“Colonel,” she answered evenly, not looking at his face.

“We just arrived,” he explained. “I heard you were back, too.”

She didn’t reply, keeping her gaze on a buckle on his uniform.

“You’re not going to even look at me?” He asked and Alice obediently looked up. He was frowning. “Or say hello?”

“I’m glad you’re okay, sir,” she managed in the same monotone. “But I think it will be best if I leave now.”

“What’s wrong?” There was a note of alarm in his voice now.

“I think you should talk to your wife, sir. I’m sure she’s eager to see you,” she dodged and turned to go.

“What?” He put a hand on her shoulder and forced her to face him again. “What did you do? Did you talk to her?”

Alice tried to shake his hand off, but he was holding her tightly.

“She came to me the day after you left,” she said, feeling a surge of anger coming. “Could you please let me go?”

His hand dropped to his side.

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth.”

He stared at her, his face a mask with no feelings visible on it. Alice wondered if her own expression was so emotionless. She could feel the heat on her cheeks – anger? Embarrassment? She wasn’t sure. Both, mixed up, perhaps.

“She knew.” Alice added pitilessly. “She came to confront me. I think you’d better go talk to her now. She made me promise I would not go anywhere near you again.”

Espinoza’s lips tightened. He watched her for maybe five more seconds and then turned and walked away at a brisk pace. Alice took a deep breath. It wasn’t that bad, was it? She survived the worst. She could not conceive of what Espinoza planned to do next; what would he tell his wife? Would they split? An in that case… where did it leave her?
She searched her feelings. *If* Espinoza was no longer with his wife… *if* he wanted to be with her, Alice… *would she* want it? Would she accept him? She thought back to that day a month ago when he started kissing her in her apartment. It was all nice, but somehow she couldn’t bring herself to imagine it happening again. The doubts, the moral dilemma it posed, the confrontation with the wife, and now this less-than-friendly conversation… all of it resonated in her much too strongly. No. She could not accept him anymore. Not in the best of circumstances.

But she didn’t think they would split. Mrs. Espinoza said it herself: he still loved her. And she loved him, that was plain as day. Perhaps there would be a row – like one of those Alice’s own parents used to have, with her throwing things at him, and him infuriating her even more with his quiet and calm resolve. It wasn’t until that moment that it struck Alice how very alike Espinoza was to her own father. Both were soft-spoken, clever, charismatic and authoritative. Not to mention both were pilots, though her dad was in the Navy, not Air Force. Alice almost laughed at herself. They said daughters were always looking for men like their fathers…

“Alice!” A new, familiar voice interrupted her musings. Her heart skipped a bit and she felt a wave of relief washing over her. She turned and almost bumped into Archer. He extended his arms and took her in a bear hug.

“Hi there,” she said into his jacked, her voice muffled. Archer then let her go and stepped away, with his hands still on her shoulders. He looked at her from head to toe and back up again.

“You’re here.”

“We just came back today,” Alice explained with a smile. “I’m glad you’re okay. They didn’t tell us anything…”

Archer frowned, a shadow passing through his face.

“So you don’t know?”

An alarm bell came off in her head. Archer was here, safe, but…

“Don’t know what?”

“Allie… I’m so sorry.” He clasped his palms tighter around her shoulders. “It’s Spinner. He didn’t make it.”

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The memorial ceremony was truly resplendent. A non-denominational service was led by the base’s own chaplain, with all uniformed residents in attendance, and many civilians as well. Furthermore, General O’Neill himself participated, flanked by Doctor Jackson, Colonel Carter, Teal’c and the new SGC commander, General Landry. There was choir music, a sea of flowers, and post-mortem medals. Out of the *Daedalus’s* crew of around two hundred, sixteen lost their lives during the rescue of Atlantis; twelve 302 pilots and four additional service members who were beamed down to the city to help purge it from remaining Wraith. Five fighters were shot down, and additional two were hit hard enough that one of the two pilots in each was injured and died later on, one still during the fight, the other on the operating table. The bodies of the ten drivers who have been shot down were never recovered.
“I thought it was a beautiful service,” Fiona remarked as she, Archer, Alice and two other guys from the Daedalus crew hung around in one of the corridors, waiting for the crowds to disperse. “The choir was particularly nice.”

“I hated the choir,” Alice said forcefully, her voice trembling a little, eyes down. “I hate that song.”

“Amazing Grace?”

“They sung it on my daddy’s funeral, too.” Alice lifted her gaze, but didn’t look at anybody, instead staring blankly at a point in space. “It lies.”

“The hymn lies?” Fiona sounded a little shocked.

“I don’t feel saved by any grace. And neither were they, or they wouldn’t have died.”

“It’s about salvation of the soul, not the body,” Fiona explained like to a little child.

“Oy…” Archer murmured.

“There is no such thing as immortal soul,” Alice’s voice was sharp. She turned to face her squadron mate and looked her right in the eye. “When you die, you stop existing. That’s all there is.”

“You don’t really believe that,” Fiona tried to be gentle, but it only angered Alice more.

“Do not tell me what I believe!”

They stood for a moment, bristling, and it was Fiona who let go first.

“I’m sorry,” she said emphatically. “I know Spinner was your friend. I should let you grieve however you need. I think it will be better if I go now.” She nodded to Archer and the others and left quickly. The other two pilots from Spinner’s squadron also decided to quit the drama and disappeared right away.

“I didn’t know you were an atheist,” Archer commented offhandedly when they were alone, not looking at her.

“I’m sorry,” she said emphatically. “I know Spinner was your friend. I should let you grieve however you need. I think it will be better if I go now.” She nodded to Archer and the others and left quickly. The other two pilots from Spinner’s squadron also decided to quit the drama and disappeared right away.

“I didn’t know you were an atheist,” Archer commented offhandedly when they were alone, not looking at her.

“Can we please not talk about it?” Alice asked, suddenly very tired. She couldn’t sleep at all the night before. She couldn’t sleep at all the night before. She would never admit it to anyone, but a large portion of that night she spent crying into her pillow. She wasn’t sure whether she grieved Spinner’s death, really, or was it just her own feeling of loss? Her own fear at being all alone again? Espinoza was out of her life now, Fiona was a buddy but not really someone she could be friends with, and now with Spinner gone, Archer was the only person left. Sure, there was mom and Jake and Aaron, but none of them were close – physically close enough to enjoy their company. And none of them knew – they had no idea about the Stargate, flying in space, any of it. Could you really be close to someone if you couldn’t share your day to day with them? Alice doubted that.

There was more, though, than the feeling of loss and fear of being alone. There was one more emotion in her that embarrassed, even shamed her. Something she could never confess, ever. Realizing it made her hate herself a little more. What kind of twisted, evil person feels relieved that a close friend has died?! Of course she knew what the source of the feeling was, and it made it all even worse. She was relieved that it was Spinner and not Archer. That out of the two, she preferred Archer, so losing Spinner was the lesser of two evils. That is wrong on so many levels, she thought. For starters, it
implied that one person’s life was more worthy than another’s. That some people were more important than others. That kind of thinking was dangerous; it wasn’t difficult, in her line of work, to imagine a situation when a choice needed to be made and decisions taken based on personal preferences were bound to be bad. And then again it was just wrong, just plain wrong to feel that way.

“Alice,” Archer said and she looked at him, as if she was coming from underwater. Apparently it wasn’t the first time he said her name.

“What?”

He just nodded his head to behind her. She turned and faced none other than Espinoza. They haven’t spoken since yesterday and seeing him here, now, was a rather unpleasant surprise. He looked calm and solemn, though, and damn handsome in his service dress uniform.

“Captain Archer,” Espinoza said, looking over Alice’s head (which was not difficult for him, since he was a good ten inches taller than her). “I know you were a particular friend of Malcolm Spinner. His family is holding a memorial service of their own in his hometown and they said all his friends in the Air Force are welcome. That includes you too, Boyd.” He lowered his gaze to look at Alice. She tried to read something, anything, on his face, but there was nothing, no emotions, just his usual steady calm. “You have both been granted leave to go, if you wish. The service is in three days in Lincoln, Nebraska. You are expected back on the base the day after.”

“Thank you, sir,” Archer replied and Alice nodded soberly. Espinoza walked away without another word, and Alice turned to face Archer.

“What’s with the cold shoulder?” The captain asked with his eyebrows raised. “He was usually very friendly towards you.”

Alice bit her lip and looked away. Was it that obvious to everyone except her? Had she been just that clueless? Did everybody know? Would they notice a change in their relations now? Would they speculate?

“He’s just lost a handful of people,” she dodged. “I’d be ill-disposed to be friendly to anyone.”

“You are ill-disposed to be friendly to anyone.” Archer quipped half-jokingly. Alice gave him a ghost of a smile.

“I guess so. Are you going to the family memorial service?”

“Yes.” His voice was now serious, almost grave. “Someone needs to tell them that he died a hero. Even if they can’t know the details, someone who knew him needs to tell them that.”

Alice nodded slowly.

“You know it doesn’t work, do you?” She asked unhappily. “They said the same thing about my daddy. It didn’t make his death any easier.”

Archer looked straight into her eyes then.

“It’s not meant to make it any easier. It’s meant to make them proud.”

“Yeah.” Alice turned her head away from his gaze. She could feel tears welling up in her eyes and didn’t want him to see that. She remembered feeling sad, and lonely, and even angry at her dad for dying and leaving her alone. Proud didn’t come in the mix… not until much later. She flashed back
to that day when she walked into an Air Force recruitment office and talked about her father and how he died. Yes, she did feel proud then. Archer was right: it didn’t make anything easier. But it was something.

“I’ll come with you,” she told her only remaining friend in the service. He nodded and smiled, though it was more of a sad expression than a real smile. They went their separate ways after that, returning to their duties.

* 

Lincoln, despite being a capital of the state, was not a big city. Certainly not in the sense Alice was used to – but she had been brought up in Los Angeles, and so not many places deserved the name of a ‘big city’ in her book. She only got to see it out of the cab window, though, but even so, it seemed more like a big town than a small city to her. She and Archer had taken a commercial flight from Las Vegas early morning, arriving at the Lincoln airport around noon. They had booked rooms in a hotel downtown, and had only a few hours to get refreshed and dressed up before they had to go. There would be no burial, since there was no body; it had not been recovered from the Lantea’s ocean, where the fighter fell after being shot down by a Wraith Dart. But the family decided to hold a wake in Spinner’s parents’ home and then a memorial service in a church. Archer and Alice had been invited to both.

Alice was dreading this experience. Talking to strangers was never her forte, and in these circumstances it was bound to be even worse. All of her bad memories from her dad’s death flocked to her mind, picking at her emotions, but at the same time, she was thinking about Laura, Spinner’s wife, and his family; Alice had known what happened to her father, and they buried his actual body; the Spinners didn’t even have that.

Wearing their service dress uniforms again, Alice and Archer came up to the house at four o’clock sharp. It was a boy of maybe ten years old who opened the door.

“Hi,” said Archer. “You must be Eddie. We are your uncle’s friends from work.”

“I can see that,” the boy answered soberly and then nodded his head for them to enter. “The other soldiers are already here. Come in. Grandma will be with you in a moment.” The boy then stepped back and took another hard look at them, focusing on Alice. “You’re wearing a skirt!”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” Alice replied in a deadly serious voice, staring him down. She didn’t like it, but she deemed it more appropriate than slacks, the only other option available for service dress uniform. It didn’t make her any less self-conscious, though, and apparently the kid sensed it. He didn’t comment on it any further, though, but led them through the hall to the living room, where already a number of mourners stood around a table filled with Spinner’s photos, his medals displayed on a glassed board, a manually assembled model of an F-15 Eagle, and a multitude of candles and flowers. There were two smaller tables with refreshments pushed to the walls, and a few people stood with glasses in their hands, though it was hard to tell at first if it was just soda or something stronger. Everyone was wearing black except three men standing to one side of the room, dressed identically as Archer and Alice. Spinner’s friends from the unit he had served at previously, probably.

Alice and Archer first approached the table with the memorabilia. In the very center there was Spinner’s formal photo, taken a few years before, after he achieved the rank of captain. He looked
tense in the picture, but otherwise almost exactly the way Alice remembered him, down to his carefully trimmed hair. The two of them stopped before that photo and, without any prior agreement, they both snapped their feet together, straightening up, and saluted in the general direction of the photograph. The last salute for a comrade fallen so far away that few people could ever imagine the distance; a friend whom they would never see again, not in life and not even in death. His body broken and burnt, alone somewhere deep underwater on a planet three million light years away… Alice felt tears threatening to spill out of her eyes and blinked them away as she and Archer turned from the display to find Laura and Spinner’s parents and give them their condolences. They were all three talking to the other servicemen in attendance.

Laura did the introduction; they had met her on the Groom Lake base a couple of times, and her husband must have mentioned them to her, too. She was calm and disconnected, but her red eyes told the tale of wakeful, teary nights that must have led to this day, ever since the news came.

“Thank you both for coming,” she said to Archer and Alice after they expressed their condolences. “I know Malcolm thought of you two as his closest friends on the base. He would appreciate you coming.”

“And the salute,” her mother-in-law put in. “That was a very nice gesture.” She was visibly more shaken than Laura. Her voice trembled, but she smiled at them kindly. She was probably whom Spinner got his warm, friendly disposition from. His father was silent and thoughtful, and regarded them with a spark of some negative emotion, Alice wasn’t sure which one. Distrust? Blame? She didn’t know, but she understood him completely. She had blamed her father’s comrades, too.

“Of course, ma’am,” Archer replied, with a slight bow of his head. “It was the least we could do. Colonel Espinoza, our commanding officer, sends his deepest condolences, too, and he wished me to relay his regret at not being able to come himself.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Spinner nodded. “We quite understand.” She then looked away as new guests entered the room. “Will you excuse us, please?”

“Of course, ma’am.” Archer bowed again and the three Spinners floated away to greet and receive condolences from the newcomers. Archer and Alice moved their attention to the three Air Force officers from Spinner’s old unit. Laura had introduced them as Major Carrick and Captains Lowe and Fowler.

“You from Malcolm’s current unit?” Carrick offered as a way to begin a conversation.

“Partly, sir,” Archer replied. “I am, but Lieutenant Boyd here serves in a sister-unit. We all went through the same extended training a few months back, though.”

“Training in what?” Captain Lowe inquired. “Malcolm was very shifty about his latest stint.”

“Just training.” Archer held Lowe’s gaze steadily and didn’t offer any other remark.

“I’m surprised to hear that a mere lieutenant was friends with Malcolm, especially from a different unit,” the major proceeded after it became apparent that there would be nothing added. “He was about to get a promotion himself when he was leaving us. I guess it was delayed because of the change…”

Alice raised her eyebrows.

“Mere lieutenant, sir?” She repeated, her voice laced with subtle sarcasm. Since it was the first time she actually spoke to anyone since coming into the room, it got the major’s attention.
“Don’t get me wrong, my dear,” he said with a patronizing edge that instantly raised Alice’s blood pressure. What a damn asshole! “We’ve all been a lieutenant once, it’s just not normal for a ranking officer to socialize with lower ranks too much.”

“When I met Captain Spinner I was a Second Lieutenant and we got along just fine, thank you. Sir.” She added the last word after a deliberate pause. She wanted to tell him not to call her my dear, too, but decided to bite her tongue. It wasn’t wise to piss off superior officers, no matter the circumstances. The fact that she got away with the whole Vasquez thing didn’t mean another such situation couldn’t go bad for her.

“You seem to be socializing with captains, though, sir,” Archer put in with a crooked smile.

“That is different.” The major huffed indignantly. Both Alice and Archer reacted to that with an identical raise of eyebrows, but decided to let it go.

“So where are you guys located at?” Captain Lowe said after the silence stretched into awkwardness. “Which base?”

“Spinner told me it was in Nevada,” Carrick interrupted before either of them had a chance to reply. “Not Nellis, though, so my guess it’s Creech. He was really stuck up about it, though, never confirmed anything.”

“I believe the correct term for such attitude is following orders, sir,” Archer said, the same mocking, crooked smile appearing on his lips again.

“Which means you guys are not going to tell, either,” Lowe concluded with an exasperated sigh. “Can you at least tell what machines you’re driving? Ours are Eagles,” he added for no reason.

“Sorry, pal.” Archer shook his head, but his eyes were still on Carrick.

“But you know what happened, do you?” Fowler asked, speaking for the first time. He was younger than the other two, kept his mouth shut for the most part – which Alice judged wise enough to follow the same rule herself – but he looked somehow kinder than his companions. Nothing like the open hostility of Carrick or Lowe’s inquisitiveness. Amongst them, he looked like the only one who was actually mourning a loss of a friend. “I’ve been trying to find out, but I’ve hit a wall. All I’m getting is the same crap they told Laura. Spinner crashed during a routine training sortie… my ass. He was the best damn pilot I knew.”

“Crashed on a routine sortie? That what they told Laura?” Archer frowned and shot Alice a glance. She knew he was thinking of their earlier conversation.

“That what they told all of us,” confirmed Lowe. “You know better?”

“Captain Archer was there,” Alice said, again surprising the lot of them. She turned to face Fowler and spoke to him directly. “We can’t tell you what happened. But we lost more people that day and they were all damn good pilots.”

Fowler looked into her eyes and she held his gaze. Then he nodded.

That was the moment when Spinner’s nephew, Eddie, decided to join them and ask some questions. He probably didn’t get to see his uncle too often lately, and like all little boys, he was fascinated by planes and flying.

“So you’re all fighter pilots? Like uncle Malcolm was?” He asked incredulously after greeting them all again. “Even you?!” He pointed his finger at Alice.
She smiled and reached out to take his hand and pull it down.

“Don’t point, it’s not very nice,” she scolded him lightheartedly. “Yes, I am a fighter pilot too. Women have been disqualified from flying fighter jets until a little over a decade ago. That’s why there still isn’t that many of us in this specialty.”

“But are you as good as guys?” Eddie pressed, his disbelief a little insulting. She was about to reply, but Archer cut her off.

“She’s a better pilot than any guy I know.”

Alice looked up at him, surprised to hear such a compliment. The three other officers gaped at him, too.

“That’s an overstatement,” Alice protested. “I’m good, but not that good.”

“I’ve seen you fly, Alice, and I’ve heard the stories of your aerial exploits.” Archer’s expression was, for once, completely serious. “You don’t have the experience, but I’ve never seen anyone who would catch on as quickly as you. You’re gonna make a splash, girl. And that’s not even mentioning the sciency stuff you do that I understand nothing about.”

Alice felt her cheeks burning red. Archer was her friend, but also sort of a mentor, and hearing this from him was a very nice feeling indeed. She felt the balloon of pride inflating inside of her again, but it was also kind of embarrassing to be standing there with the three unfamiliar pilots looking at her, all skeptic and unconvinced, and hear these comments, as if she needed to be defended against their judgment. She wasn’t sure what was a socially acceptable way to react to something like that. Suddenly she felt like going away and hiding from everyone, including Archer.

She laughed nervously.

“Please don’t feed the monster,” she pleaded half-jokingly. “I don’t need any more ego-boost.”

Archer smiled, but it wasn’t his normal arch smirk yet.

“No, but I think your self-confidence could use a little boost.”

Alice blushed again and looked down, not sure what to say or do.

“How old are you, anyway?” Carrick asked, the patronizing note still present in his voice. “You seem too young for your rank.”

“I’m twenty-two, sir,” she replied, embarrassment quickly giving way to anger again.

“Impossible!” The major exclaimed, taken aback.

“You want me to show you my CAC, sir?” Alice offered in a sweet voice, bobbing her head to the side and smiling innocently.

“What’s a CAC?” Eddie put in before Carrick had a chance to huff indignantly.

“It stands for Common Access Card,” Alice explained to him, losing the annoying tone instantly. “It’s a smart card used for identification of military personnel and to allow access to military buildings and such. Your uncle had one, too.”

“Where is it now?”
Probably gone with him.”

Eddie hung his head low and Alice felt an unfamiliar impulse to hug him, but stopped herself. She wasn’t his friend or family, it would probably just freak him out.

There was another bout of silence after that, none of them knowing what to say. Alice was still looking at the boy, but she wasn’t seeing him; she was remembering herself, a slender, redheaded girl standing in a circle of Navy officers and demanding answers. Why was he flying that day? Didn’t they know there was a storm coming? Couldn’t he have flown away from it? Were they that far out on the ocean that he couldn’t have made it to the land? None of it made sense to her then.

“I’m going to the restroom,” Alice said to Archer finally. He nodded and she walked away. She didn’t really need it, but felt like she had to hide for a moment. Too many memories and emotions were assailing her.

Her dad was dead because of force of nature. Her friend was dead because of life-sucking creatures from another galaxy. And she… she was why three Jaffa were dead. More if you counted the ones she shot down with her F-302. She suddenly felt almost nauseated. Would it ever stop?

Maybe she made a mistake. Maybe she should have chosen to stay in LA, take care of her mother, concentrate on science. But then she would not know the things she knew now. The wealth of knowledge and discovery available to only those privileged few who were lucky enough to become part of the Stargate program… And she would have never met Archer or Spinner in the first place. Or Espinoza.

She came to the end of a short corridor, expecting to find a restroom, but instead ending up in a kitchen. It was empty except for one person: Laura was standing at the counter, supporting herself with her hands lying flat on the surface, her head hanging, eyes closed. Alice hesitated. Should she leave her alone? Or say something? What did Laura need – time to process it alone or someone to comfort her?

Before Alice could arrive at any decision, Laura heard or sensed her and looked up at Alice. Her eyes were glistening with tears, but her cheeks were dry.

“I’m sorry to intrude,” Alice said softly, moving closer, but staying on the other side of the counter. “Are you alright?”

“No.” Laura shook her head to emphasize the word. “I don’t know how to do this,” she added.

“It’s alright. Nobody ever does.”

The woman shook her head again.

“When you marry a fighter pilot, you come to expect bad news,” she said with difficulty, her hands still plastered to the surface of the counter, her whole body leaning over as if she was bearing an enormous weight on her shoulders. “Every day he’s away, you imagine hundred things that might go wrong and you see yourself crying over his broken body, and you think that’s how you prepare yourself for the worst, but it’s not. Because then…” She couldn’t go on.

“People think it’s easier,” Alice nodded understandingly, her voice soothing. “But it’s not.”

“I don’t even know what happened.” Laura’s arms suddenly gave way and folded under her, so that she was now propped up on her elbows, hands on her forehead. “There’s no body to cry over. And I… I feel so alone.” She was quiet for a minute or so, Alice patiently waiting since it was clear she was struggling to say something more. “We were trying for a baby. I found out the day before the
news came. I’m pregnant. Our child is never going to know his dad…”

*Oh, fuck.* This was indeed messed up. Was there anything Alice could say to make it better? To make it easier? But she knew there wasn’t.

“I’m sorry,” she said helplessly, quietly. Hesitatingly, slowly, she made her way around the kitchen counter to get closer to Laura and tentatively stretched her arm to touch her shoulder. Laura shivered, but otherwise remained motionless. “My dad was a pilot in the Navy,” Alice started in a low voice, unsure if she should continue or not. “He died when I was fourteen. Crashed his fighter into a carrier deck trying to land during storm. He was out on a routine patrol during peacetime. I still don’t know why they didn’t recall him sooner, before the storm became dangerous. His death was preventable, and it was meaningless.”

Laura put her right hand back on the counter, with the left one still supporting her head, and turned to look at Alice through tears.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered with difficulty. Alice felt her heart constrict. The grieving widow was offering comfort for the one who tried to console her… that was just too kind. Too selfless.

“My point is this… I know what you’ve been told by the command. It’s not true.”

Laura lifted her head slightly and focused on Alice’s face.

“Captain Spinner… Malcolm… he didn’t die during a routine patrol. I can’t tell you any specifics, but know this: he died protecting our people from an enemy. His actions saved lives. There is a whole city out there, still standing, though in no ways intact… but it’s there, and its people are alive because of Malcolm.” She squeezed Laura’s shoulder lightly. “I know it doesn’t help with the grief. But in time, you will see that it matters. His death was not meaningless. He died a hero. One day, you will be proud of that. And your child will be, too.”

Tears still streaming down her face, Laura smiled in a painful kind of way. One of her hands flew to her stomach, and Alice thought maybe through the horror of it all… maybe having a baby was a blessing after all. Maybe it was some kind of a secret weapon against grief? If not anything else, it would blunt all other feelings. Wouldn’t it?

“Thank you,” Laura manged to whisper again.

“If you or your child ever need anything… and I mean anything… please let me know. I’d like to help.” Alice removed her hand from Laura’s shoulders. The widow seemed to be calming slowly, straightening up and wiping the tears off her face, though new ones kept spilling from her eyes.

“You already have,” she told Alice in a more audible, though choked voice. Alice smiled and stayed with her, quiet and motionless, until Laura stopped crying altogether, wiped her eyes and cheeks clean of tears and makeup, and was ready to go out to other people again.

*The rest of the wake was excruciatingly boring.* Alice felt bad about thinking that, but there was just no point in beating about the bush; it was boring. She and Archer tried to stay away from the other three pilots, and had to endure a seemingly endless cycle of small talk. Alice thanked her stars that Archer was there, as he was much better disposed to chit-chat with strangers. Alice
mostly stayed quiet and let her thoughts wander, only occasionally answering a direct question or nodding agreement to whatever Archer was saying.

The memorial service was held in Spinners’ parish down the street. It was quite nice, the pastor gave a beautiful sermon, and, much to Alice’s relief, nobody played nor sang *Amazing Grace*. There were more people in Air Force uniforms in attendance, officers and enlistees alike; people in Spinner’s life who either weren’t invited to the wake, or couldn’t come, or decided not to. The service was open for all.

It was nearing on nine when Archer and Alice came back to their hotel.

“Wanna grab a beer before we turn in?” The captain asked as they passed the lobby bar.

Alice shrugged. “Why not. But let me change out of the monkey suit first, will ya?”

“Sure, sure. I’ll do the same.”

They met again at the bar twenty minutes later, both in casual clothing; Archer in jeans and a t-shirt with a Star Wars logo on it, and Alice in jeans as well and a bottle-green tank top. They didn’t talk much, both too tired and sad for their usual amicable banter. They did toast to their lost friend, though.

About halfway through the glass, Alice became aware that someone was watching her. She lifted her gaze and her eyes met a steady stare of a man sitting on the other end of the bar. He was older than her, but not by much; dressed in an elegant gray suit with a black fedora sitting on the counter beside him, his hazelnut eyes boring into hers shamelessly, a very subtle smile playing on his lips; he looked like a predator ready to pounce. Alice instantly dropped her gaze and felt her cheeks go pink. She risked another short look a minute later, and found that the man was still staring at her brazenly. She thought he even winked at her, before she quickly looked down at her beer again. She chanced a few more looks as time passed and her glass emptied, only to meet that steady, predatory gaze piercing her like a bullet each time. She didn’t know what to think of it. Who was this man? Did he know her? This seemed unlikely; she had excellent memory and would probably remember if she had met him before. So what did he want with her? The answer was so painfully obvious that when it came to her, after a good while, she felt like hitting her face on the counter. She didn’t of course, but she sighed in exasperation at herself, and Archer noticed and asked if she was okay.

“Fine, just… the whole thing, you know,” she answered ambiguously. They were almost done with their beers. She lifted her eyes again and found that, for the first time, the man was not looking at her, but somewhere behind her shoulder. Instinctively, she turned to see what it was. There, only two seats away from her, sat a gorgeous woman in her late twenties, dressed in a ball gown with an exposed back, her black shiny hair falling down to cover it almost all the way to her waist. Beautiful, mesmerizing, feminine – the kind of woman Alice could and would never become. The kind that outshone every other female within sight. Alice felt unexplained anger flare up inside her. She turned back to look at the staring guy and, sure enough, he had eyes only for the black-haired beauty. Before she came in, Alice had been good enough for him, but now she was to be ignored, as usual. She was tired of being ignored and overlooked by everyone. She had to prove her worth over and over again to everyone she met. It was fucking ridiculous. She was better than that.

“Okay, I’m going to hit the sack.” Archer’s voice pulled her out from her vexed musings. She nodded and then hesitated. Her brain was telling her to get over it, go to sleep, it wasn’t worth it. But there was a new, although somewhat familiar voice, telling her to go for it, to not let herself be beaten by a vamp in a pretty dress. What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not like she was the innocent little girl she had been just a month or so ago. Right? Right?
“I’m gonna stay and have another one,” she told Archer. He did a kind of double-take at that, raising his eyebrows. She pretended not to notice. He looked at her for a moment, then shrugged.

“Okay. See you in the morning.”

“See ya.” He walked away and she gestured to the bartender to give her another glass of beer. He obliged and she sipped it without looking at the man with a fedora. She drank it faster than the last glass. The alcohol was going straight to her head. She was small and light, and she hasn’t eaten anything for a long time, having refrained from doing so during the wake. She was beginning to feel a light buzz.

So what if she did it? Who would ever care about it? Didn’t she deserve a little fun now and then? That guy was very good-looking, very dapper in his gray suit. The fedora was a nice touch, too. His smile was intriguing and his hazelnut eyes mesmerizing in their focused quality. And, for a change, he wasn’t that much older than her. Maybe twenty-five. Alice made a decision, took a slow, deep breath and then looked up from her beer, directing her gaze straight onto the fedora man. She put as much conviction and determination as she could in that look, not smiling or in any other way communicating her decision.

For about thirty seconds she thought it was all in vain, that – again – she made a fool of herself. He was still staring at the black-haired vamp behind Alice, but he couldn’t miss her movement and change of attitude, since she was directly in his line of sight. He ignored her on purpose, but as seconds ticked by, she noticed his eyes lost focus, as if they wanted to slid back to her and he was exerting his will not to let them. At the long last, however, he gave up and looked at Alice; their eyes met. She felt her cheeks go pink again, but she didn’t lower her gaze or move, determined not to give way this time. Another half a minute passed before he smiled the same subtle, predatory smile and slid down from his bar stool. He took a seat just next to her, leaning over, close. In normal circumstances Alice would have moved away; he was in her private zone. But with the alcohol buzzing in her head, the exhaustion of the long day filled with travel and socializing – which always tired her more than she cared to admit – and the emptiness she felt after the overwhelming waves of emotions had passed, these were not normal circumstances. She didn’t recoil.

“Hi there,” he said to her. His voice was surprisingly gruff for such a well-rounded man in a suit. “I’m Robert. What is your name, pretty eyes?”

The epithet caught her off-guard. Did she actually have pretty eyes, or was it only something he said for no other reason but because it sounded nice? She never considered that part of her anatomy very closely. Eyes were eyes, though hers were of particularly bright green, so maybe there was something of a real compliment in his words?

“Alice,” she answered mechanically, too surprised to think too much about the response. She bit her tongue before she blabbered, do you really like my eyes? That would have been hilarious.

“Alice,” he repeated softly. “I like that. That name suits you.” He looked her over slowly, as if assessing her. “So, where are you from, Alice?”

“L.A.”

“Of course. City of Angels. I should have known.” He smiled and she actually giggled at that. It wasn’t funny or anything, and part of her brain knew that she was acting like a fucking teen on her first date, but the bigger part – the one that was veiled in the haze of alcohol and exhaustion – couldn’t care less.
“Where are you from, mister?” She asked, deep inside recognizing how foolish it sounded, but it was as if she gave the reins of her body to some other Alice, one that she’s never known before.


She smirked into her beer. In addition to being young enough to really be in the last year of a BA program, she looked even younger; it wasn’t surprising that he took her for a student.

“Nah.” She shook her head. That was not the best decision; her whole world began spinning slightly. “Working on something boring far away. Just here for the day.”

“And night,” he added in a low voice, even more throaty than before.

Alice slowly lifted her gaze from now-empty glass of beer and looked at him. His face was closer than she expected and she almost jerked back, but something held her in place. She could feel his warm breath on her cheek. It smelled minty.

“Yes. And night.” She dropped her gaze again, took the check that the bartender left beside her second glass of beer and in a deliberate, slow motions signed it with her name and room number. She knew his eyes were following her each stroke. Without looking at him, she stood up, leaving the bill on the counter, and left, resisting the urge to turn around and see his face.

She got to her room two minutes later. The door didn’t even click locked behind her properly when she was already in the bathroom, taking off her tank top to wash up. She put half of her face under the running water to make it quick, knowing that she had little time to make her face back up again. She had been wearing her usual subtle makeup, as per Air Force regulations; she thought hazily now would be a good time to go a little crazier than usual.

She turned the tap off and straightened up to look at herself in the mirror. At first the sight of her face lined with dark streaks of mascara made her giggle, but then an image flashed to her mind: Laura, with her makeup running with tears, only a few hours before. This made her stop abruptly. She stood, looking into the mirror, unable to move. Her bright green eyes looked freakish ringed with dark smears, against her pale skin. Her hair was still meticulously styled in a low bun, but the strands close to her face were now damp. Somehow this sight, and the overlapping image of crying Laura, hit her hard. What the fuck was she doing?

Her friend was dead. Today was his memorial service. She had been at a wake, where she had comforted his pregnant widow, for fuck’s sake. Was she really about to get in bed with a stranger on a day like that? She didn’t know anything about this guy. Even his name was probably fake. He obviously had some skill in picking up women. It was her fault that he thought she was one of those eager to jump at the occasion. She didn’t only encouraged him; she challenged him. For all she knew he might be a psycho. Or worse, he might have STDs. Even with her pitiful hand-to-hand combat skills, she probably could have taken him if he became violent, but a disease? Of course, she’d insist on using protection, but it was never a guarantee. And for what? For a one-night-stand she’d probably regret the next morning?

A soft rapping on the door interrupted her train of thought. Alice almost jumped. She turned to face the open entrance to the bathroom, but didn’t move yet. Thirty seconds later the rapping sounded again, more forceful now. She stepped out of the bathroom and made for the door, unsure what to do. She stopped less than a foot away, breathing hard, as if she had been running or something. In nothing but her bra and jeans, with face streaked with mascara, she stood motionless as the rapping sounded for the third time.
“Alice!” A hushed voice came through the door. And then again, a little louder: “Alice, let me in!”

She leaned closer to the door, resting her forehead and palms on the cold surface. Her head was spinning. Let him in? But she didn’t feel anything of the fascination and – *just say it as it is, you moron!* - desire of ten minutes ago. Quite the opposite, she was now disgusted with the man and his behavior. And with her own, too. What was she thinking? Was it how she wanted to honor the passing of a friend? She felt nauseated.

“Come on, let me in! I know you’re in there, I can hear you breathing!” The man called, anger now audible in his voice. Alice exhaled and then stepped back, her palms still touching the cold surface of the door. The she took another step and her hands dropped to her sides. The she turned on her heel and entered the room proper. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked down. She really *did* feel nauseated, in a very literal sense. She wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol or rather the revulsion she felt towards herself at that moment.

Robert banged on the door, this time using his fist, making her jump.

“Open up!” He almost yelled. Alice shivered and slid down from the bed onto the floor, hiding her head between her knees.

He banged on the door once again.

“Bitch!” He howled and then she heard his footsteps, fading away after a few seconds. He was gone; there was only silence. In it, Alice sat on the floor, her back against the bed, clasping her knees with her arms, and tried to cry or yell or cuss, but nothing came, only emptiness and contempt for herself. In that moment, for the first time in her life, she wished she was dead. No more lost friends or family. No more stress. No more anxiety. No more having to prove anything to anyone. No more faces of the Jaffa she killed haunting her at night. No more night. No more darkness. No more *feelings.* For the first time, she truly understood what her mother had gone through.

“Get it together, Boyd,” she told herself. “You are not your mother.” But it didn’t work. Maybe mom had the right idea. She just wanted to escape being herself. She just wanted it to *stop.*

She shivered again, and as her body moved, something cool touched her chest, having slipped from the material of her bra towards the bare skin. She knew what it was immediately and she clutched at it, as if it was a lifeline: dog tags. Her identical pair, and the odd one she got from her father so many years before but picked up at her house only a few months ago. She felt it grow warm in her hand. She lifted it and pressed the small piece of metal to her lips. Her dad would be furious if he saw her now.

Or would he? He was conflicted, too, wasn’t he? He had lost friends, too. He had to prove himself constantly, too; the little freckled red-headed quiet guy could not have it easy in the aviator community. He had to deal with his sick wife and weirdo of a daughter. And yet he never faltered, never stepped down, never gave up on them.

“Daddy...” Alice whispered, wishing more than ever before that he were there, that she could once again sit beside him and get folded in his arms like a little girl. That she could fall asleep on his lap, being gently rocked back and forth, while he said meaningless, soothing words that conveyed nothing but unconditional love and support.

A shudder shook her and she finally broke down, curled up on the floor, tears streaming down her face, streaking her cheeks with more smudged mascara.
Archer didn’t comment on Alice’s puffed eyes and even darker than usual demeanor when they met at breakfast the next day. He didn’t let her sulk, though; he kept talking and pulling her into conversation by asking direct questions, and lo and behold, before they disembarked from the plane at the McCarran airport, Alice actually felt almost normal again. Archer’s unimposing yet lively presence was a relief; although she couldn’t so easily forget the overwhelming feeling of self-hate, pain and loss that almost beat her to the ground the day before, it was no longer so vivid. She could remember without reliving it. Nevertheless, she was glad when they were back at the base and she could throw herself into the whirlwind of work and independent study.

With the ZPM brought by Daedalus, the Atlantis mission could now send regular reports through the Stargate on their status, but more than that – they also sent data. Things they discovered about the city or the Pegasus galaxy, information deciphered from the Ancient database, intel on the enemy and even original ideas and theories coming from the Atlantean research teams. All that was received at the Stargate Command and promptly forwarded to the Groom Lake facility for further study. Theoretically speaking, the data was classified and shared on the need to know basis, so Alice didn’t think at first she would be allowed to look at it. But she got lucky.

It was three days after Spinner’s memorial service. The Prometheus was supposed to leave for its next deployment after next weekend, making it the longest Earth duty they’ve had so far. The Daedalus was also getting ready to embark on its long way to the Pegasus but needed to catch a ride on the ship the other way around – back to the Ancient city, although they wouldn’t be leaving for another month or so. Alice took the opportunity to spend one of the last evenings with her one remaining friend – Archer. It was likely they wouldn’t see each other again for some time, as their respective ships would probably go out of sync with their returns to Earth. Archer and Alice decided to skip the club (Alice had been avoiding alcohol after her misadventure in Lincoln) and go to dinner instead, but the only real restaurant on the base was all sold out (as was usual before a ship’s deployment), so they ended up in the main building’s chow hall.

They were halfway through their plates, both laughing at one of Archer’s lame jokes, when someone walked up to their table and stood right behind Alice. She only noticed it because Archer stifled his snicker and leapt to his feet. Alice turned halfway back to see who it was and then jumped up to attention herself.

“At ease, both of you!” The soft, warm tone and the unmistakable sparkle in the eye were still there, exactly like Alice remembered. Lieutenant Colonel Carter was standing beside her and smiling down at her; Alice smiled back and relaxed her stance.

“Can I join you?” The colonel asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Of course, ma’am!” Alice sat down and moved the chair next to her to make it easier for Carter to sit. The ranking officer was dressed in her service dress uniform which made her stand out from the crowd of civilian researchers and the servicemen, who were mostly in their BDU or flight duty uniforms – including Alice and Archer.

“Colonel, this is Captain Christopher Archer from the 901st Space Fighter Squadron,” Alice said waving over to her colleague.

“Nice to meet you, Captain.” Carter bowed her head slightly.
“It’s a real honor, ma’am.” Archer didn’t miss a beat and gave her one of his signature crooked smiles.

“901st, that’s Daedalus, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good job in the Pegasus. I heard your engaging the enemy really made a difference.”

“I hope so, ma’am. We’ve lost some good people.”

Carter nodded unhappily. Alice thought she wanted to say something more, but the colonel kept silent for a moment and then moved her attention to her, Alice.

“So, Lieutenant. I hear you’ve been doing some good work, too. Seems like we’ve made the right choice with you.”

Alice smiled and reminded herself to stay humble.

“Definitely,” Archer answered instead of her. “I’ve done the training with her, and she’s one of the best we’ve got, ma’am.”

“That’s an overstatement,” Alice disagreed.

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Archer shook his finger at her. “Don’t you try to argue with a superior officer!”

“Oh, because I have such a good track record on keeping my mouth shut,” she joked.

“I would think you especially wouldn’t have a hard time with that.” Carter raised her eyebrows questioningly. “I remember you being rather reticent.”

“I was referring to an incident that happened during the training, with a superior officer...” Alice looked down on her hands, embarrassed. Vasquez was all but forgotten in her life, but occasional reminders were still uncomfortable for her, even if she was the one to bring it up.

“Ah, I remember, I’ve heard about that, too.” The colonel nodded. “I thought you handled yourself very well.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Alice mumbled and then continued in her normal voice, just to change the topic: “Can I ask you what brings you to our base?”

“Well, Lieutenant, it’s now my base, too.”

Alice stared at her for a second, processing this information and arrived at only one logical conclusion.

“You’re being reassigned to the R&D?”

“I’m here to lead the R&D”, Carter confirmed, nodding again. “I’ll be officially moving here in a couple of weeks.”

“Wow. Congratulations, ma’am.”

“Hear, hear,” Archer interjected. “Glad to know we’ll have more chances to see the legend.”
“I’m hardly a legend...” Carter rebuked humbly, her eyes cast down for a moment.

“I beg to differ, ma’am.”

Now it was Carter’s turn to change the topic to something less uncomfortable.

“Daniel told me he met you on the *Prometheus* after Vala Mal Doraan hijacked the ship.”

“He did?” That was a surprise. To think that Doctor Jackson and Colonel Carter actually *talked* about her, Alice… She frowned. Was it a good thing or a bad thing? She wasn’t becoming notorious or anything, right?

“Yes, Lieutenant, he did. We’re friends, you know. We talk.”

“Right. Of course, ma’am. I just find it odd that you should be talking about *me*… I’m not that interesting a topic.”

“I beg to differ.” Carter shot an amused look at Archer, repeating his earlier words. “I had hoped that the last ten months would have given you some confidence boost, but I see that it’s still lacking somewhat.”

Alice smiled and looked down.

“It’s not…” She shook her head and then lifted her gaze to make a point. “I mean to say that I’ve learned a lot in that time. I’ve seen and done some amazing things and a couple less amazing that I’d rather take back. I feel like… I mean I know that I’m ready for more, but there’s still so much I don’t know or can’t do, it’s disconcerting when people start to praise me too much because I alone know how wrong they are...” At that point her courage left her and she cast her eyes downwards again.

For a few seconds, nobody said anything. It was Carter who broke the silence.

“There’s much more scientist in you than regular A-type fighter pilot,” she said in slightly amused tone, but then got serious. “You need to be confident in your abilities, Alice. As much true value as we need to bring into this job, a lot of the times it’s touch-and-go, fake it till you make kind of thing. You *have to* believe in yourself, and believe that you’re good enough, or no one else will. Not all people are so kind and generous as your friend Captain Archer here. Knowing your limitations is important, but it’s only by pushing your boundaries that you will truly learn.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alice kept her eyes on her almost-empty plate. It was very touching on Colonel Carter’s part to say this, but she didn’t understand that Alice *had to* stay humble, she *had to* doubt herself, or she would become insufferable to everyone, including herself. If she allowed herself to be overconfident, it would be her doom, she just knew it.

There always existed two Alices inside her mind: the one who knew she was *special*, brilliant and skilled. And the other one, who was convinced that everything she’d ever achieved was some kind of a fluke, a fraud on her part that was bound to be found out eventually. One mistake and everything she had would disappear in a puff of smoke.

Carter smiled wistfully, looking down, possibly knowing that she hadn’t gotten through to the young lieutenant.

“So you’re leaving soon for the next deployment, are you?” She asked after a moment’s silence.

“Yes, ma’am.” Alice lifted her gaze and nodded, thankful for a change of subject. “I hope it will be
peaceful, at least for us F-302 drivers. I’ve had my share of excitement lately.”

“So I’ve heard. Aren’t you a bit bored when nothing’s happening, though?”

Alice took a moment to think about it.

“Not really.” She shook her head slightly. “We still have practice sorties quite often – Colonel Bolton is fond of them.” She smiled. “And when I’m not on flight duty, I’m in the Prometheus’s engine room or auxiliary control, helping out. It’s quite fascinating.”

“I’d have thought by now you’ve discovered everything there was to discover on the engine.”

“Not everything,” Alice protested.

“If it broke, could you repair it by yourself?”

“Depends on the extent of the damage…”

“Let’s say the control crystals are fried, and you don’t have spares.”

Alice had to concede this one. “I believe I could repair that, ma’am.”

“Then let me ask again, aren’t you a little bored when nothing’s happening?”

“There are plenty of systems I haven’t studied thoroughly yet, ma’am.” Alice shrugged. “There’s always something new to learn.”

“That is true,” Carter admitted. “The ship, even though it’s not as advanced as the Daedalus, is still an excellent piece of technology, very complex. Still, I’d hate to see your talents go to waste.”

Alice didn’t know what to say to this. What was Carter getting at? What else was there to do?

“I think in your new position you could do something about that, ma’am,” Archer suggested, grinning knowingly.

“Yes, I was thinking about that, actually.” Carter smiled too. “I’m not officially in command yet, but I think we can scrape something by… so, Lieutenant, how would you like access to some of the intel we’ve been receiving from the Ancient database?”

Alice didn’t respond, but stared at her, wide-eyed. Was it possible?

“I’ll take it as a yes,” Carter chuckled. “I’ll make sure the paperwork is filled out today, so you can download some of the data and have a go at it before your next deployment.”

“Oh my god, Colonel!” Alice gushed (perhaps for the first time in her life outside of conversations with her mom), her eyes twinkling with excitement. “Are you serious?!”

Carter nodded with a wide smile. “Quite so.”

“Wow. Thank you!” Alice could hardly think of anything to say. “That’s… wow.”

“Count on Boyd to get speechless at the prospect of more time studying old texts and data.” Archer was shaking with quiet laughter. “For the rest of us that would be a punishment.”

Alice pressed her lips in a tight line to keep from smirking and threw him a disapproving look. It only exacerbated his laughing fit. Alice lifted her hands in a sign of surrender and smiled.
“That’s what I have to deal with,” she pretended to complain to Carter. The colonel was visibly amused, too. She shook her head, then looked at her watch and frowned.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. I have a thing in fifteen minutes. It was great seeing you again, Lieutenant. Nice meeting you too, Captain.” She stood. Alice and Archer jumped to their feet to shake her hand and soon enough they were alone, both still trying to stifle laughter.

*I am going to miss you*, Alice thought as they continued their dinner. The *Daedalus* was supposed to leave for Pegasus within the next two weeks or so, which meant that they’d probably get out of synch with their Earth duty, so they might not meet again for some time. There was an aftertaste of sadness mixed with anxiety in their friendly banter as they sat, enjoying each other’s company. There should’ve been three of them sitting there; and who knew if the next time both of the remaining two were going to make it back? There was no way of knowing it, and they purposefully steered clear of these topics. No need to dwell on what ifs.

*  

Lieutenant Colonel Carter came through on her promise. Alice got the official clearance to download some of the Atlantis data to her work laptop and later take it with her on her deployment. She spent her entire free time the next few days poring over the data. It was not easy; while some parts of the database have been translated into English, most of it remained written in the Ancient language. There was a short reference book prepared by no other than Doctor Jackson that Alice also downloaded, but it was nowhere near enough to easily understand the complex data. She picked up on the alphabet pretty quick - it was a matter of memorization, and her capabilities in that regard were impeccable. But actually deciphering the text while only every tenth or eight word was included in the reference book, and the rest needed to be pretty much guessed… that was almost impossible. Alice would try, fail, grow frustrated, and quit – and then go back to it the next day. She was nothing but persistent; she didn’t like leaving things unfinished.

She hadn’t seen Carter again. Either the Lieutenant Colonel went back to Colorado Springs for the time being, or was busy. As soon as the *Daedalus* had been completed, plans for building another ship of its class were put in motion; only now it would be constructed entirely without any outside help. Of course, having already made the *Daedalus*, the schematics for most alien systems were ready, but now there would be no Asgard to oversee and help with the installation. It stood to reason that Carter would be preoccupied with the project. It would take the better part of the year to construct the new ship.

It was Friday and Alice was on the *Prometheus*, finishing an engine diagnostic – which was done at least a couple of times after every maintenance – when the phone in the room rang. Technical Sergeant Hicks, who was running some other program on the computer across the room, stood up to take it.

“Colonel Bolton wants to see you in his office in the main building, ma’am” he informed Alice, hanging the receiver back up. There was sill no love between them, and Alice sometimes wondered how he would treat her had she not been an officer. She nodded and thanked him politely, though, determined to keep things civil with the man. Despite his attitude, he was a good engineer, and there was just no point in antagonizing him further.

It took her almost twenty minutes to shut down her diagnostic and get to the main building of the complex, where Bolton had his office. Of course, he only used it whenever they were on Earth
duty, which was usually one week every month. Alice wondered idly if the place was used during their deployments for some other purpose. It seemed wasteful to leave it empty.

The door was open when she got there. She entered and stood at attention, saluting. Bolton waved his hand for her to relax.

“Close the door, Lieutenant,” he told her. She did and then sat down in the chair he offered with another overstated gesture. He was smiling in a friendly manner that instantly calmed her. Why did she always feel nervous when being called into a superior’s office, no matter how sure she was she’d not done anything to warrant a scolding of any sort?

“I have some good news, Lieutenant,” Bolton said, his hands fluttering around in his usual emphatic way. “I’m telling this to you last, all your fellow 201st pilots are already informed. The next time we dock here, there’s going to be a ceremony on the base. You are all receiving not one, but two separate decorations!” He sounded excited, much like a parent would if his child was going to be given an award. Alice pursed her lips, fighting a smirk. “The Chief of Staff of the Air Force has just designated off-world deployment as qualified for Air and Space Campaign Medal and Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal. Of course, it’s still classified, but that means that any of our pilots is eligible to receive them. All of you have been deployed for more than 60 non-consecutive days in direct support of a qualified operation and encountered armed opposition or were in danger of hostile action, which are basic criteria for those medals. Which means that all of you will get them. It’s already been approved.” He grinned at her and this time she allowed herself to smile back, without sarcasm. This kind of medal was not perhaps particularly gratifying – it didn’t recognize any sort of meritorious conduct or heroic act – but it was a reason for pride. And it would look much better on her uniform with two rows of three ribbons instead of the uneven rows of one and three she already had: Air Force Training Ribbon, USAF Basic Military Training Honor Graduate Ribbon, Small Arms Expert Marksmanship Ribbon and National Defense Medal. These were awarded for completing the initial accession training, graduating that training within the top 10% of her class, qualifying as an expert marksman in small arms, and serving in active duty during the designated period, respectively.

“Wow. That’s great. Thank you, sir!” Alice said. “I presume it all applies to you, too, though?”

He nodded. “I’m getting a device on both.”

“Well, then, congratulations to all of us, I guess!” She snickered.

“Indeed.” His face grew a bit more serious, though his eyes were still twinkling with mirth. “But that is not all. I’ve called you here last, because out of all my squadron, you have been recognized with an additional award.”

Alice blinked quickly, surprised. What the fuck? Me? What for?

“You have officially been in combat now, under enemy fire. You more than deserve to get the Air Force Combat Action Medal.”

Oh. So not exactly a recognition of service or an act of heroism or anything like that. Still, this medal was high up on the decorations list, an actual proof that she’s seen combat; it gave depth to her bragging rights, if nothing else. Though it screwed up her perfect ribbon line-up; now it would be one, three and three. At least until she got some new awards… and then it hit her that having seven ribbons while still just a lieutenant was rather uncommon. Not totally impossible, but rare.

She smiled at her CO. “Thank you, sir. I am honored.”
“I only wish we could allow our families to be present during the ceremony. But alas! Top secret. You can tell your close ones about the awards, but not what they are for.”

Alice nodded. That was bound to cause some friction; Jake for sure would love to know, especially about the reasons behind the Combat Action Medal. He would have to live through the disappointment, though.

That night, after she slipped out of the club, where the entire squadron celebrated the news, she called her mother and brother to tell them. Jake didn’t pick up, so she left him a voice message to call her back. Her mom didn’t really understand what the medals meant, but didn’t care; her little girl was being decorated, and that was enough for her to start crying and gushing with pride. Her reaction was so genuine and happy that it managed to significantly lift Alice’s spirits for a day or two. As she predicted, when he called her the next day, Jake wasn’t happy about all the secrecy, but didn’t push as much as she’d thought he would. The worst turned out to be Aaron; again, she had to remind him of their compromise; she wouldn’t lie to him, but he was supposed not to pry.

And that was it. The only three people in the world whom she could or even wanted to tell the news. The thought was a little depressing.

At least, and at last, the day before departing again, she found a way to significantly boost her understanding of the Ancient database. It was so obvious, she felt like hitting her head on the desk when she finally realized it. As it was, she only scowled at her computer and mentally kicked herself, swearing at her own stupidity. Ancient language was a derivative of Latin (or rather, the other way around). She could actually find the meaning of some – if not most – Ancient words by checking similar spellings in Latin. It would be slow going, but it was better than the frustrating exercise in futility she’d been doing up till that moment. She was glad she didn’t have a chance to talk to Carter after all; the Colonel would probably laugh at her had she known how dumb Alice had been.

That new discovery made her next deployment much less frustrating and more interesting. She was so lost in deciphering the Ancient database that it even happened to her to forget that she had to actually monitor her instruments when in the engine room on duty. That earned her a reproving look from Sergeant Hicks, although of course he didn’t dare say anything. Flustered, Alice spent the next twenty minutes staring at the engine stats with unseeing eyes, wondering how strange it was that a twenty-two year old girl with two and a half years job experience was supposed to be ordering around a man ten years her senior with as many years of experience over her. Eventually, she returned to studying the Ancient text, being careful not to forget herself again, though.

Thus the deployment passed quickly and uneventfully, right until the end. They continued their Solar System patrolling with occasional support for ground troops around the Milky Way, but the 302 drivers didn’t have much to do aside from their practice sorties. Even preoccupied with her tablet full of Ancient data (which she took to carrying with her everywhere she went, making herself even more of a lonely island than usual, constantly reading and ignoring any opportunities at social interaction), Alice was getting tired of the routine. Consciously, she knew that any branch’s serviceman’s life was mostly spent in training, either giving it or receiving. But despite of not being the regular type-A fighter pilot herself, she did like a challenge just as anyone in her squadron, and having joined the Stargate Program, she had hoped there would be more action. Her wish came true a bit lopsided the last day of their patrol; the next morning they were supposed to dock at Groom Lake again.

She was in the engine room, running a computer diagnostic on one of the systems she didn’t know very well, and thus paying much more attention than usual. It was one of the sub-routines that supported the beaming generator. It was coming on 16:00 Zulu time – or, to the layperson, 4 pm
according to Coordinated Universal Time, used aboard the ship – when her instruments registered a power spike that could only mean that someone was beamed aboard – or beamed down. This was unusual – especially the day before landing. Intrigued, Alice brought up more indicators on her screen, to see what other systems were in use. Most were quite normal and obvious, such as engines or life support, but among them she noticed a spike in power consumption from the Asgard sensors, which began more than an hour before. Her curiosity piqued, she looked at the clock; it was five to four. Then she checked her diagnostic tool, and noted that it was almost done. She had measured her timing well; it would end right when her shift did, at four o’clock. Then she could perhaps sneak into the auxiliary control room 2, where the sensors were being operated from, and see what was going on.

Her program finished on time, producing no surprising results. With that, she wrapped up her report for Chenkov, exchanging a few pleasantries with him – he was on duty with her at the time – and waiting for Sergeant O’Reilly to come relieve her. He did a minute later and she bid both of them goodbye and left, heading to the auxiliary control room 2. There were a few people inside, but she strode straight to Lieutenant Kevin Marks, who was frowning at a screen. He was one of the few Prometheus’ crew members whom she spoke to a few times before; older than her, but the same rank, he often offered information on the ship’s system to her, even without her asking, whenever she found herself visiting the control room.

“Hi Kevin,” she greeted him, standing beside his chair and peering onto the screen he was watching so intently. “What’s up?”

He jumped slightly as she spoke up, evidently startled from deep thought. “Oh, hi Alice. Why are you here?”

“I noticed the Asgard sensors flaring up. My shift just ended, I got curious. What are you trying to find there?” She waved at the screen.

“Believe it or not, that is Glastonbury Tor, England. Well, the inside of it. Apparently there’s some sort of subterranean structure beneath the hill, sort of a cave and some tunnels. It’s completely shielded inside, though. We can’t see through.”

“Glastonbury?” Alice’s voice shot up an octave in surprise. Why was he trying to peer beneath the Glastonbury Tor?

“Yeah.” He nodded, uncertainty evident on his face. He wheeled his chair across the room to another monitor. “I don’t know either. I mean, they say there’s a big stash of treasure there...”


She was joking, but Marks’s face when he looked at her was all consternation.

“That’s uncanny,” he said, arching his eyebrows. “How did you know?”

What? She was confused for a moment. King Arthur? No fucking way.

“You’re not serious.”

“That’s what they say...”

She was about to ask who were they, but didn’t get a chance as the door opened and familiar voices drifted into the room. Alice snapped up her head and took a few steps back, recognizing the newcomers. Teal’c and Doctor Jackson she has already encountered before; then there was a lieutenant colonel she vaguely remembered from a photo, a 302 driver who got a Medal of Honor
for the action over the Antarctic post, against Anubis; and a woman with dark hair, wearing tight black leather outfit that stood out in this room full of uniforms like a horse carriage in a car park. It was certainly stylish, but it looked odd and Alice couldn’t imagine it being very comfortable, too.

Alice has never seen the woman, and she only recognized her because of the first thing she uttered after coming into the room.

“Oh, now, this brings back memories!” She said, looking around.

“How is that?” Doctor Jackson asked in a not-really-interested voice, more focused on the P-90 in his hands. *How odd to see him with a submachine!*

“Isn’t it where I beat you up?” She continued.

“No.”

“No, I’m pretty sure that right there is where I crossed...” She was standing close to Doctor Jackson; *very close*; and she lifted her hand and stroked his cheek in a sensual manner. *Whoa!*

And that’s when Alice knew who it was; Vala Mal Doraan, the very same who once hijacked the *Prometheus*, neutralizing them all – including her, Alice – and sending them onto an Al’Kesh. Sudden rage bubbled inside Alice’s chest. What was this *harlot* doing in here, being all kinds of coquettish and flirty towards Doctor Jackson?

“All right, excuse me, kids,” the lieutenant colonel interrupted Vala and stepped between her and Jackson, approaching Marks. Alice was glad he did. She slipped further back into the room and against the far wall, glaring at the impudent woman. *How dare she!* Why was she even here?

Marks was explaining his findings to the lieutenant colonel – Alice couldn’t quite remember his name; was it Micheals? - when the bimbo bent down next to him, showing off her cleavage, and Alice’s blood heated up again. *What a fucking floozy!* She screamed at her inwardly, watching Marks take a peek and then look away, embarrassed and uncomfortable. It made her feel good when Jackson grabbed Vala’s back and pulled her up unceremoniously. Why was Alice reacting so strongly to this woman? Was it because of what she did to the ship and the crew, including herself? Or was it because her overtly sexual behavior? *Am I that much of a prude, despite of all that’s happened?* The unwelcome image of Espinoza, naked and lying on top of her, came into her mind. *Oh, for fuck’s sake. Concentrate, Boyd.*

It was hard for her to focus, but nevertheless, Alice listened intently to the exchange between the green-clad team (obviously led by the lieutenant colonel) and Marks. Whatever was in the cave beneath Glastonbury Tor, they believed it was left there by the Ancients. Considering how Kevin reacted when she mentioned King Arthur... *Impossible. King Arthur was a fictional character based off of an amalgamate of Celtic and Roman historical and literary figures. The Holy Grail was a novelization of some early Celtic myths mixed up with a heavy dose of Christian symbolism. Wasn’t it?*

But the world was no longer its old sane self. This was a reality where snake-like aliens who took humans as hosts posed as gods and Norse legends were spawned by the little gray guys with huge heads. Was it really impossible that an Ancient would descend from whatever plane of existence he was on and mingle amongst medieval Romano-British? Wouldn’t his science and profound knowledge of the universe seem like magic to the simple folk of the fifth or sixth century? Couldn’t some of his technology seem like a miraculous, mystical object?

The team left to try and use rings to get inside whatever structure was buried there under the
Glastonbury Tor. Alice moved closer to Marks again, now that he was unoccupied.

“So what is really going on?” She asked, leaning over the side of the control station and raising her eyebrows at Kevin. “Obviously you know.”

Marks shrugged noncommittally. “Oh, you know…”

Alice huffed. “Let’s just say I don’t.”

Marks smiled nervously. “Well, they seem to think that, erm, Merlin was an Ancient and he left some sort of… well… treasure behind him. And I’m not betting against Doctor Jackson.”

Alice wanted to laugh but she was too astonished. That was the most preposterous thing she’s heard since joining the Program, but on the other hand… it did make a bit of sense. *Teeny tiny bit.*

“How does he know? Doctor Jackson, I mean, how did he come up with this?”

“The alien woman, Vala… she brought a tablet written in Ancient. Apparently it made a reference to Merlin’s treasure or something, and Doctor Jackson also determined that Merlin was one of the Ancients who came to Earth after they lost the war with the Wraith and abandoned Atlantis. So he thinks that our legends and myths about Merlin and Kind Arthur might actually have some truth in them. They went in to check if they can find anything.”

Alice shook her head. She still thought it was insane, but the Glastonbury Tor *was* thought to be the location of the mythical Isle of Avalon, and if Doctor Jackson was right and Merlin truly *was* an Ancient… it could all be real. *Wow.*

“I wish we could know what’s going on over there,” Marks sighed, waving at his monitor, showing the subterranean structure. Alice nodded in agreement. This stuff was fascinating. She actually caught herself wishing she could go with them.

*Stop it, Boyd. You’re a fighter pilot, not some kind of a ground troop,* she scolded herself. *If you wanted to go on ground missions, you should’ve joined the Marines.*

It took an excruciatingly long while before they heard something. The phone on the wall rang and an airman standing closest to it picked it up.

“Lieutenant Marks, sir, you’re required in the ring room on level two,” he said, replacing the receiver.

Kevin and Alice exchanged a look. He got up, waved at a sergeant sitting nearby to take over his tasks, and left the room, Alice following him unbidden. There was a big chance that whatever Marks was wanted for in the ring room, she wasn’t supposed to see or know about. But there was also a chance that they wouldn’t mind her there while they explain to him what happened.

The room was crowded with people, a few of them standing in the middle, ready to ring down. The CV, Major Davidson, waved at Marks when he spotted him. Alice kept close, and the major didn’t seem to mind.

“They found it,” Davidson enthused without a preamble. “They actually found Merlin’s treasure in the cave!”

Alice and Kevin exchanged another look – one of disbelief.

“We’re sending some of our people down there to sift through all that they found – I hear it’s quite a heap,” the Vice-Commander continued. “I want you down there, too.” Then he seemed to notice
Alice. “You can come down as well, if you want, Boyd,” he added as an afterthought. “I doubt we’ll need 302s now, but we might need people with technical expertise to go over the SG-1’s findings.”

Alice smiled at him broadly. The opportunity to look at that treasure was not to be ignored. Marks snickered at her as they both joined the group standing in the middle of the room. Then someone activated the rings and they came up, enveloping them in a flash of white light, and a few seconds later they found themselves in a dark cavern. They stepped out of the rings circle and stumbled farther into the cave.

The treasure was lying around. Actual, literal treasure; tons of gold plates, vases and figures, chests full of gold coins, and many other trinkets.

Marks whistled with awe, and Alice silently agreed with him. Wow. It looked like they could potentially buy a small country with as much wealth as was here in this cavern. Or finance a new Daedalus-class battlecruiser. Now there’s a thought. Wouldn’t the British object, though? It was on their territory.

They spread out, weaving through the alleyways of gold. Doctor Jackson, Teal’c, Vala and – Mitchell, Alice suddenly remembered the name – were already pilfering through the treasure (quite literally, in Vala’s case, it seemed).

“We have to catalogue all this stuff before we get it topside,” Doctor Jackson called out, waving around and then pointing upwards.

“Can we get it topside, though?” Alice wondered out loud, though low enough only for Jackson and Teal’c, who were closest, to hear her. “Doesn’t it belong to the Brits?”

Jackson looked at her and for the first time he seemed to register her presence at all.

“Alice! I didn’t see you there. How you’ve been?” He asked kindly.

Alice thought about the past few months; her struggle with the aftermath of her killing the Jaffa on P2K-254, her tryst with a superior officer and the resulting conflicting emotions and a showdown with the cheated wife, the death of one of only two friends she had in the service, her way of (not) coping with it… She forced a smile on her face.

“Very well, thank you. And you?”

He didn’t seem to buy it. “Fine.” He was frowning at her. Why oh why did her face have to be so transparent to everyone? She needed to work on her lying skills. “I don’t know what’s gonna happen to the treasure. The President and the Prime Minister will have to decide, I guess.”

And a shitload of lawyers, Alice added silently. She picked up a golden trinket with a fleur-de-lis, a symbol of a lily, engraved with great detail. Then she looked up at Jackson with a much more genuine smile.

“And all of this” - she waved around, indicating the treasure - “is really Merlin’s? He was an Ancient?”

“Yes.” He grinned at her, excited like a kid in a chocolate factory. “I hope we find something significant, something more than just this.” He looked at the chest full of gold coins with such disdain that Alice had to laugh. She bent down and picked up what looked like a very old book – or maybe the more appropriate word would be grimoire. It was in folio format and upholstered in a brownish red leather. It didn’t bear any marks on the cover, so Alice peeked inside.
“Think that’s significant?” She closed the book and handed it to Jackson over the chestful of coins. “It’s written in Ancient.”

Daniel took the book and opened it. A cloud of dust drifted from the yellowing pages as he flicked through them, more excited than careful. “Fascinating!” He stumbled over a golden vase and then sat down on a step, immediately completely engrossed in reading. Alice exchanged an amused look with Teal’c who stood nearby. He inclined his head towards her in recognition and she answered with the same gesture. And as she did so, Vala Mal Doraan sauntered into view, literally throwing herself onto a pile of gold with a satisfied smile. Alice pictured her as a dragon, Smaug on the pile of treasure inside Erebor. She had to stifle a laugh and decided to move to another part of the cavern, away from that woman whom she instinctively disliked so much. She kept her ear perked in the direction of Doctor Jackson, though, and heard him read out the story about a race of advanced people called Alterans who came to this galaxy and built stargates… The Ancients didn’t originate in the Milky Way, she realized a moment before Colonel Mitchell uttered the same. Holy fuck. Each time we think we’ve finally reached an understanding of our beginnings, we find everything we thought so far was wrong.

What else was there to discover? Alice felt a shiver go down her spine. She wasn’t sure if she was excited or nervous to find out. Each time they made a discovery on a similar scale so far, it was inevitably followed by gaining some new, powerful enemy. Surely it couldn’t end up like that this time, right?

* 

They spent nearly six hours in the cavern, sifting through the treasure, cataloging every item and packing them carefully into crates which were then sent topside via rings. Most of it was just gold and jewels, all of it priceless not only through the value of the materials, but also – and mainly – by its historic nature. Many items were engraved with symbols of fleur-de-lis or a red dragon, clearly evoking the old Arthurian mythology. They did find a couple of obviously Ancient devices, though; first, Marks discovered a large flower-like apparatus topped with a blue crystal, and then an airman unearthed something that looked a bit like a computer keyboard, though there was no attached screen of any kind. Nevertheless, most of the treasure hunt would delight a historian, and not necessarily an engineer.

They weren’t even halfway done when they were recalled back to the Prometheus. Another group – scientists, this time – was relieving them. The battlecruiser’s crew was ordered to get some rest before they docked at the Groom Lake the next day. As Alice had predicted, the Daedalus was gone. Without Archer, the base seemed empty to her. She went out to the club with Fiona a couple times, but mostly she stayed in her room in her spare time, trying to decipher some more of the Ancient database, catching up with her family and Aaron, reading, and surfing the Internet. For all that, she felt a little bereft. Until now, whenever she came back to base, there was someone waiting for her. Being alone all the time has never been a problem for her before; in fact, she used to revel in her loneliness. She was pretty anti-social, or at least she thought of herself as such. But perhaps it was only a way of protecting herself. Or a matter of habit? She remembered feeling similarly desolate after she went to college, alone for the first time in her life; before, Aaron and Jake had always been by her side. So maybe it was just that she finally got to know and like someone again, someone who filled the void. His absence made itself apparent. And then there was also Spinner; the lost friend whom she would never see again. At least Archer was still alive – the last she heard.
A few days into their shore duty, while the *Prometheus* restocked and had its systems maintained and retested, the decoration ceremony for the 201st Space Fighter Squadron took place. It wasn’t the same without families and friends, but it was still pretty fancy, with many civilian Groom Lake employees in attendance, alongside the entire crew of the *Prometheus* and the 510th SFS – the squadron based in the Area 51 permanently. The cherry on top was the man who presented the award to them. Alice had thought it would be Colonel Williams, the commander of the 1st Space Fighter Wing, of which the *Prometheus* squadron was part, but instead, General O’Neill himself made an appearance. Fiona commented that he probably couldn’t stand the Pentagon and looked for any opportunity to get out. Alice had to agree that it seemed plausible.

Though technically it was an *award ceremony* and not a *decoration ceremony* – the difference being that the latter one required recognition of meritorious service, outstanding achievement, or heroism, and none of those were criteria for the three awards being distributed that day – the setup of it was very formal and followed the latter’s sequence of events. That meant, to Alice’s unspoken horror, that the order of presentation was by award from highest to lowest, and only then by rank of individual. And since she was alone in receiving the Air Force Combat Action Medal, the highest of the three being awarded, she would have to go first and all alone on the stage. On the other hand, for the other two awards, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal and Air and Space Campaign Medal, she would go last, being of the lowest rank and shortest time-in-rank. Being singled out was both nice – there was no denying that receiving awards gave her some egotistic pleasure – and horrifying.

Thankfully, the ceremony was blissfully brief, with O’Neill being his usual taciturn self. He did smile at her quite genuinely, she thought, as he pinned the AF Combat Action Medal to her uniform. By the time he was pinning the Air and Space Campaign Medal next to the other two, his smile was gone and he looked haggard and exhausted. Alice didn’t blame him; sixteen people times two awards, plus her unique one; it meant that it was the thirty-third award (or device) he was giving that day. She smiled at him encouragingly, but he didn’t seem to notice. He did look glad that it was over, though.

After the ceremony, there was a reception with refreshments for all attendees. Alice tried to stay out of the way, standing at the far end of the buffet table with a glass of sparkling water in hand, but it was in vain; many people came to congratulate her, nevertheless. She didn’t really know most of them; she encountered them on the base, during the *Daedalus* construction, or during the initial F-302 training, but that didn’t mean she had exchanged more than a few words with them. There were, however, a few she did know, like some of the *Prometheus* crew – her engineering team (even Hicks came by), Lieutenant Marks, Major Davidson and even Colonel Pendergast. Colonel Carter also stopped by to congratulate her. Alice took that opportunity to thank her for the access to the Ancient database.

“It’s really fascinating,” she told her. “Reading it is quite a challenge, but it feels like it’s only making it more satisfying...”

Carter smiled. “Yes, well, I’ve never been particularly good at that part.”

Alice nodded, but without real conviction. Carter may have not been quite the language expert as Doctor Jackson, but she must have had a fair understanding of both Goa’uld and Ancient to be able to work with their technology.

“You would not believe how many times I needed Daniel just to decipher the basic labels on alien tech,” the colonel continued, shaking her head in dismay.

“I’ve seen that Doctor Jackson was back with the SG-1.” Alice changed the subject to something
that had been eating at her. “So, Colonel Mitchell is now the official leader of the team?”

Carter nodded, an amused smile playing on her lips. “Yes, Cam was quite glad when Daniel missed the Daedalus, I hear.”

“Why did he miss it?”

“Vala Mal Doraan.” Carter shrugged, but she was still visibly amused. “She tied Daniel to herself using some old Goa’uld technology. He couldn’t go anywhere far from her.”

Alice gaped at her. Why the fuck would that tramp do something like that? Unless…

“She wanted to make sure that we find the treasure. And share it with her.” Carter snorted, like it was the most preposterous idea ever. Because it is! “Well, you know we did find the treasure. But things didn’t exactly go as planned… That thing you found under Glastonbury Tor was a long-range communication device. Very long-range – it reached another galaxy.”

“Pegasus?”

“No.” Carter shook her head in emphasis. “We’re not sure exactly where that galaxy is. But that’s where the Alterans fled from.”

Whoa. “What were they fleeing?” What could possibly force such an advanced race to run away from their own galaxy?

“They call them the Ori. They are ascended beings, but not like our Ancients. Milky Way and Pegasus ascendeds made it their mission not to interfere in the lower planes of existence. The Ori are the opposite. They actually require humans to believe in them.”

“Believe in them? As in… gods?” Again? What is it with this universe and false gods?

“Yes. And anyone who doesn’t gets… eliminated.” Carter was all seriousness now, visibly worried about this new information. We’ve found the treasure like four days ago, how did we get to here in so little time?

“Anyway Vala released Daniel from the ties that bound them, but the Daedalus was long gone by then. He will stay here for at least another month, probably more, until the ship comes back.”

Alice didn’t let herself be sidetracked.

“And these… Ori, they are confined in their galaxy?”

The colonel’s face froze for just a second before she gave her a forced smile. “That’s the hope.”

She knows more than she’s telling me, Alice thought, but didn’t push further. Carter volunteered as much information as she was allowed, the rest must have been too sensitive to share with someone who didn’t have a clear need to know.

They were interrupted by someone at that point and Carter wandered away, leaving Alice alone with her thoughts. She wondered if there was any mention of these Ori in the part of the Atlantis database that they had access to. If the Atlanteans were previously Alterans, who fled from the Ori, then perhaps there would be something. She decided to check that as soon as she came home from the ceremony.

Her searches, however, didn’t yield any results. Others probably already thought of it before her,
maybe even sent a request to the Atlantis expedition to check in the full database. *Silly Boyd*, she scolded herself. *You thought you could make a great big discovery. You better stick to what you know*. But that was not in her nature, and she felt more and more drawn to anything but her standard duties, both on Earth and on the *Prometheus*.

And her work continued to be frustratingly uneventful. While flying her fighter in space in simulated dogfight was still a thrill, it was becoming part of the mundane, too. *Prometheus*’s Asgard-enhanced tech provided less and less of a challenge with each passing day, and Alice found herself wandering throughout the ship much more than before, trying to find something new to learn about the battlecruiser. That forced her to socialize more, and the crew became used to her ambling about and asking questions, and occasionally they let her examine their stations closer, even going as far as to allowing her to press some buttons or take a peek at the source code. She got caught doing so on the bridge a few times both by Major Davidson and Colonel Pendergast, but there seemed to be an unspoken acquiescence to let her go on with it. She understood it to be quite a big deal; that meant they trusted her not only not to sabotage anything or whatnot, but also not to break anything. They believed both in her integrity, as well as her expertise. That realization made her grow a few inches taller.

A few days into the deployment, as she traipsed into the auxiliary control room 2, she noticed an unusual agitation among the crew. They were standing around in small groups, whispering excitedly. Alice caught the name *Carter* spoken by a Senior Airman as she passed by, and her curiosity level shot up. She strode straight to Marks who was intent on his screen as he fed a long sequence of numbers into the computer. Alice stood nearby, but didn’t interrupt him, as he was obviously trying to concentrate hard. Instead, she observed his screen, frowning. It looked like he was calculating a hyperspace jump, but it wasn’t possible. If she was right about the meaning of the numbers he was entering, the destination would be far, far away, beyond the edges of their galaxy. Were they going to Pegasus? She found it unlikely – they would be informed if they were going, right? But then again, where else would they have a reason to go that far for?

Marks leaned back in his chair and pressed *Enter*. The computer program picked up the numbers to complete the calculation.

“Hi, Kevin,” she greeted him.

“Hey,” he answered with a small smile. “How are you?”

“Intrigued.” She pointed at the screen. “Where are we going?”

“Far, far away.” He chuckled. “It’ll be announced at the commander’s call tonight, so I guess there’s no point in hiding it...”

Alice snorted. It seemed that everyone in the room already knew, so Marks must have been forthcoming with them, too.

“Cough it up, Marks,” she teased.

“Yes, ma’am.” He flashed his teeth at her. “Earlier today we picked up Colonel Carter from a planet nearby, she gated there. She wants to study something beyond the fringes of the Milky Way, I didn’t understand that part. Something about the Big Bang and microwaves?”

Alice’s felt her jaw drop as she gaped at Marks.

“You’re kidding!”
“I take it you know what she meant?”

She blinked quickly.

“I mean, I can’t be sure, you weren’t very precise. But it sounds like she wants to study the cosmic microwave background beyond what we’ve known as observable universe so far.” Alice’s voice was filled with awe.

“What did you study in college?”

“Mechanical engineering.”

“Then no. I doubt you had any cosmology or astrophysics classes with that major.” Alice grinned at him and he smiled shyly in return, shaking his head. You’re flying in space now, though, m’dear. You could read up on this stuff, she chastised him mentally. “Cosmic microwave background, simply put, is the radiation left over from an early stage of development of our universe, relatively soon after the Big Bang. It’s been measured by many scientists in our observable universe, meaning in the universe we can see from Earth. But each point in space has its own observable universe. Recording the CMB from outside our galaxy might yield some interesting results, even ground-breaking.”

“Or it might yield no new results at all.” A familiar voice interjected from the direction of the door. Alice and Marks both turned around to see Lieutenant Colonel Carter standing in the entrance and smiling at them. She waved at them to stay at ease. “That’s the beauty of science.” She strolled over to Marks’s seat and looked at his screen. “I see we’re almost ready with the preliminary calculations.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The lieutenant tapped a button to bring up the progress bar. It showed 90%. “Nearly there.”

“It’s a very long trip. Let’s run the numbers through a simulator once it’s done.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We’re going straight there?” Alice asked, frowning. “No stops on the way?”

“No, we want to make it as far as possible before we need to head back for maintenance. Why?”

Carter noticed Alice’s uneasiness.

“Oh, well… no stops mean no practice sorties for us 302 drivers,” she explained. “That’s not going to go down very well with my squadron. As it is, they’re already bored.”

Carter raised her eyebrows.

“Are you?”

Alice looked down.

“A bit,” she admitted. “Having access to the database helps, but I can’t deny that it’s been feeling a little monotonous recently.”

“Well, I’m sure we can find something for you to do other than sit in the engine room all day,” the colonel sounded slightly amused, but there was warmth in her voice, too. Alice lifted her gaze to
see her smile. “I’ve actually already spoke to your commander about it. He agreed to let me borrow you for the duration of my stay aboard.”

Alice gaped at her silently. Carter chuckled.

“You seem surprised, Lieutenant. How many times do I have to tell you that you’re brilliant? I’ve never seen anyone learn as much and as quickly as you have in the past year. I think you have a tremendous potential.”

Alice felt her cheeks heat up and dropped her gaze to the floor again. Why was Carter always insisting on praising her so? It made her feel all warm and glowing inside, but it was dangerous. She couldn’t let it go into her head.

And what did she actually mean by “tremendous potential”? Potential for what? She was already a space fighter pilot, and that was all she’s ever wanted to do. Sure, she loved learning new things, and she loved technology and science, but it was all just a side to her primary love: flying. She wasn’t sure how her career was going to progress, but she imagined herself in fifteen years a squadron commander, then perhaps a group commander, before she retired from the Force before her job became all desk-ridden paperwork. She could then continue on as a civilian contractor, perhaps even in the Area 51. But Colonel Carter seemed to be pushing her in another direction; more scientific, less flying-related. Were they that desperate that they needed a 22 year old greenhorn doing R&D? Surely there were many more qualified people than her, Alice?

“I’ve brought a few projects with me on board I’d like to focus on while we make our way outside the galaxy,” Carter continued. “I’m gonna need a good research assistant.”

Alice frowned again. It didn’t sound that bad. An opportunity to work with perhaps the best scientist the Earth has produced so far didn’t come often. And it will be nice to have something interesting to do while the fighter practice is on hold.

As she had predicted, her fellow pilots were not happy about the new mission, which was announced to the crew during that evening’s commander’s call.

“They could’ve left us on Earth,” Fiona complained as they made their way back to their cabins. “For all good we’re gonna do here. At least you have something interesting to do! Well, interesting for you,” she amended with amusement, but then grew somber again. “I’m going to die of boredom. What am I supposed to check if everything will be stowed away for a month?!?” Her off-flight duty was equipment safety.

The only person who seemed genuinely glad was Hicks – and Alice had a feeling it had something to do with her being reassigned to Carter’s lab and Hicks not having to endure her in his engine room anymore.

The lieutenant colonel was working on several projects at once. Two were strictly theoretical – she was trying to mathematically describe a certain phenomenon of subspace communication, specifically its apparent dependence on power consumption and distance, which contradicted conventional understanding of subspace; and, secondly, she wanted to extrapolate a mathematical equation for energy inputs required to establish and maintain a wormhole based on variations in event horizon’s size. Two other projects were studies of pieces of alien technology, and the last one – an attempt to reverse-engineer such a piece and make a viable prototype of a completely human-made force shield. At first, Alice found Carter’s way of working a bit chaotic, but after a while she noticed that rotating between projects helped her keep a fresh mind and thus made her more productive.
The older officer proved to be an amazing teacher; in no time, she brought Alice up to speed on her work so far, and they dived into it together. Carter was great not only in explaining things, but more important than that, she posed excellent questions, forcing Alice to think and find answers for herself. She grew to appreciate the practical projects the most; finding out how a thing worked and, especially, how could they replicate it with the technology available to them was positively fascinating. It combined science with engineering, allowing her to feel like an actual inventor. It was nice.

But there was more to it: Alice felt not only appreciated, but needed. Maybe not irreplaceable, but certainly more essential than in her other jobs; she was just an auxiliary engineer and obviously they could spare her from the *Prometheus* ’s engine room; and even as a pilot, there was always a possibility to substitute her with someone else, the fighter was operated by two people, after all, and everything she could do as a pilot, others could as well. But she alone could help out Carter as much as she did with her research. Obviously, there were people much better qualified than her back on Earth, but there, aboard the battlecruiser flying beyond the fringes of their galaxy, she was the only one.

And Carter was a very easy-going boss. While it would be hard – and inappropriate – to forget the difference in ranks, she created a kind and friendly atmosphere and, to Alice’s belated surprise, got the younger officer to open up about herself in almost no time at all. A week into their flight, Alice found herself telling Carter about her childhood, something she didn’t do even with Archer; not in so many words, she only usually gave out snippets and partial information. This time, however, she was recounting nearly her entire upbringing.

“Half of my family has been or still is in the service.” She said one day as she was leaning over a table where a small round object lay, almost completely taken apart. She had a multimeter pointer in hand and was taking electric resistance measurements, touching certain exposed parts of the device and checking the results on an open laptop at her side. As the computer was recording it automatically, she didn’t really need to do anything other than continue sticking the pointer to the wires. “My brother is a Marine, I have an uncle in the Army and a cousin in Coast Guard, and my dad was an aviator in the Navy. And now my youngest cousin is thinking of joining the Air Force, too. Actually, he wants to be an astronaut.” She chuckled.

“Does he, now?” Carter was amused, too.

“I told him not to go for Astronomy at CalTech and choose something like Physics or Mathematics instead. He’s a bright kid.”

“You’re thinking he could join the Program, someday?”

“Maybe.” Alice nodded and laid the pointer on the table for a moment, flexing her hand. “I don’t really know him as well as I’d like to. I know his dad is extremely proud of him, even though he chose the AFROTC over his beloved West Point.”

“So kinda like you choosing the Air Force instead of following your dad’s footsteps to the Navy.” It wasn’t exactly a question, but an invitation to share more. It could be refused, but Alice realized she couldn’t really say no to this woman.

“My dad was a pilot in the Navy. I decided I also wanted to be a pilot and figured I had more of a chance for that in the Air Force,” she admitted. “Every day I thank my stars that I did that. I wouldn’t have this opportunity otherwise.”

Carter nodded from over her computer. How she could concentrate on her notes and listen so intently to Alice was a mystery to the younger officer.
“It’s not easy, growing up with a father in the service,” the lieutenant colonel observed. “It means a lot of absences.”

Alice remembered that Carter’s own father was in the Air Force for a long time and then he went on to become a Tok’ra. He had died only a few months earlier. It had been discussed at length by virtually everyone who was involved in the Stargate Program in any capacity. She decided not to pry.

“Dad went on long deployments aboard carriers. I think he’d find it funny that it’s exactly what I’m doing now, only our carriers are in space.” Alice smiled warmly. “I used to throw a fit every time he left.”

“You, a fit? I can hardly believe that.”

“Oh, you should see that. My brother usually joined in, until he was too old for that. I felt very betrayed.” She unknowingly placed her hand on her chest, where her three dog tags hung beneath her uniform: hers two, and the souvenir from her father. She then remembered herself and picked up the pointer to continue her work. “My mom was very upset when she learned of our plans for the future.”

“Having lost her husband the way she did, I can imagine why she was upset to have both kids in the service,” Carter commented. Alice reminded herself that the older officer had read her file, so she knew all about her dad’s death.

“Yes, but it’s more than that,” Alice admitted. “It meant that both of us would be leaving her alone. I…” She hesitated, her voice breaking slightly. This was hard stuff to talk about. She lifted her eyes to find Carter looking at her intently. The lieutenant dropped her gaze immediately. She couldn’t confess her feelings of guilt while looking into these penetrating, deep blue eyes. “I sometimes regret not staying.”

“Why?” There was equal measure of understanding and surprise in the lieutenant colonel’s voice. Alice kept her eyes down.

“I… She… Well.” She sighed, gathering her wits. “My mom was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia when I was a child. After dad died, she did her best to stay functional, but the moment we left home, she got worse. She had depression and her condition became so severe that eventually we had to put her in a residential care facility. She’s doing much better now, but I sometimes wish I had stayed close to her, so I could visit often or take her home with me, help her somehow…” She couldn’t say anything more, her voice broke again.

“I’m sorry,” Carter said in a soft voice. “But I doubt you could’ve stayed anyway. Do you think you could have afforded it?”

Alice looked up at her, surprised. “No. That was one of the reasons we decided on the treatment center. It’s definitely not cheap but putting together the DIC mom is still receiving, both mine and my brother’s salaries, and some help from our two uncles, we’re making it work. Had I stayed, I would probably get a low-paying job right out of college, and I would have to pay for things like transportation and suchlike… not that I make a fortune in the service, but it’s a decent and stable income that rises continuously with time, and now that I’m on deployment in space I get special pay for Hardship and Hazardous Duty and Imminent Danger… and I don’t really have the time or opportunity to spend it anyway.” She shrugged.

The lieutenant colonel nodded. “So you did the only reasonable thing, it seems. Stop blaming yourself for it. I know it’s hard to be so far away from our loved ones when we know they’re
hurting… but we do what we gotta do.”

Alice looked down on her pointer, still moving swiftly, checking each exposed wire and current conductor. She didn’t reply and they worked in pensive silence for a while.

“So,” Carter began again some time later. “Going to college, you knew you’d eventually join the Air Force? Why not go to the Academy or ROTC for that matter? Why did you choose Officer Training School?”

Alice smiled, glad to move away to a lighter topic. “I didn’t really have a choice, ma’am. I was too young for the Academy or ROTC.”

“Right!” The older woman shook her head at herself. “I forgot. You went to college at, what, fifteen?”

“Yes, ma’am. My only option was to get a diploma first, as an early entrant, and then go through the Officer Training School. My recruiter was pretty surprised when I walked in, all of nineteen years old, and demanded to be admitted to the OTS.” She smiled at the memory, feeling as if it was in a different life, long ago, while really it’s been only three years.

“I bet he was.” Carter smiled, too. “How was college for you, though? I went to the Academy, so my experience was pretty different than your regular college kid, but I think yours wasn’t that standard either.”

“Not really, no.” Alice shook her head emphatically, remembering. “I wasn’t the only early entrant on the campus, I wasn’t even the youngest one, but all the others seemed to have chosen all different majors and minors, I’ve never had a single class with any of them. I was fifteen and my youngest peers were eighteen. It doesn’t seem all that much now, but three years of difference are a lot when you’re fifteen.” She paused for a moment when one of the circuits she was checking buzzed softly. She looked at the screen and raised her eyebrows, retook the measurement and, hearing the low buzz again, laid down the pointer to make a note. That done, she picked up the pointer and continued the tedious labor. “It was quite lonely, to be sure. I spent most of my time in the library.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. You didn’t make any friends in the four years, though?”

“Four and a half, actually.” Alice smiled as Carter looked up at her with surprise. That was in her file, wasn’t it? Maybe the colonel had forgotten. “I took a semester abroad, at Ecole Polytechnique in France. There, I could study only in one field, so when I got back I had to catch up with my second major.”

“Wow. That’s great. So you speak French?”

Alice snorted. “Not really. I took French in high school and then went to Paris a month early to prepare, but I’m rather lousy at languages in general. I mean, I mostly understand written or spoken French, but speaking it myself is a whole other thing. I’m still amazed that I managed to go through whole four months in France and survive, and even finish my courses with good grades. I’m quite convinced the French profs took pity on me. I was barely eighteen, this small redhead from California whose questionable French was hardly allowing her to make sense… or maybe they just didn’t understand me and just assumed I got the right answer.” She laughed at herself.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Carter chastised her amusedly. “What did you do in Paris for the month before classes started? How did you prepare?”
“Well, I needed to immerse myself in the language while simultaneously making some money to be able to afford accommodation and stuff. So I got a waitress job at a café on Champs Elysées.”

“You, waiting tables? I can hardly imagine that.”

“Especially with my poor French. I will never, ever in a million years get that accent right.” Alice shook her head, amused at the memories. “I felt very brave, though. All these new people around me speaking this strange language, and there I was, among them, all alone yet determined to do it.”

Carter chuckled. “Why did you, though? If you were so worried about the language and people, why even do it?”

Alice raised her eyebrows in surprise. “It was a great experience, ma’am. Totally worth it.” And then she added with a smile: “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.”

“That sounds like a quote.”

“It is. Marie Skłodowska-Curie, one of my idols.”

“That does not surprise me either.” Carter nodded solemnly.

“I did make some friends in college, both in France and at CalTech,” Alice decided to answer an earlier question. “Although I’m not sure if I can really call them friends… more like acquaintances, perhaps. We don’t keep in touch. I was always too young and too socially inept to make real bonds.” Alice touched the last circuit in with her pointer, put it back on the table, and leaned back, stretching her arms, feeling the stiffness in her muscles. She needed a good workout after this. “I’m done, ma’am.”

“Alrighty then.” Carter moved around the table to peer into the laptop’s screen. “That’s interesting.”

“Yes, very level, isn’t it?”

“Except this one.” The colonel jabbed her finger at a spike on the chart.

“It’s this one here.” Alice showed her the said circuit with the pointer. It buzzed at the touch.

“What’s the voltage?”

Alice tapped a button and the chart changed. “And here’s the current.” Another tap on the keyboard. “I’m pretty sure that’s where the command prompt is generated. That circuit is key.”

“Okay. Tomorrow we’ll check it closer. It looks like it’s made out of naquadah due to its superconducting properties, though.”

Alice nodded. “We thought as much.”

“It’s nice to be right, though.” Carter smiled. “Alright, let’s call it a day, shall we? I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alice moved to secure the equipment, but the lieutenant colonel waved her away.

“Leave it, I’ll do that. I want to check one more thing. You go get some rest.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alice hid a smirk and left the room converted into a lab for the time being. How much this woman worked was beyond her. Did she ever sleep? Or have any fun?
Alice shook her head, crossing the mostly empty corridor, heading towards the mess. She could hardly believe the amount of information about herself she just gave Carter; that bit about her mom, especially, was astonishing. She had hardly ever spoken about that to Jake or Aaron, let alone anyone else. Her forthcomingness was astounding, but it didn’t make her feel bad about herself, as it usually did; it was nice to talk. And that made it even more peculiar than anything else.
Chapter 10

Alice continued to assist Carter in her lab for the remainder of their journey. And while they worked, they talked; Alice told the older officer about growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, her close relationship with her older brother and his best friend, their obsession with music, her difficult time at school, where she excelled academically but had a hard time fitting in; and about college and its challenges, her ten weeks at the Officer Training School – she mentioned Colonel Clarke, too, who took over Espinoza as the squadron commander at Groom Lake, so Carter knew him – and even about the F-302 training and subsequent duty aboard the *Prometheus*. Carter was very good at getting information our of her, but Alice managed to return the favor somewhat and asked a lot of questions about the lieutenant colonel’s time as a member of the famed SG-1. Of course she’s read almost every mission report she was allowed to access, but it was quite different hearing it recounted by the very woman who did it all.

They flew for ten days, covering nearly thirty-six thousand light years from the edge of the galaxy – where they had picked up Carter from the outermost planet with the Gate. It was not nearly as much as the *Daedalus* did on its way form Earth to Atlantis – Pegasus was around three million light years away, and the BC-304’s powerful engine allowed it to make that journey in only eighteen days. That meant that it was over forty five times more efficient than the *Prometheus*’s. Still, it was the farthest *in that direction* any human has gone, and definitely farthest Alice has ever been.

They dropped out of the hyperspace on the tenth day, and spent about thirty-six hours roaming around the big nothingness, while Carter took her measurements – with Alice’s continued assistance. Then the ship jumped back into hyperspace for the return journey, while Carter and Alice analyzed their recorded data and continued with their projects.

They were already within the fringes of the Milky Way when they received a subspace communication from SGC, telling them to drop Carter off at the nearest Gate.

“I’m leaving all my equipment here,” the colonel told Alice as she fastened the clasp on her backpack. “You can use it if you wish, although I assume with me gone you will resume your primary duty in the engine room.”

Alice nodded with a slight frown. Her primary duty was piloting an F-302, the other one was only secondary. She held her tongue, though. It was nice of Carter to give her access to her lab, even if it was only for a few days – before they got back to Earth and had to surrender all the equipment.

It was only two days later, though, when they received another communication, diverting them from their way towards Earth and into another quadrant of the galaxy, not far from where they were. They made a short stop over a planet with a Gate where they picked up some cargo – and a few passengers – before jumping back to the hyperspace. The rumors about what was going on reached the mess about two hours later.

“The SG-1 is aboard,” Fiona said excitedly, joining a group of pilots and deck crew at their table. Alice was among them, too; her shift was going to start in less than half an hour and she was finishing her breakfast. “They beamed them up from a planet with the Gate. They say we also have a bomb in the hangar. A nuke!”

“You kidding,” the chief of the deck exclaimed. “A nuke on my deck and nobody even thought to inform me!” He was visibly upset.
“What do we need a nuke for?” A 302 pilot named Munoz asked, raising his eyebrows.

“There’s an enemy beachhead we need to destroy.”

“Goa’uld?”

“No, Spencer said something about some priest or something?” Fiona sounded unsure. “We’ve been away for a long time, but apparently it’s some new threat in our galaxy.”

New threat? Alice flashed back to her conversation with Carter during the banquet after her squadron’s decoration ceremony.

“He didn’t mention anything about… the Ori? Did he?”

Fiona gaped at her. “How did you know?”

Now everyone was staring at her. Alice felt uncomfortable.

“It’s something Colonel Carter once mentioned.” The pointed silence around her forced her to continue. “She told me about these beings called the Ori. You know about the Ancients, right? How they ascended and all?”

“Oh, of course.” Fiona rolled her eyes at her, and a disgruntled sigh rolled through the group.

“Well the proper name for our Ancients is Alterans. And they didn’t originate in our galaxy, they came here fleeing the Ori.”

“Ancients fled here?!” Someone gasped, and someone else exclaimed: “Ancients fled the Ori?!”

“The Ori are ascended as well, but they’re not like our Ancients. The Ancients have a strict non-interference policy. They do not meddle in the affairs of lower planes of existence.”

“But the Ori do?”

“They require people to believe in them. As if they were gods.” Alice shook her head. “That’s what made me think of them when you said something about priests.”

“Now that you mention it I think Spencer’s words were exactly Prior of the Ori,” Fiona added. “But wait, does that mean that they’re here?!”

“I don’t know. But if we’re going to try to destroy an enemy beachhead, and it’s all connected with the Ori… it is a logical conclusion.”

The thought was chilling. Beings who chased the Ancients away must certainly be very powerful. Why else would the Alterans flee? And now they were here. How come every time they defeated an enemy, a new, more powerful one seemed to appear out of nowhere?

They all flocked to the 302 deck after that, but were halted at the entrance by the Marine Security Forces. Nobody was allowed in unless the fighters were needed to be launched.

“It’s just a security precaution,” Sergeant Matthews told them in a clipped tone that suggested something else entirely.

“They don’t want anyone near the nuke,” Fiona guessed as they stood around in the corridor.

“Maybe we should get ready, in case they need the 302s,” Munoz suggested and everyone agreed.
They wandered away into their locker rooms to pick up their gears. Alice and Fiona barely made it to theirs when the ship dropped out of the hyperspace. It was always a peculiar sensation; sort of like sitting still while also decelerating rapidly. Nothing moved, but everything shifted.

The two women grabbed their gear and made their way back to the hangar. The Marines were gone and they had no problems getting inside this time. There was nothing akin to a bomb, too; was it already taken out? What was going on?

Bolton entered the hangar a few minutes later, already with his gear, too.

“Of course ya’ll already heard that there’s a possible mission ahead,” he laughed at their sight. “We haven’t had the yellow light yet, but it can come at any time, so we might as well get into our birds.” Yellow light meant a standby order, an official command to prepare for launch. Usually during practice such an order was being given without any previous warning to measure their response time, but of course in a real combat situation every minute they could spend on preflight was precious.

It was over half an hour, though, before the dial on Alice’s dashboard turned yellow. She leaned back and put the breathing mask over her face, eying her controls again, making sure everything was ready. Her crew waved at her and ran away from the deck; getting caught anywhere near as they launched would mean instant death. She didn’t have a backseater for this mission; or, to be more precise, her backseater – a captain named Allen, one of the original members of the Prometheus’s squadron – chose to take over one of the two “spare” machines. There were eight fighters, but only twelve pilots, which meant that in the best of circumstances they had four planes manned by two people each, and four flying alone in the cockpit.

Maybe two minutes passed since the dial turned yellow; and then, suddenly, she felt something struck the Prometheus’s shield and the whole ship shook violently. She lifted her eyes, shocked, and saw a gaping hole in the ceiling near the end of the slingrail arm of the hangar. They had a hull breach! She could see the blackness of space through it, and the bluish sparkle of the shields. What the fuck is going on! She looked around, panicky. Did all of the deck crew made it out of the hangar? The pilots were safe inside their 302s, but anyone on the deck wouldn’t, not if they were venting atmosphere… but were they? She checked her instruments in the fighter. Pressure outside seemed unchanged. And then she realized: the shield was preventing the catastrophic venting of the atmosphere.

“What the hell is going on?” Bolton’s own voice came through the intercom. He then switched to outgoing communication and repeated the question.

“We took some damage,” somebody responded, and Alice recognized the voice of Major Davidson, the ship’s CV.

“Yes, we can see that!” Even from the inside of her 302 Alice could see her commander’s arms flying around in a wild gesture.

“We’re sending a team to assess the damage and see if we can repair it on the spot. The shield should keep the atmosphere in.”

“What about the 302s?”

“Standby.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Bolton muttered under his breath, having turned off the out-comms, so only his squadron heard him.
About five minutes later a group of five men entered the hangar, stood below the place where the hole in the hull gaped, talking for a while, and then they retreated without doing anything.

Ten minutes after that, their combat dials suddenly flickered and turned off. Their crews spilled back onto the decks to take care of the planes. They worked quickly and kept glancing nervously over their shoulder at the hull breach; Alice didn’t blame them. It looked scary, even though the hole wasn’t even that wide. Maybe two feet in diameter. Still, there was nothing but a layer of energy between them and cosmic vacuum. Of course, that was also true for every time they launched; the ship’s layout was such that two fighters could roll out of the slingrail arms at once, passing through an internal shield which was active only when the bay door was open. It must come on automatically whenever the sensors pick up a breach.

The ramp touched the side of the cockpit. Alice switched off last of the controls, removed the breathing mask from her face and pushed the button to open the canopy. Even though she knew about the protection of the shield, she half-expected to hear a whuss of air leaking into the vacuum. She didn’t, of course, but the nervousness of the deck crew got to her too, and she climbed down the ramp and made it to the locker room in record time. Her gear back in its place, she strode straight to the engine room, where, if not called for another standby, she would continue her shift.

To her relief, it was Sergeant O’Reilly and not Hicks on duty at that time.

“So what happened?” She asked as soon as she was set up with her monitoring equipment. Staff Sergeant O’Reilly was a nice guy, somewhat shy towards her, even though he was a couple years older. Alice suspected he had a thing for her and was trying to hide it. He acted completely relaxed when talking to the other engineers, crew or even the CO. He was also very smart – but that wasn’t anything new. Only the best of the best could find themselves part of the Stargate Program. She felt a momentary burst of pride for being there herself.

O’Reilly was well-informed. He told her the reason for their trip here – to stop an Ori Prior from making a beachhead in this galaxy by making a force field on the planet. He recounted how they tried to convince him to go back where he came from by threatening him with a naquadria-enhanced nuclear warhead and how, eventually, they had to detonate it. Alice listened with a deep frown on her face as he admitted this only allowed the force field to expand to the point where it enveloped the entire planet which then collapsed into a micro-singularity that was supposed to power a Supergate that would allow the Ori to send an armada of ships into Milky Way. O’Reilly mentioned also that building blocks of the Supergate was what struck the Prometheus with enough force to punch a hole in the hull; it also completely destroyed two Jaffa Ha’tak ships.

“I bet they weren’t very happy about it,” Alice commented, not happy about the damage to the Prometheus either. “But did we stop the Supergate from forming?”

“We didn’t. It was that alien woman, Vala Mal Doraan.”

Alice felt her face freeze in a shocked expression.

“She ringed aboard a cloaked Tel’tak the Jaffa left over to observe, sent the Jaffa driver back here, and flew the ship into a gap between the building blocks of the Supergate. I guess it interfered with the flow of energy because the Supergate was destroyed as soon as the singularity had formed.”

“And Vala?”

He shook his head. Alice gaped at him in stunned silence. This woman whom she thought so lowly of… the woman who once hijacked the Prometheus, who led them to Avalon for her own personal gain, who acted so lewd and coquettish, that woman sacrificed her life to stop the Ori
from coming here? Boy, did Alice misjudge her! Once again, proof that she had no ability whatsoever to read people. She didn’t say anything more, but concentrated on her diagnostics. Machines were so much easier.

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Fiona sat at the table in their room, engrossed in an e-mail. She wrote one to her husband and kid every day; they were transferred to Earth in the daily subspace communication; unless, of course, they were too far away to send it. Alice wrote her own e-mails every week or so – to her mother, brother and Aaron – but nothing close to this almost religious routine Fiona was cultivating. She didn’t even look up when Alice entered the room and started gathering her PT uniform to go to the ship’s gym for a workout. She went on a run on a treadmill every morning, but also added more extensive exercise three or four times a week, just to stay in shape.

“I was just in the mess,” Fiona commented a minute later, just as Alice was about to leave. She must have finished with the e-mail. “The SG-1 is in there. Minus Doctor Jackson. I heard he’s in the infirmary.”

“Well?” That was news. “Why?”

She shrugged. “I thought you might want to go say hello to Lieutenant Colonel Carter. She and you became close during our recent deep space reconnaissance mission, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know about close,” Alice said, though in all frankness, she did feel somewhat close to Carter. “But thanks. Maybe I’ll go eat something now and work out later.”

She noticed Fiona trying to hide a smirk. What was that about? She frowned, but decided not to get into it. The truth was, she did want to see Carter. More than that, she wanted to ask her about Vala. The fact that the alien woman sacrificed herself so altruistically rattled her. Or rather, the fact that Alice had been so wrong about her was what really was eating away at her.

The SG-1 was still in the mess, as Fiona said. They were occupying one of the more remote tables, away from everyone else. Alice remembered that time she had approached Doctor Jackson after Vala hijacked the Prometheus. People had been giving him a wide berth, too. She wondered why was that. Was it because of the aura of adventure surrounding them? Or was it respect?

She took a tray and filled it with food, hardly paying attention to what she was taking. Then she headed straight for the SG-1’s table but stopped nearby, suddenly shy and unsure. It was Teal’c who first noticed her and his looking up to her was what alerted the other two to her presence too. Alice smiled nervously.

“Hi. I don’t mind to intrude, I just wanted to… um… say hi to Colonel Carter. And Teal’c.” The two of them smiled, and the Jaffa inclined his head. Colonel Mitchell had his eyebrows raised as he took her in. “So… um… hi.” She shifted her weight to the other foot and cursed herself inwardly. What a fucking perfect display of awkwardness, congratulations, Boyd, you dumbass! She made a move as if she wanted to leave, but stopped when Carter waved at her.

“Don’t be ridiculous, sit with us, Lieutenant!” She said with a grin, patting a place next to her. Alice hesitated. “Come on.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” The young lieutenant sat down, her tray clattering way too loudly as she laid
it on the table. Her cheeks were hot; she was blushing again. Why oh why did she think it would be a good idea to come here?

“Teal’c, you remember Lieutenant Alice Boyd, right?” Carter presented her with another wave of her hand.

“Indeed.” The Jaffa nodded again, and Alice smiled timidly and nodded back.

“And this is Lieutenant Colonel...”

“Cam Mitchell,” the man finished, extending his hand to Alice. She took it and they shook briefly.

“It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” Alice said. “You’re quite the legend among us 302 pilots.” He grinned. “See, that’s what I’m talking about!” He professed to the other two. Carter snickered, shaking her head, amused.

“If I may be so bold, ma’am... I heard that Doctor Jackson is in the infirmary. I hope he is not seriously injured or ill.” Alice looked at Carter worriedly.

“No, he’ll be fine. He wasn’t injured, it’s the effect of the Goa’uld bracelet Vala Mal Doraan bound him to herself with. It’s been removed weeks ago, but the effect lingered. Thankfully, it faded enough for him to survive when she...” Carter suspended her voice as if it was too hard to say.

“So it’s true, what they say? She’s... gone?”

“Maybe.” Carter met the gaze of Mitchell and smiled slightly. “She was trying to ring back to the _Prometheus_ as the singularity formed... you know about that part, don’t you?” Alice nodded and Carter continued: “She didn’t get here... so there’s a slight chance that the matter stream was pulled into the singularity.”

Alice frowned. “So you think she might have ended up in the Ori galaxy? Alive?”

“It’s a small chance, I admit, but not impossible.”

“The matter stream would always seek out the closest ring platform, if the Ori are like the Ancients, it’s possible there would be one somewhere not far from their Supergate. On a ship or something,” Alice mused.

“That’s the theory. Of course we have no way of knowing for sure...”

“Why did she do this?”

Mitchell and Carter exchanged pointed looks again.

“We may have misjudged her,” Mitchell acknowledged, mirroring Alice’s thoughts.

“If she is alive, she may yet find her way back to our galaxy,” Teal’c declared in his signature grave voice.

“Yes, you gotta admit, she is one resourceful lady,” Mitchell agreed.

“I wonder what the Ori will try next.” Carter frowned. Her eyes glistened in the bright light of the mess hall. “We may have stopped them for now but I doubt they’ll be so easily put off.”
“I bet you everything I own they’ll try again with the Supergate, somewhere else.” Mitchell nodded soberly. “Maybe not right away, but eventually. If we don’t stop them first.”

“How are we to stop them, Colonel Mitchell?” Teal’c seemed only mildly interested in the answer, but Alice figured it only looked so on the surface.

“That I don’t know yet, brother,” Mitchell acquiesced. “But we will do all we can, that is sure.”

For a moment there was silence around the table when each of them was thinking ahead to what else was coming.

“Alright, guys. I’m gonna check on Daniel and then hit the sack. See you tomorrow.” Carter stood up and collected her tray from the table.

“Wait up, I’m gonna go with you.” Mitchell mimicked her and Teal’c also got onto his feet. “It was nice meeting you, LT.”

“Yes, sir, likewise,” Alice replied, jumping up too, and only sat back down when they were several paces away. She finished her meal, went back to her room to pick up the PT uniform and eventually made it to the gym, all the time churning the new information and events of the day in her head. This new enemy seemed worse than any of the ones they’ve previously faced. Maybe because it was her first actual enemy – aside from some lowly Goa’uld and Jaffa she had fought before. But not only that; they were the people the Ancients fled from. They were able to create a force field capable of collapsing a planet and creating a singularity. They almost succeeded at creating a Supergate. They were clearly a force to be reckoned with. How could the humans of Earth stand up to such power?

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It took almost five days to reach Earth. In that time, Carter spent some time back in her lab, but Alice has not been recalled from her engine room duty. She met the lieutenant colonel a few times in corridors and the mess, usually along one or more members of the SG-1. They always exchanged some pleasantries, but the easy camaraderie Carter and Alice have worked out during their journey beyond the edges of the galaxy was gone. Alice realized how ridiculous it was, but couldn’t help but feel a bit hurt. She’s opened up her heart before that woman and as soon as her older friends were around, she went and forgot all about Alice.

Doctor Jackson was released from the infirmary the day before they got back to Earth, but Alice didn’t have an opportunity to talk to him, either. The SG-1 was beamed down straight to the SGC as soon as they reached the orbit, and the rest of them had to wait until they finally docked in the hangar off the Groom Lake base. It was almost noon, late August, and the sun was blasting from the cloudless sky, the temperature reaching a hundred degrees. After the relative coolness of space (understandably, Prometheus was heated, but only to low sixties to conserve power), the blazing heat almost overwhelmed. It was a real relief to enter her air-conditioned apartment building. She barely got to her place, though, when her phone buzzed.

“Lieutenant Boyd,” she said to the receiver, heaving her bag of personal effects onto the bed.

“Good morning, Lieutenant, this is Sergeant Rossky, Colonel Bolton would like to speak to you as soon as possible.”
“Alright, tell him I’ll be at his office in twenty minutes. Thank you, Sergeant.” Alice hung up and sighed. What did Bolton want? She had been looking forward to a nice shower and then lunch before the afternoon’s squadron assembly. Instead, she just splashed some water onto her face, made sure her flight duty uniform was in order, and left.

Fifteen minutes later, as she entered the main building where Bolton had his office, she was already drenched in sweat. The light breeze from the A/C was nice, but it was starting to concern her – all those sudden changes from hot to cool and back could not be good for health. In L.A., where she grew up, the average temperature in summer was around eighty degrees, so the difference was not as drastic. She remembered with a smile how much she welcomed the Nevada weather after three weeks at McMurdo.

Bolton’s office door was open. She entered but he was nowhere to be seen. She waited only a couple minutes, though. He closed the door behind him and waved at her to keep at ease as he sank into a chair behind his desk and then gestured for her to sit in another, facing him.

“So, Lieutenant, it’s been almost an entire year since you’ve started flying 302s”, he began kindly. “How are you feeling about it?”

“Well, if you count from the moment we’ve begun our initial training at McMurdo, then it’s been exactly a year and a day.” She smiled, thinking about how much has happened since then. “It’s been quite a ride, sir.”

“That it has.” Bolton nodded with a smirk and a wide gesture of his hands. “And that’s actually why I’ve called you here, Boyd. I’ve been going over some files and it seems to me that since the beginning of your assignment to the *Prometheus* last December you haven’t taken any leave.”

*Oh*. Was that true? She frowned, thinking hard. Weekends, yes, national holidays, sure, but personal leave? Unless you counted the time when she went to Spinner’s wake and memorial service in Lincoln and a few days of special pass given to all crew members of the *Prometheus*, then, in fact, she hasn’t taken any time off yet.

“I’m mentioning it because all of your colleagues take at least a day or two almost every time we dock to be with their families and friends.” His voice was serious and his gaze intense. Alice dropped her eyes to the ground, but she didn’t know how to respond. She was used to not seeing her family for long periods of time; ever since she had left for college, she has been away – close enough to, in theory, visit often. But with her mother being at a residential care facility with limited visitation possibility, especially at the beginning, and her brother away on training and then on deployment in Iraq, she didn’t really have much incentive to go back. They all grew accustomed to being apart.

“I don’t mean to poke my nose into your life, LT,” Bolton continued. “But as the commander of this squadron, I am responsible for all my pilots’ well-being, and that includes making sure they get enough personal time.” He paused for a moment. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that your idea of crew rest is more work.”

Alice felt her lips twitch up, but stifled the smile. Instead, she looked up at Bolton, trying for a steady gaze. It was him who smiled then.

“Now while I understand that someone with a brain like yours might feel the need to… let’s say, relax actively” - he snickered at that - “I need to know that you’re not getting overworked and that you do, actually, get enough rest.”

“I do, sir,” she reassured him eagerly. “It’s just that I get bored quickly and there isn’t that much to
do aboard the *Prometheus*..."

He raised his eyebrows.

“I’ve never seen you in our movie theater, or in the game room...”

She couldn’t help the smirk this time. “I’m not much for movies or games, sir.”

“I’ve noticed.” He chuckled. “Boyd, I don’t mean to meddle in your affairs, you do what you want when you’re off-duty. Just promise me you’re gonna be mindful of the crew rest time and how you spend it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Bolton paused again, shooting her a rather unconvinced look. “And on that note, I need you to take some time off.”

“Sir?”

“Boyd, you have forty days of leave carried over from last year,” he informed her. “And twenty-two days from this year so far. If you don’t take at least some of it before 30th September, you’re going to lose it.”

Alice frowned, thinking back. She entered the service in September 2002, and immediately went in for a pilot training. Servicemen accrued two and a half days each month, which meant 30 days per fiscal year. The leave not taken was carried over to the next period, but only up to 60 days; anything over that limit was lost. Alice had taken a couple weeks of leave every year, but there were always some days carrying over, and apparently she’s reached the limit this year. After their 302 training every pilot got five days off, which was charged as paid vacation time and subtracted from their total number of leave days, which was why Bolton said she had twenty-two this year. Still, forty plus twenty-two exceeded the limit and she would, indeed, lose some of it.

Another question was, did that matter? She was happiest when she was working. Using vacation days wasn’t exactly high on her priority list.

“And not only that,” Bolton picked up after a moment of silence. “You need to think about how to plan your leaves ahead; if you don’t then you’ll have the same situation next year.”

That was also true. *I could visit my mom,* she thought. She hasn’t seen her in over eight months. It wasn’t exactly unheard of in her life, but at least previously she’d been calling her twice or thrice a week. Obviously, now she could only call when she was on Earth, and in the meantime write e-mails, but it wasn’t the same. There was no denying that she missed her mom. And Jake and Aaron, too, of course. She could also visit both her uncles. She’s seen uncle Simon last December, but uncle Alastar had been absent then and on one another occasion when she had been in L.A. She could meet up with Tobey, maybe give him some more tips on the Air Force and college… *Okay, maybe I’ve gone a bit overboard with the work,* she admitted to herself.

“Yes, sir,” she replied, because there was nothing else to say.

“Alright.” Bolton tapped two fingers on his desk. “I want to see the paperwork before the end of the day. Take tomorrow and the entire next week, that’ll be six days. *Prometheus* is scheduled to leave again on September the 3rd in the morning, so I expect you’ll be back in the base by Friday afternoon.”
“Yes, sir.”

“And think about how you want to distribute your leave in the next few months. I’m not kidding,” he warned. “I can order you to make a formal plan if it’s necessary.”

“Not necessary, sir.” Alice shook her head to emphasize the point. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good. And now, off you go. It’s lunch time. Dismissed.” He waved her away with a smile. Alice stood up at attention, saluted, and then left.

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The next day Alice packed a bag and got into her car. She hadn’t used it much in the past year, preferring instead to move about the base on foot, although some distances were considerable enough to merit a drive. She had installed a smart charger and kept it plugged in in the underground garage in her apartment building, but still made regular trips around the barren Nevada wastelands every time she came back from deployment just to make sure her battery didn’t die. She was now glad that she did; she had about eight hours of driving ahead of her, if she was lucky. She had checked flight options, but commercial tickets were quite expensive to buy only a day in advance; there was also a military shuttle going from Nellis to Edwards base, but it was around four hours to Las Vegas, then an hour of flight, and then another three hours to get to her house in Los Angeles, if traffic was not too bad; plus, with Space-A travel, you never knew if there’d be place or if the flight wouldn’t be delayed or canceled. She decided on making the drive instead.

Even stopping only once on the way – for lunch – it took her more time to arrive than predicted, and it was almost evening when she pulled onto the driveway. The house looked like it always did these days: empty and somehow sad. Maybe it was the yellow lawn (she still hadn’t installed the sprinklers) or the coat of dust on the porch and obscuring the windows, or maybe she was just projecting her feelings onto it.

She got out of the car and hung her bag over her shoulder, looking around. The neighborhood didn’t change much since she was a kid. Some houses repainted, others had new occupants, but overall it was pretty much the same. Alice noticed Mrs. Hootfield peeking from her window across the road and waved at her, grinning. Yes, quite the same.

The house was oddly clean. The last time she had come here, it was covered in a layer of dust; but though the protective plastic coverings hung over the furniture, they were almost pristine. Someone must have been here very recently. Only three people, except herself, had the keys: Jake, uncle Simon and uncle Alastar. Since both uncles had their own houses and families, the most probable option was Jake. Maybe he’d had a vacation, too? He never mentioned anything last time they spoke, but that was over a month before, so it was possible there was a change of plans.

She spent the next hour picking up all coverings, folding them and putting them away. Then she decided to walk down to the nearby convenience store and get something for dinner; obviously, the fridge was empty, except for a bottle of ketchup and an unopened jar of mayo.

She was standing in line to the checkout when someone spoke her name from behind her.

“Alice? Alice Boyd?”
She turned around and faced a short (though still an inch taller than her) but athletic man with a mane of dark brown hair and a light goatee. He looked a couple years older than Alice.

“It’s Stephen. Stephen Foster, remember? We went to school together?”

Something clicked. She remembered a scrawny boy with pimples sitting in front of her in AP French in twelve grade, though of course she had been nearly four years younger. He was much better than her at French and they even studied together a little during free periods; to be quite honest, she didn’t think she could have gotten her 5 at the final AP exam without his help.

“Oh, wow,” she said, smiling. “Of course I remember. Sorry I didn’t recognize you immediately. It’s been quite some time. You’ve changed.” She couldn’t help the appreciative undertone in her voice. He laughed.

“Look who’s talking. If not for the red hair, I wouldn’t have recognized you either.” His gaze slipped from her face as he said it, resting on her chest for a moment before he looked up again. She suddenly felt self-conscious; she was wearing a v-neck midnight blue t-shirt, offering the slightly taller man perfect opportunity to peek in. He grinned at her as his eyes met hers and she blushed. “How have you been?”

“Good,” she replied, turning around to take a step in the line, and discreetly pulled her shirt a little higher. “I just came here for a little vacation. You still live in the area?”

“Oh, no, God forbid!” He chuckled. “I’m visiting my folks. I live in New York now. Well, New Jersey, but just across the river, really. Seems like fate brought us here in the same week.”

Alice smirked, thinking of Bolton ordering her to take the leave. Some fate!

“Yes, it seems so.”

“Listen, I gotta run tonight, but tomorrow I’m meeting a couple of guys from back in the day, schoolmates and stuff. Maybe you’d join us? We’re doing bowling but I expect we’ll end up in the bar.” He laughed. Alice didn’t remember him being so vivacious. What a difference seven years can make! But he was proposing a social gathering with people she hardly knew, if at all. It was not something that Alice would consider doing of her own free will.

“Um, not sure if I’ll have the time. I’m going to be visiting my family, I don’t know if I’ll be back by then...” She looked down, taking another step in the line. There was only one more person before her.

“Well, if you decide to join us, we’ll be at the AMF and then probably at Cliff’s,” Stephen offered hopefully. Alice suppressed a snicker.

“Yeah, I’ll see what I can do.” She said noncommittally. It was then her turn, so she paid and then waved him goodbye as he stepped up to the checkout. He waved back enthusiastically.

After her solitary dinner, she paced the house, not knowing what to do. She surfed the Internet for a while, reading and commenting on her favorite blog, In Layman’s Terms. Then she turned the TV on, but zapping through the channels only frustrated her and when she didn’t find anything of any interest, she turned it back off. Instead, she wandered into her dad’s den, where he used to relax when he was home between deployments. There was a huge bookshelf there, and although Alice had read most of them, there were still a few books left that she didn’t know. She rarely read fiction so at least it was some change. She picked up a novel called Solaris and sank in her father’s leather chair with it. As she closed the cover an hour later, she felt somewhat uneasy. It was
supposed to be a sci-fi book and she thought it would be fun to see how far the author strayed from the truth. Instead, she found a philosophical treatise on humans’ inability to communicate or even understand an alien entity; because truly, how could they, if they don’t even properly understand themselves? She couldn’t help but apply the same logic to the real aliens out there; especially the ascended beings, whose existence was just so very different that it seemed virtually impossible that they’d be able to comprehend them or their motives at all. And yet, the Ancients and the Ori both used to be like them, like humans, before ascension; so maybe there still was a flicker of hope?

She went to bed that night unsettled and unable to shake the strange, chilling feeling that the book had given her. Maybe it would have been better to just watch the mindless blabber on the TV instead.

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Alice spent almost the entire next day at the Hallaway Treatment Center, the residential facility her mom was at. It was tucked out of the way on the very opposite side of the city, two hours drive straight with only light traffic, that could quickly expand to three or even more during peak hours. She had called ahead to make sure the doctors were fine with the visit, and indeed found her mother in a very good state. She was delighted to have her elusive daughter come see her, and confirmed that Jake had been there a few days before too.

“You’ve just missed him,” she informed Alice as they sat at the big terrace at the back of the main building. Mother’s unfinished canvas stood nearby; she had been painting when Alice came. It was a stormy sky dotted with dark shapes of birds, fluttering helplessly against the wind. The bottom was still empty; Alice wondered what would be there. A darkened mountainside? Or maybe a troubled sea? The memory of the disconcerting ocean-planet she’d read about the day before came unbidden and she had to shake her head at herself. Now, in the light of day, her last night’s eerie mood seemed somewhat ridiculous, though a bit less so when she was looking at her mother’s unsettlingly dark canvas. “Jake’s been here for like, three days I think? Maybe more at the house, but he’s definitely been here three times.”

“I haven’t spoken to him yet,” Alice admitted. “He didn’t pick up when I called him yesterday.”

Her mother looked at her musingly and then smiled lightly.

“I think he’s seeing someone,” she told her in a conspirational tone, lowering her voice. Alice raised her eyebrows. “Oh? How do you know? Did he tell you something?”

“No.” She shook her head emphatically. “You know Jake. He’s normally such a blabbermouth, but not on the topic of his relationships. Much like you.”

“Well, I have a good excuse,” Alice mumbled, looking away. “I don’t have any relationships.”

“Uh-huh.” Her mother didn’t sound convinced. “Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“Notice what?”

“There’s something different.” Eileen waved in Alice’s general direction. “It’s subtle, but it’s definitely there.”
Alice had to remind herself to stay calm. Her mother had a very keen sense for reading people. Exactly the opposite of herself.

“I take the silence for a confirmation,” the woman said triumphantly and then chuckled. Alice marveled at how much she looked like the woman she had been before the attack, before dad’s death.

Mother didn’t push her, though; they spent the afternoon chatting about nothing important and just enjoying each other’s company and the warm, sunny day. It was nearly six in the afternoon when a nurse interrupted them with an apologetic smile, saying that it was time for Eileen’s group therapy session. Alice said goodbye and promised to come back soon. On her way out, though, she was stopped by a young man in a white coat she’s never seen before.

“Miss Boyd? I’m Doctor Francis Chersky, I’ve been working with Doctor Marcell on your mother’s case for a few months. Can I speak to you for a moment?”

Alice felt a twinge of panic. Can I speak to you for a moment usually wasn’t followed by good news. The physician showed her to an office and sat in one of a pair of comfortable armchairs standing next to an open window. He gestured for her to join him. He must have noticed her sudden tenseness because he smiled encouragingly.

“Please, do not be alarmed.” His voice was very warm and he had dimples in his cheeks. “I just wanted to give you a couple updates. I know you are a busy person, what with your constant deployments and all…” He checked himself then. “I’m sorry, it feels as if I already know you. Eileen talks about you and your brother all the time. She's very proud.”

Alice nodded uncertainly. What was the update?

“We have recently adjusted your mother’s medication, reducing the dosage slightly,” he continued, his gaze focused now. “Her response was very encouraging. We would like to try to scale back the medication further, see if we can go back to roughly what your mother was taking before the last episode.” He wasn’t referring to what had happened soon after Alice and Jake had both left home; that was only the first attack. The last episode was a little over a year ago, not long before Alice was offered the chance to join the 302 program. Her mother had been doing increasingly better since then, maybe better than ever since her husband’s death.

“Do you think it’s a good idea?” Alice hesitated. “I don’t want her to go through another episode because we’ve reduced the medication too much.”

The doctor shook his head. “She hasn’t needed much antipsychotics in a long while, and we’ve switched her antidepressants to a… milder kind recently, no adverse effect as of yet. I’m quite certain that reducing her medication further is the best course of action. At this point I’m more concerned about the side effects than another episode.”

“But that doesn’t mean she’ll never have an episode ever again.”

“No, I’m afraid there is no way to guarantee it. Our purpose here, however, is to give her back her life, bring her into society. She can’t do that here, and we can’t let her go until we’re reasonably sure that we’ve found a combination of drugs that will help her in her daily life without compromising it with annoying and potentially harmful side effects.”

“You think that’s possible any time soon?”

“Perhaps. That is why I wanted to talk to you. It would be best if your mother was released into a
family member’s care, at least for a while.”

“Oh.” Alice frowned, looking down. She was gone four weeks out of five, there was no way for her to take care of her mother. Jake’s situation wasn’t much better; at the moment, he was at Twentynine Palms, but who knew where he could be thrown to next?

“This will not happen for at least a few more months,” the doctor added quickly. “But it is something to consider.”

“Yes, it is. Thank you, Doctor.”

“My pleasure, Miss Boyd.”

He walked her almost out of the building.

“Your mother is an extremely talented artist,” he told her before going back. “I’m sure she could eventually make a living out of it again. And it helps her focus and keeps her mind occupied. I strongly believe we can get her to a point where she’ll be living completely autonomously. It’ll just take some time.”

Alice nodded, thanked him again and walked out of the building. This visit did not go as planned. At least it was not bad news, she thought. It was actually good. Her mother was doing remarkably well. She could restart her life on her own soon. She just needed a little support first. They would find a way. She could be independent and happy again. That was good, right?

So why was Alice feeling so uneasy?

* 

She was looking for the keys in her purse, standing on the porch, when she heard the car slow down and then pull over at the curb in front of the house. She turned around in time to see Stephen Foster get out of his car and begin walking in her direction. Fuck. She wasn’t going to join him at the bowling alley, nor at the bar. She was planning to spend the evening at home, watch a movie she’d picked up at a DVD rental. But here he was, dressed in a Star Trek t-shirt and jeans, with a huge grin plastered to his face as he approached.

“Good! You’re home after all!” He exclaimed when he was still some paces away.

“What are you doing here?” She demanded, sighing. She found her keys at that moment.

“I was just driving down to the AMF. My folks live up the street, it was on the way.” He shrugged, his smile less bright now as he read her mood. “I saw you from the car and decided to ask if you’d like a ride.”

She rolled her eyes. Three minutes and she would have avoided him. Damn luck!

“Listen, if you don’t want to, you don’t need to come,” Stephen said in a clearly disappointed tone. Alice felt defensive.

“It’s just that I’m not really a people person.”

He snorted at that. “Yeah, no kidding. Some things don’t change.” He shook his head. “I was kinda
counting on you, I won’t lie. The people I’m meeting tonight were some of the popular kids, you remember Paul and his clique?”

Alice nodded, frowning. She never particularly liked Paul, but he mostly ignored her existence in school. It was his sister who was the embodiment of a stereotype of the popular girl: pretty, blonde, captain of the soccer team, she didn’t like that the most popular boys in school who weren’t related to her – the Dead Man’s Eyes band mates – were treating Alice, the small, withdrawn A-student who was three years younger than them, like a peer, one of them, a true friend. It didn’t help that Cecilia had a crush on Jake and he completely ignored her advances.

“Turns out my best mate at school – you remember Kenny? I think he was in AP Physics with you? So, Kenny and I went to college on opposite ends of the country, and we kinda grew apart, you know? But apparently he got close to Paul, and so when I brought up that we should hang out while I’m here he was more than game, but he also invited Paul and some of their friends… And I don’t know what to expect. So I would really appreciate to have some positive reinforcements, you know?”

Alice shook her head slowly, rolling her eyes again. “That’s a very elaborate excuse.”

“It’s all true, though.” He flashed her a wide grin. “Come on, Alice. It’ll be fun.”

“I think I have a different definition of fun,” she mumbled. But wasn’t that the point of this vacation? Go and do stuff that she’d normally not do? Be with people? Just… let go for a moment?

And Stephen grew up to be a very handsome man. He clearly liked what he saw, too, otherwise he wouldn’t be insisting, right? So what’s the harm? She could leave at any time. Come home, close the door, forget it ever happened. And she was curious about Stephen. He had always wanted to move to France. That obviously didn’t happen; he lived in New York now. What was he doing in life?

“Please?”

She sighed. “Alright.” His grin widened still; a little more and his face would split in two. It was a bit unsettling. “But I need to change.”

“I’ll wait here,” he offered immediately and watched her like a faithful dog as she opened the door and entered the house. When she reemerged ten minutes later, dressed in jeans and a bottle green halter top, he was still in the same place, his hands in his pockets, and he was watching the twilight sky. He shifted his gaze at her as she stepped down from the porch.

“All ready?”

“All ready.”

He led her to his car and even opened the passenger door for her. She hid a snicker.

It was a five minutes drive to the bowling alley. They were a little late; the group was already waiting at one of the lanes. There were four of them; Alice instantly recognized Kenny, who was in her AP Physics classes in high school, and Paul and, to Alice’s despair, his sister Cecilia. The fourth person was a woman, too, but she didn’t look familiar.

“Hey guys, sorry to be late, I was picking up an extra,” Stephen exclaimed as they approached.

“You guys remember Alice Boyd?”

“Oh my, little Alice!” Cecilia said, sounding genuinely surprised. She wasn’t as slim as she had
been in their high school days, and she was still very pretty, in a more mature and confident way, though by no means provocative. Her makeup was tasteful and she was wearing a knee-length skirt and a light blue blouse that went very nicely with her blonde hair and fair eyes.

Her brother looked very dapper, too, even though he was just wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. He was clean-shaven and had manicured hands. Kenny was the most loose of the three; with a flannel shirt and disheveled hair, he resembled the kid she’d known from classes, always stirring up some trouble or thinking up a new prank. The second girl looked younger, maybe Alice’s age, and she was dressed in a long black skirt, black lace shirt and had brown eyes and dark hair.


“Hey, Alice.” Kenny grinned at her, but Paul didn’t acknowledge her in any way, other than to stare at her.

“This is my girlfriend, Lamya.” Kenny put his hand on her shoulder.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you.” Alice extended her arm and Lamya shook it with a small smile.

“Let’s start the game, shall we?” Paul suggested in an annoyed tone. Alice raised her eyebrows and looked at Stephen, and he shrugged. They sat down around the table while Paul went to ask the clerk to set up the game. He was up first, then Cecilia, Kenny, Lamya, Stephen and Alice at the very end. This did not surprise her.

The conversation was centered around simple catching up – where they lived, whether they were married, what they did for a living. Standard for such a meeting, Alice thought, though it was the first one for her.

“So did you manage to get to France at all?” She asked Stephen after he finished describing the neighborhood he lived in in New Jersey.

“Yeah, but only for a semester,” he admitted. “I was too chicken to just pack my bags and go to France like I had planned to do. Instead, I was admitted to NYU and decided to go for it. It was already much, much farther than I’d ever been in my life.” He laughed at himself. “After that, I kinda stayed put and never came back to the West Coast except to visit my folks.”

“That’s cool,” Alice said with a smile. “I was in France for a semester, too. I swear, if not for all the tutoring you’d given me in high school, I would not have survived the four months there!”

He laughed. “Where in France were you?”

“Palaiseau. Ecole Polytechnique.”

“L’X? Pas vrai!”

“What’s that?” Cecilia interrupted curiously.

“Only the best engineering school in France!” Stephen was grinning again.

“Cool!” Cecilia smiled too. It was like she was a different person altogether. Genuine, warm, and friendly, a complete opposite of what she had been in school.

“So what do you do now, Stephen?” Alice decided they talked about her enough and steered the conversation back on track. “Anything to do with French?”
“I’d say so. I’m a translator and interpreter at the UN.”

“Oh, now *that’s* cool.”

“Not really.” Stephen laughed again. “I mostly just translate boring admin texts. I don’t have the experience for the heavy stuff yet.”

“But you’re doing something meaningful,” Alice insisted. “You’ve always wanted to make positive impact.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He looked at her with a spark in his eye. Alice blushed and quickly moved on as Stephen rose to throw a ball.

“Cecilia, how about you? What do you do now?”

“Oh, nothing, really!” She waved her hand as if waving the attention away. “I’m a stay at home mom. My daughter will be three this October.”

Alice lifted her gaze to meet Cecilia’s eyes. There was love in them. So that was it; the thing that truly changed her? Becoming a mother, giving life and love to someone?

“That’s meaningful, too,” Alice told her softly and was rewarded with a warm smile.

“Do you want to see my daughter?”

“Sure.”

Cecilia took our her wallet and handed Alice a photo of a laughing toddler. She had bright blue eyes and blond curly hair, just like her mom.

“Oh, she’s so cute. What’s her name?”

“Dorothy.”

“Very pretty.” Alice passed the photo to Stephen who just came back to sit. It was her turn to throw. She did and scored a strike, leveling with Paul.

They were talking about Kenny when she got back. He dropped out from college after second year to set up a start-up with a friend. It did well and was later bought by one of the big tech companies for a considerable amount of money. He was currently working on a business plan for another start-up. His girlfriend, Lamya, was an actress in an experimental theater in downtown LA.

“Wow, everyone here is so accomplished,” Alice commented. “What about you, Paul? What do you do?”

He looked at her with a condescending smile. Alice held his gaze, trying to remember if he had always been so full of himself. She remembered that he played football in high school, was very popular with girls, and completely unaware of her, Alice’s, existence, or so it seemed to her. She had never sought out his company, though, and his clique held to themselves and didn’t mingle with Aaron and Jake’s music crowd, so she really couldn’t say one way or the other.

“I’m a pilot,” he said with an air of superiority. “I fly for UPS, so I don’t have to put up with any pesky passengers.” Apparently he found it hilarious, because he started laughing. Alice exchanged looks with Stephen again, barely hiding her amusement. Paul was almost like a cartoon character.

“I make over 250,000 dollars a year. Accomplished enough for you?”
Alice couldn’t help the smirk this time. She saw Cecilia rolling her eyes, too.

“Sure. I hope you do like flying, too, though?”

“Of course! It’s one of the most challenging jobs ever,” Paul huffed. “Not that I expect you to understand the level of complexity and responsibility involved...”

“Oh, I understand,” Alice put in, trying to keep a straight face. “Believe me.”

“I doubt that.” He said as Alice rose to throw again. She scored nine on the first throw and a spare after the second, which put her ahead of everybody else.

“If I knew you were going to kick my ass so much, I wouldn’t have invited you,” Stephen teased her when she got back. Paul strode by to do his turn.

“Sorry for my brother,” Cecilia said in a low voice, sighing. “I’m afraid his ego has been growing since high school and doesn’t show any signs of stopping.”

“Don’t worry, he’s being very entertaining,” Stephen assured her in a whisper. “Isn’t he, Alice?”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “The fun is not finished yet, though.”

“How so?”

“Oh I just can’t wait to tell him what I do for a living after what he just said.” Alice’s tone was mocking, but she felt a bit uneasy. Here she had a perfect example of what could happen if one let one’s ego run amok. This was why she always had to keep herself in check. She knew she had the potential to become the same kind of sad pompous cartoon character. She had to constantly remind herself and work on being humble.

Paul came back and Cecilia went to throw with a curious glance at Alice. Stephen took the bait.

“So, Alice, you’ve heard all about us, now it’s your turn. What do you do for a living?”

Alice smiled sweetly at Paul.

“As it happens, I am also a pilot.”

“What!” Paul exclaimed in a raised voice. “You?”

“Yes, me.” She shrugged. “So you see, I know a little bit about that complexity and responsibility you were talking about.”

“What is that you fly?” He asked suspiciously. Did he think she was lying? “I fly a 747.”

“I fly an F-16,” she said in a fake cheerful tone. Of course, it was no longer true, but the existence of F-302 was classified, and she used to fly an F-16. *Close enough.*

There was a period of silence at the table and then Stephen and Kenny both burst out laughing, Lamya sniggering.

“Oh, burn, brother!” Kenny patted Paul on the back. “And here you thought you could impress little Alice!”

“That’s impossible,” Paul complained. “You couldn’t possibly be an Air Force pilot! It takes skill, it takes strength!”
Alice didn’t reply, but instead reached to her wallet and pulled out her Common Access Card. It had her color photo, name, military affiliation, pay grade and rank, in addition to a chip, magnetic stripe and bar codes. She showed it to Paul, but it was Stephen who snatched it from her hand.


Alice raised an eyebrow at him, taking the Card back.

“So you went into family business, huh?” Kenny joked. “I remember your dad was in the Navy, right?”

“He was a pilot in the Navy, yes.” Alice nodded. “And my brother Jake is in the Marines.”

“Oh, I thought he’d go for Steinhardt with Aaron!” Cecilia was back and still vividly interested. “You know I had a crush on him in high school?”

“I suspected.” Alice snickered. “He never reciprocated, I’m afraid.”

“I was understandably hurt,” Cecilia continued in a self-mocking tone. “Here I was, captain of the soccer team, thinking myself to be the prettiest girl in the school, and he just ignored me all the time!” She laughed. “I was mostly mad at you, though.”

“Because I tailed the band all the time?”

“Because they let you in. You were the only girl they allowed to hang out with them. Even Aaron’s many girlfriends were never that close.”

Alice smiled. “We all grew up together. They just thought of me as one of the guys. It helped that I was always the kid to them. Besides, Aaron didn’t have all that many girlfriends in high school. Maybe five or six during the last three years.” She laughed. “Hardly a record.”

“Oh, I know, some guys were worse, my dear brother here included,” Cecilia acknowledged, punching him in the arm playfully. He was still sulking, eyeing Alice darkly. She had to hide a snicker again. “I have to say, Alice, part of why I was always so annoyed at you was because you were also so remarkable.”

“Me? Remarkable?” Alice shook her head. “I was shy and quiet, trying not to be remarked at all.”

“Yeah, well, you failed.” Cecilia informed her, trying to sound deadpan. “I guess you never knew this, but all the teachers always put you on a pedestal. I guess they were trying to motivate us by comparing us to you, you know, you being so young and still better at all academics than any of us. It kinda had an unintended effect of everyone coming to loathe you, I’m afraid. I’m sorry for that.” She was sincere and serious now.

Alice shrugged. “Oh, I knew that. Jake told me. But honestly, at that point, I didn’t really care all that much. I had my tribe, and by that I mean the band. Being ignored by others wasn’t really that bad. At least nobody dared to bully me, thanks to my friends protecting me.” She stood up to throw the ball again and scored another strike.

“How the hell are you doing that?” Stephen was shaking his head when she came back. Paul strode by her furiously to the lane.

“I got a good aim. Comes with the territory.” Alice smiled.

“Right.” He clapped his hand to his forehead. “Stupid, stupid. I guess it’s a good thing to know that
the people who fly our nation’s colors can shoot straight.”

“Oh please.” Paul came back in a slightly better mood, having scored a strike as well. “In these fighters everything is done by a computer.”

Alice looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Have you actually ever seen the inside of a fighter jet?”

“It’s common knowledge,” he snapped back.


“What you’re thinking about is a drone,” she informed Paul. “And even that doesn’t fly itself, even though it’s unmanned.”

“Are you telling me there is no computer aboard a fighter?”

“No, I’m saying that the computer is one part. It won’t fly or fire without a pilot holding the stick.”

“I always thought it was called a yoke?” Lamya interrupted in her airy voice. She had a slightly dream-like quality about her, her eyes kept wandering around, never really focusing on anything for long.

“It’s yoke in most aircraft, kind of like a half of a steering wheel,” Alice explained. “But fighter jets have sticks, either central or on the side. An F-16 has a side-stick, so the pilot’s hand may rest more comfortably.” This was one of the few design flaws in their F-302s, at least in Alice’s opinion. The central stick in the space fighter required to extend the arm all the time, even after adjusting the seat. The Falcon’s setup was much easier on the muscles.

“There must be hundreds of switches and dials on your dashboard,” Kenny mused. “How do you keep track of them all?”

“Well, you don’t, not all the time.” Alice shrugged. “That would be quite impossible. Some of them you only use during preflight checks, some you only activate once, others you might use if a specific event happens, for example during an air refueling or if there’s an engine fire. And of course backups for almost all systems that can be used manually. Most of what you need to keep the track of is on your displays, or around you. And the way the fighters are designed, you manipulate the stick and the throttle and you have all the most vital buttons and switches right there, so you don’t even need to take your hands off them.”

“So it’s not that difficult, then?” Paul interjected with a hopeful note in his voice.

“I didn’t say that. There’s a reason fighter pilot training takes almost two years before you’re fully operational.” Alice shrugged. “I’ve only been flying for about a year since I got to that point myself.”

Her turn was up again. She scored another spare, with 8 and 2 pins in each throw. She was still ahead of everyone else.

They went right back to interviewing her when she returned to the table. She wished they’d change the subject, but their obvious fascination also stroked her ego pleasantly. She reminded herself to not allow it to get too big.

“So what do you do?” Stephen asked curiously. “I mean, like, on a day-to-day basis. You’re not involved in the Iraqi war, are you?”
Alice smiled and looked away. “I’m not at liberty to discuss any ongoing operations.”

“I have no idea what that means but it sounds deliciously mysterious,” Stephen joked. “But really, have you ever… you know… shot down someone? Or, I don’t know, dropped some bombs?”

Alice rolled her eyes and decided to do try some diplomacy. “You know what the military life is all about?”

“What?”

“Training. Any branch and any combat specialty, fighter pilots, army infantry, marines, navy crews… you name it, they’ll all tell you the same thing. If you’re not currently deployed, and often even then, most of your time is spent on training. Fighter pilots in the Air Force usually have two to four practice sorties a week, you know, doing combat drills and suchlike, mostly within a squadron, sometimes as part of a larger exercise. It can get pretty monotonous after a while.”

“Yeah, sure, flying fighter jets four times a week, what a bore,” Stephen snorted.

“You didn’t answer the question, though,” Kenny pressed shrewdly. “Have you been in any battles?”

Alice didn’t reply immediately, looking musingly at Lamya as she made two almost dance-like steps and threw the ball; she missed completely and it rolled into the gutter. She seemed unfazed by this and went back for another ball, taking her time to choose and get a proper grip. Her black lace shirt and long skirt looked somewhat incongruous with the white and blue bowling shoes.

“I’ve been awarded the Air Force Combat Action Medal about a month ago,” she finally said. It was, after all, a matter of public record. “They don’t give them out for participation.”

“That sounds ominous,” Cecilia remarked. “You’re being very cryptic about all this.”

Alice smiled apologetically at her. “It’s the nature of the job, I’m afraid.”

“Is it, though?” Paul frowned, throwing her a skeptical look. “I know a few pilots in the Air Force. They are always the first to tell the tall tales of their supposed bravery and achievement.”

Alice laughed quite sincerely, this time. “I can believe! Most pilots are type A personalities. But you’re right, of course, not everyone has the same restraints that I do.”

“So your work is secret?” Stephen stood up to throw, but lingered to hear the answer.

Alice shook her head. “It’s classified, yes.”

“There’s actually a difference? Between secret and classified?” Cecilia carried the conversation when Stephen left to choose the ball.

“It’s a bit like with rectangles and squares.” Alice smiled at her. “Everything that is Secret is classified, but not everything that is classified is necessarily Secret. There are three formal levels of classification in our country: Confidential, Secret and Top Secret. There’s also a possibility to add a Code Word to any classified information, so only people cleared for that specific Code Word may access the data.”

“And your work is what? Top Secret?” Paul asked in a mocking tone. Alice just looked at him levelly and didn’t reply. He shifted uncomfortably under her steady gaze until Stephen got back and Alice broke the eye contact to throw the ball herself. She ran out of luck this time and scored
only 8 in total; she was still in the lead, though.

“Must be really nice to fly,” Stephen was saying dreamily as she returned to the table. “I don’t mean in a passenger plane; it feels like being in a big tin can.” He frowned. “But to be able to see all around you, feel the speed and the vastness of the horizon… I guess it’s not possible to go on a joyride in an F-16?”

“Not unless you’re some sort of a big fish, a celeb or a politician, and get an official permission from some general. And at any rate, I fly a single-seat variant.” She did, in the F-16. And even in her F-302 she mostly flew alone now, the pilot-to-aircraft ratio often disallowing backseaters.

“You should try a sightseeing flight,” Kenny put in lively. “We’ve done it with Lamya once, it was very entertaining. The pilot was a bit overcautious for my taste, but even so, the experience was quite incredible.”

“Ha! I shall try. How does one get about doing so? I presume I have to go to some flying club to find a pilot?”

“Or you could just ask the one that’s sitting at your table,” Alice joked.

“I’m serious! I want to try!” Stephen insisted, even as he rose to throw again. Alice nodded at him to go, and followed quickly to take her turn as soon as his second shot was in. They were now halfway through the game; she was still the clear winner, but she was growing tired of the constant focus on her. She wasn’t used to talking so much, though it was also quite pleasant to see Paul so sullen and the others so keen.

“Listen, Stephen, if you want to try flying in a small plane, it can be arranged,” Alice said as she sat back down. Kenny and Lamya were discussing something quietly between themselves at the moment, Paul rose to throw, and so only Cecilia listened to them. “An old friend of my father’s is an instructor at a local flight school, he has his very own Cessna 350 and I’m sure he wouldn’t have anything against us borrowing it for a short flight about LA.”

“You’re serious?” Stephen nearly jumped up and down. “Just like that?”

“Sure, why not? We’d still need to pay for fuel and maybe some extra for him, but it’ll be nothing compared to any commercial sightseeing flight you might want to purchase. Plus you’ll have the one and only chance to fly with me.” She winked at him. His enthusiasm was very appealing.

“Awesome! Let’s do this!” He pumped his fist in the air. “Tomorrow?”

“I already have plans for tomorrow. The day after tomorrow is okay?”

He nodded. “Cutting it a bit close, I’m going back to the East Coast the day after that, but whatever. I’ll make time!”

She smiled. “Good.”

That settled, the conversation quickly moved towards reminiscence of their time in school, and Alice sighed with relief at not being the center of attention anymore. She lapsed back into her usual silence, with only few passing remarks until the end of the game – which she won, earning a furious and outraged look from Paul. She gave him a sweet smile, which only aggravated him even more. She declined the invitation to join the group for a drink in the local dive bar, though, claiming she had to be up early the next day. Stephen offered her a ride back home, but she refused that, too.
“Well, I did kind of kidnapped you, I am responsible now,” he said. Before she could respond, however, Cecilia came up to them, having just turned in her bowling shoes, and cut in:

“I’ll drive Alice. I have to go back home, too, my husband just called to tell me that Dorothy has a fever and he’s pretty much out of his depth.” She laughed nervously, but her concern was plain. Alice agreed and they both said their goodbyes and walked to Cecilia’s station wagon. They didn’t talk much on the way; it was a very short drive anyway, and Cecilia seemed preoccupied.

“It’s the third time in a month that she gets a fever, see,” she explained as they were pulling up next to her driveway. “I dismissed it previously, children get sick so often! But this is now too often.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing serious,” Alice reassured her awkwardly, feeling incongruous, as she was getting out of the car. She didn’t know anything about children or parenting. She barely ever was a child herself. But Cecilia just smiled, said goodbye and drove away. Alice breathed and headed towards the front door. It had been a long day and she did want to get up early.

* 

Alice spent the entire morning at her mother’s treatment center, enjoying the sunshine and the company. They had lunch together and Alice didn’t leave until three in the afternoon. Then she drove straight to her uncle Simon’s, where she was invited to Sunday dinner. She was eager to see her extended family, but felt somewhat ambiguous about the whole dinner affair. Her uncle usually invited a number of people for these, often his officer friends from the Army. She’d prefer just to spend some time with her close ones, but there wasn’t much she could do to change Uncle Simon’s mind once he made a decision. He wasn’t known for his flexibility, to put it mildly. At least the formal dinner didn’t start until eight o’clock, other guests would start arriving around seven, so she had plenty of time to just sit down and talk. Not that she was doing much of the talking, of course; both Jodie and Tobey, her younger cousins, were blabbermouths, so it was quite convenient for her to just sit back and listen. Jodie had finished her freshman year in college and chatted excitedly about classes, majors, teachers, classmates and – most of all – parties. She had joined a sorority on campus and was just bursting with wild stories.

“When do you get time to study in all this?” Alice finally asked. Obviously, she’d never joined a sorority herself; she had been too young, too socially inept and way too focused on learning to participate in any kind of social activities on campus.

“Hey, I have 3.4 GPA.” Jodie instantly became defensive. “I’d rather have a life than a perfect score!”

Alice raised her hands in a calming gesture. “Hey, I hear ya. Sometimes I wish I had different priorities in college too.”

“You do?” Tobey asked, surprised. Alice and Jodie were sitting on the sofa in the living room, and Tobey was lounging on the loveseat across from them. He mostly ignored his sister’s chatter and concentrated on the book he was reading, but he did make small remarks from time to time.

Alice shrugged. “I’ve been finding my education somewhat lacking lately. I never really learned how to talk to people.” That was an understatement, but she couldn’t confess just how much of a social dummy she was to her younger cousins. Although technically, Jodie was only two years younger than Alice; it felt like more, though. And not only from her own perspective; Jodie had
already said as much.

The soon-to-be sophomore laughed at Alice’s statement, and proceeded to tell another story about a socially awkward friend.

Some time later, when Aunt Helen called Jodie to the kitchen to help her with something, Tobey put down his book – it was a math textbook – and launched his own attack on Alice.

“I’ve met with a recruiter, you know,” he told her in a low voice, as if he didn’t want to be heard. “I haven’t told dad yet, so please keep it to yourself.”

“Of course.”

“I know it’s pretty early but I wanted to know beforehand what I’ll need to do to get in. He was very nice and gave me all these brochures and stuff.”

Alice smiled, remembering her own first contact with a recruiter, his shock when she said she already had a BA and wanted to enter the Officers Training School.

“And I’ve been all over the college applications, there’s so much I can still do in my senior year to improve my chances…”

“That’s great, Tobey. But just… don’t forget to have fun in the meantime, too, okay?” Alice shook her head. “Don’t be me.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re like the coolest person I’ve ever met.” Alice blinked. That was a very unexpected compliment. She knew what she did was cool; flying fighters and all. But that she, personally, was cool? That was the first – and probably only – time she’d heard something like that. “I mean, you are a little odd…” Tobey continued, and Alice almost laughed at herself “- but in a good way. Like, extravagant as opposed to weirdo, you know?”

“So I’m extravagant?”

“Hell yeah.” Now they were both chuckling. “You’re the most extravagant person ever!”

“Well, trust me, I’d give up some of that extravagance for a bit more of social aptitude,” she admitted with a smile, but she meant it. “Anyway, I now know Jodie’s, but what’s your GPA?”

“4.4,” he said with pride. “I’m in top three in my year.”

“That’s great! Congratulations. So I presume SAT will be a breeze for you, too…”

“I hope so. But even with perfect GPA and SAT, I still need a boost… you know yourself how competitive it is to get to CalTech.”

“Yeah, only about 11% of applicants are admitted.”

“Ouch. I don’t know if I wanted to know it was that bad… anyway I’m worried about the essay. It really needs to be brilliant…”

“What it needs the most is to be genuine,” Alice contradicted. “You are brilliant and your essay needs to showcase you, your abilities and your passion for science. If you manage to do that, it will be enough.”

“You’re saying it like it’s easy.” Tobey laughed. “But at least I have a ton of extracurriculars… I’ve got three clubs and I’ve been class president for two years now, not planning to change that
Alice nodded. “That should help, definitely. Anyway...” She didn’t finish her sentence as Jodie entered the room with an annoyed look on her face.

“Mom says it’s time to change for dinner. I really wish dad would stop with those. How much nicer would it be if we got a takeout and just sat down around the TV and binge-watched the Simpsons or something.”

Alice couldn’t agree more, but she just smiled and got up to get her dress from the car.

Twenty minutes later she was standing in Uncle Simon’s spacious dining room in a sleeveless midnight blue dress, with a boat neckline and a flimsy A line skirt gathered at the waist and coming down to her knees. Her hair up in a side bun, with light makeup on her face and silver earring in the one visible ear, she felt very unlike herself, but Jodie insisted on making her up and she let her. It didn’t instill confidence in her, though; Jodie herself looked stunning with her crow-black hair, deep chocolate-brown eyes and long legs on display – she was wearing a short pleated skirt, almost too short for the occasion. But Jodierocked that look with all the conviction of a woman who knows she’s gorgeous and how to take advantage of it. Alice felt like a fraud in her flimsy dress; she was thinking about her uniform longingly when the doorbell rang for the first time; the guests started arriving.

“How many people your father invited?” She asked Jodie, taking a quick look around the dining table; ten places in total.

“Four or five?” Jodie answered absently, concentrating on the Hi-Fi tower. A few moments later the deep warm voice of Leonard Cohen filled the room, and Jodie turned down the volume, making it little more than background music. Then the door to the dining room opened and Uncle Simon marched in with two other men in elegant suits. He steered them towards Alice and Jodie.

“Girls,” he said with a satisfied smile, “this is Doctor Madhu Nath, he is the head of cardiology at the UCLA Medical Center.” He pointed to the older of the two; a man of maybe fifty-five, with graying hair and a considerable beer belly. “And this is his colleague Doctor Robert Carlisle, cardiovascular surgeon from the same fine institution. Gentlemen, this is my daughter, Jodie, who is a student at UCLA right now, and my niece, Alice.”

They all shook hands, the younger of the two – the cardiovascular surgeon, barely even thirty years old – taking appreciative looks from head to toe. Alice restrained herself from rolling her eyes, but couldn’t help but frown at Uncle Simon’s introduction. Girls? It was all she could do to not huff at him. Then, before anyone could say anything else, the doorbell rang again and Uncle Simon excused himself.

“It is a real pleasure to meet you, ladies,” Doctor Carlisle said with a suggestive smile. Alice raised her eyebrows and glanced at Jodie, ready to exchange a doubtful look, but her cousin was replying with a coy smile. Alice sighed. She could have seen that coming.

“Pleasure is all ours, Doctor,” Jodie answered. “I’ve never seen you on campus. I’d remember you.”

“Robert has just transferred from Jacksonville,” Doctor Nath put in in a deep, booming voice, which served like a bucket of cold water to the two of them. They stepped back mechanically. “And he is a very busy man.”

Alice couldn’t hide a snicker. Then the door opened again and Uncle Simon led in two other
guests: a couple, around his age, him even taller than Simon himself, her nearly as short as Alice. They greeted the two physicians first – they knew each other – and the man shook hands with Jodie while his wife gave her a cheek-to-cheek air kiss.

“Alice, this is my commanding officer, Brigadier General Ryan Sanders, and his wife Debbie. General, this is my brother’s daughter, Alice.”

Alice frowned again. She could overlook it the first time, but it was now twice that Unlce Simon introduced her with her name only, and while it didn’t matter all that much with civilians, it was a misstep with a service member, especially that of a high rank. So Alice straightened up and inclined her head respectfully. It was quite a thing to come to attention on heels and in a flimsy dress, but somehow she managed it.

“Good evening, sir, it’s an honor to meet you,” she said, keeping the position until the general nodded back. Then she relaxed.

“You’re one of ours?” He asked, throwing a look at Unlce Simon who had his lips pursed.

“Yes, sir. I mean, not exactly, I’m in the Air Force.”

“Really? What rank?”

“First lieutenant, sir.”

She smiled as the general puckered his lips. “You did not tell me you had more family in the service, Colonel. We’ve worked together, what? Three years now?”

Simon shrugged. “It never came up, sir.”

“I knew your brother was in the service. Navy, right?”

“Yes, sir, he was a Navy pilot.”

“So you followed your father’s footsteps, so to speak?” Sanders turned to Alice.

“Yes, sir, I did. So did my brother. Jacob’s in the Marine Corps.”

“Well, well… proper military family!” He nodded with satisfaction. At that moment the doorbell rang one more time and Uncle Simon went to get it.

“So where are you stationed?” The general continued with a curious expression that Alice couldn’t read – unsurprisingly.

“A remote detachment of Edwards, sir,” Alice replied vaguely. He raised his eyebrows.

“How remote?”

“Quite so, sir.”

“You’re very cryptic.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Alice smiled apologetically but didn’t elaborate, which earned her a frustrated huff from all five of them: the general and his wife, the two doctors, and Jodie. Fortunately, at that moment Uncle Simon entered with the last guest, and for once it was someone Alice knew very well: her very own uncle Alastar, her mother’s brother. He was the younger sibling, now thirty-eight years old, and he had red hair of the exact same auburn shade as Jake – or rather Jake had the
same hair as Alastar.

Simon proceeded to introduce him to everybody and before that was over, Aunt Helen entered the room with Tobey, bringing aperitifs. Alice took a glass of vermouth and retreated to the back of the room, near the Hi-Fi, where she could stand and sip the drink while pretending she was immersed in Cohen’s silky smooth voice. It took about five minutes for the dreadful Doctor Carlisle to drift towards her with a flirtatious smile. Alice sighed inwardly.

“So, you do not look like a typical woman in uniform,” he said confidently. Alice raised her eyebrows.

“Well, makes sense, since I’m not in my uniform currently.”

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

She looked straight at him. “No, I don’t believe I do.”

He checked her face to make sure she was serious. “Well, you know, women in service tend to be… bulkier.”

Alice tipped her head to the left and continued to look at him deadpan. “Do they.” It was not a question.

“Well, yes. But you are definitely not like that… very nice dress.”

Alice didn’t respond, cursing Jodie in her head, although the girl only put up her hair and did her makeup, Alice herself had chosen that dress.

Carlisle stepped closer to her, so that he was just a foot away now. Personal space, you fucker! Alice yelled at him in her head.

“Um, excuse me,” she said aloud instead and ducked around him. She hesitated for a moment, looking at the room: Aunt Helen was talking with Mrs. Sanders and Jodie, her hand resting on her daughter’s shoulder, protective – or maybe restraining. Jodie kept glancing at Carlisle. Doctor Nath was looking at Uncle Simon’s service medal cabinet, Tobey nearly reciting the list of the awards and what they were for. Simon and Alastar were standing in the middle of the room with General Sanders. As she stood for a second, deciding, Uncle Alastar noticed her hesitation and waved for her to join them.

“How are you doing, kiddo?” He asked as she approached them and exchanged nods and smiles.

“I’m great, thank you. How about you?”

“Splendid. What brings you to L.A.? I don’t think you’ve been around here since last year?”

“I was ordered to leave the base for a while.” All three men raised their eyebrows at that and she smiled. “I had lots of unclaimed vacation time. My CO told me to take time off or I’d lose it.”

“Really?” General Sanders chuckled shortly. “That’s uncommon. My guys usually take every last damn day early in the year and then something happens and they come begging me for a pass.”

Alice nodded understandingly. “I’m afraid I’m a bit of a special case, sir.”

“How so?”

“I live alone and the base is pretty far from anything, so when most of my squadron takes a day or
two every month, I don’t really have anywhere to go. It’s an eight hours drive to L.A. and plane
tickets are rather expensive. Plus, I really like my job, sir.” She grinned.

“And what is it that you do, exactly, Lieutenant?”

“I’m a fighter pilot. But I do a lot of other stuff in between the sorties. There are some very
interesting things for an engineer at the base.”

“Really? And what would that be?”

“I like tinkering with equipment, sir.” She couldn’t restrain another grin. “So much so that my
squadron mates gave me a callsign *Tinkerbell.*” She hoped this tidbit would redirect the general’s
attention from more specific questions about the nature of her job. It was one thing to be lying to
civilians who didn’t know better; another thing entirely to lie to an Army general.

Sanders snickered, and Simon and Alastar laughed out loud.

“Why did I not know that?” Alastar asked, pretending to wipe tears off his face. “That is just
precious!”

Alice rolled her eyes. At least the strategy worked.

“Well, I’m sure you have a lovely time tinkering and flying drills,” Simon said condescendingly
when they both got their breath back. Alice frowned again. Why was he so bent on belittling her
accomplishments? Did he think she was his competition or something?

“That’s not all I do, Uncle,” she protested, riled up and unthinking. Half a second later she bit her
tongue, but it was too late.

“So what else do you do, Allie?”

She looked away. “I do my job. There are lots of things.” She shrugged but of course it only piqued
their interest.

“Why are you being so cryptic?” Alastar asked, echoing Sanders’ earlier remark.

She sighed. “Most of what I do is classified.”

“That secret special assignment, huh?” Simon said, which of course prompted the other two to
inquire what he meant. “Last year there was a general call for squadron commanders to submit
candidacies for a special assignment, they were supposed to nominate the best of the best of their
fighter pilots. Alice here made it through.”

“Oh? You’re that good?” The general looked unconvinced, throwing her an assessing look.
“You’re a little young to be fully operational, aren’t you? Or even to be a first lieutenant. How old
are you, anyway?”

Alice smiled. Only a military man would pose this question to a woman without embarrassment.

“I’ll be twenty-three in a few days, sir.” She shook her head, half-amusedly and half-tiredly, at his
shocked expression. “I graduated high school early and went to college when I was fifteen. I was
nineteen when I did the Officers Training School and I was commissioned to second lieutenant a
few days after my twentieth birthday.”

She noticed Uncle Simon’s lips were pursed again. What was up with him?
“That’s amazing,” Sanders said, with another curious look at his subordinate. It looked like they had had some disagreement and Alice was proving Simon wrong. “And very rare, especially for a woman, to get so far so fast. Although it’s a bit different with Air Force. You are allowed in combat.”

“Not that Allie’d ever see any combat...” Simon put in, throwing her almost begging look, but she wasn’t going to help him. He did nothing but belittle her today.

“And why would you think that, Uncle?” She asked sweetly, but didn’t give him a chance to respond. “You don’t think the Air Force spends millions of dollars to train pilots only to never use them in combat, do you? And just so you know, I was awarded the Combat Action Medal just last month. They don’t give them away for participation.” She smiled, remembering she used almost the same exact words the day before with her former schoolmates.

“Congratulations,” the general said and she thanked him, but they were interrupted by Aunt Helen; she had slipped out of the room some time before, taking Jodie with her, and now came back to announce that dinner was ready. She engaged both her kids to ferry out the plates between kitchen and dining room and Alice jumped at the occasion to help – and get away from her uncle and his guests.

She was seated at the table between Aunt Helen and Jodie, across from the two doctors. Thankfully, Carlisle shifted his attention from her to Jodie (although Aunt Helen didn’t look happy about it), so Alice could engage in polite small talk with Doctor Nath. He turned out to be a nice man, albeit rather uninteresting. At least he did not mind talking, so Alice let him carry much of the conversation, only adding a few remarks whenever it was polite to do so.

After the meal they moved to the living room for digestifs. Alice poured herself a glass of port, grabbed Tobey and they both withdrew to quietly talk about CalTech admission, classes, campus life and suchlike. They were well into the evening when she became aware of her uncle Alastar giving something akin to a speech to Sanders, his wife, and the two doctors. He was raging against FEMA’s weak response to the approaching storm – the hurricane Katrina was nearing the Gulf Coast – and praising the President for declaring the state of emergency and directing federal aid to help with state and local disaster relief efforts.

“He wants to run for Congress next year,” Tobey told her in a hushed voice when he noticed her listening to Alastar. “As a Republican, no less.”

She looked at him, amused. “You don’t approve?”

“Do you?” He shook his head. “I know Mom and Dad are die-hard conservatives, and Jodie is a wild card, but I’m with liberals all the way.”

Alice smiled. “Are you sure you’re your parents’ son? You seem much more like us then them.”

“I know, okay?” He chuckled. “Only the hair betrays me!” He had messy dark hair and brown eyes, like all of his family; Alice, Jake, their mom and dad all had various shades of red hair and fair eyes, either green like Alice and mom, or gray like Jake and dad.

They continued joking around for a while, but Alice’s mind was churning. So Uncle Alastar was running for Congress; and Uncle Simon was introducing him to a local general and two highly successful doctors. And there was some point of contention between Sanders and his subordinate; one which, apparently, concerned young women in uniform? Perhaps Sanders was leaning towards Democrats; or maybe he just wasn’t as conservative as Simon. At any rate, if Alastar made it to Washington, and Simon was one that significantly helped him get there... well, it could not hurt
his career to have a United States Congressman owe him one. Not to mention that they were already connected by family ties; though not directly related, Simon being Alice’s father’s brother, and Alastar her mother’s, they still have known each other as family for a long time.

It didn’t hit her until she was halfway home – in a cab, having been drinking that evening so she couldn’t drive – that it could also have repercussions for her. It was no secret that people with ties to the government went up the ladder faster, scored better assignments and were more frequently decorated. For a second she entertained the idea how she could use such ties; and then instantly she felt disgusted by herself for even thinking that. She would never stoop so low. She didn’t want any promotions unless they were based on merit. That was her true goal. To do something that mattered. And besides, she doubted Alastar would be informed of the Stargate project even if he were elected; unless he managed to wedge himself into an appropriations committee, that is. But no, Alice would not allow him to pull any strings for her. She would go through life like her father taught her: being fair to herself and to others.
Chapter 11

Alice went back to Uncle Simon’s the next day to retrieve her car and then drove straight to her dad’s old friend’s flight school, where she was supposed to meet up with Stephen. She came a bit early to talk to her dad’s friend, a man she knew simply as Jimmy, but who was a retired Lieutenant Commander with a handful of meritorious conduct medals. He greeted her like a friend, with a light hug and a joke. They chatted for a moment while they were finishing up the formalities and then Alice’s phone rang. She went outside to show Stephen in.

“I’m so excited!” He enthused as they stepped into the hangar. “This is going to be splendid!”

Alice laughed. “I’ll try to make it interesting for you.”

“Is that the plane?” He asked pointing to an elegant white and red aircraft standing near the gate of the hangar. It was relatively small, with pointed nose, aerodynamic cockpit, low wings and doors opening upwards.

“Yep, that’s Cessna 350,” Alice confirmed and patted the wing as they approached. Jimmy emerged from behind the tail with a large smile.

“She’s ready!”

“Jimmy, this is my friend Stephen Foster. Stephen, this is Lieutenant Commander James Gordon, United States Navy, retired.”

They shook hands and then Jimmy took Stephen around to get him into the second pilot’s seat while she climbed into the other one. The older man handed her a file folder with a single sheet of paper on it.

“What’s that?” Stephen asked.

“Checklist. I haven’t flown this kind of aircraft for a while.” Alice shrugged. “I could surely do without it if I had to, but it’s always better to have a checklist if it’s been some time.”

“Right. There are a lot of switches and dials...” Stephen gestured broadly at the insides of the cockpit.

Alice smiled. To her, it looked like a child’s toy, compared to the insides of a Viper or her 302. Nevertheless, she took a quick look over the checklist, just to be sure. This was the aircraft she first learned to fly on; back when she was still in college but already knew she wanted to join the Air Force to become a pilot. She had been barely eighteen at the time.

“Allie had been my best student,” Jimmy said as she handed the checklist back to him. She didn’t need to keep it, it was enough to remind herself the order of procedures. “I’ve never seen anyone take to flying with such ease. What is it that you fly now, kiddo?”

“A Falcon,” Alice responded, silently asking for forgiveness for the lie. “It’s a bit different than a Cessna...”

Jimmy laughed. “A bit, yeah. Well, kids, have fun. Don’t be too long, I have a client at four.”

“We’ll be back by three,” Alice promised and waited for Jimmy to move away from the craft before she reached to close the doors and waved at Stephen to do the same.
“Alright, so how do you fly this thing?” Stephen asked while buckling his safety belt.

“We need to do the preflight checks first,” she advised, pulling on a small lever on her left side. “Circuit breakers – check, mixture – full rich, prop – full power, strobe light – on, master – on...” Her fingers ran expertly through the switches and buttons. Stephen tried to follow her hands with his eyes. Alice turned the key in the ignition and the propeller started wheeling, quickly becoming a smudge in front of the aircraft’s nose. Alice turned on the communication and put on the headphone set, gesturing to Stephen to do the same.

“Testing, testing... can you hear me?”

“Yes, loud and clear!” Even through the intercom, Stephen’s voice sounded excited. Alice smiled and continued the preflight routine. Then she switched on the radio frequency for ATIS and listened to the information.

“It’s unbelievable that it’s such a beautiful, clear day here when New Orleans is in the middle of a hurricane.” She shook her head and switched the frequency again. “Torrance Ground, this is Cessna Alpha November Charlie Echo.”

“ANCE, Torrance Ground.”

“ANCE is by Hangar 12C with information Bravo. Sightseeing flight to the South East.”

“NCE, runway one one left. Winds one five zero at eight. Altimeter two nine two two. Taxi Alpha. Squawk four nine zero one. Contact Tower on one two four decimal zero when ready.”

“NCE, copy.”

Alice reached out to input the code to transponder.

“I have not understood a word of what you’ve just said. Or them,” Stephen admitted, looking around the cockpit.

“I’ve told them where we are and where we want to go and they gave me information for my takeoff, such as where I’m supposed to go – there are two runways on this airport. They also gave me a transponder code – the number that they will use to tag us on their radar display. And the frequency to contact Air Traffic Controller in charge of runways.”

“Wasn’t that the Air Traffic Controller?”

“Yes, but it was a guy charged with aircraft movements on the ground. We need a guy in charge of runways to take off.”

“Oh.”

They started to move slowly, taxiing to the hold position. Stephen looked out the window with a humongous grin plastered to his face. Alice chuckled to herself, remembering her first time in the air; she must have been ten or eleven when her dad took her for a joyride in a borrowed Cessna, not a 350 – they weren’t produced yet – but another one.

“Torrance Tower, NCE is ready for takeoff.”

“NCE, line-up and wait Runway 11. Traffic to cross the runway.”

“Line-up and wait Runway 11, NCE.”
“So…?” Stephen looked at her after a minute of inactivity.

“Oh. We’re waiting, there’s traffic on our runway. We’ll get the clearance to take-off soon, look, he’s already almost there.” She pointed her finger at a Piper Cherokee turning away from the runway. Soon enough they heard again the buzz of the intercom.

“NCE, cleared for takeoff Runway 11.”

“Cleared for takeoff Runway 11, NCE.”

“Here we go!” Alice said to Stephen and with a slight jump they began moving again, faster and faster. Stephen was again looking out at the ground whizzing away beneath them and then, suddenly, they were in the air, climbing slowly – at least in Alice’s opinion – up and away from the airport. As soon as she could, Alice turned them around and they flew over Lomita and San Pedro towards Long Beach, but she turned again over the port, away from the land, but still in visual range. She kept to the coast, flying west and then north along the beaches.

“This is awesome,” Stephen said as they went by Santa Monica State Beach; he had taken out a camera and was trying to take pictures of the coast and the sprawling city behind. Alice was trying to keep the flight as smooth as possible for his benefit, but she was getting bored. They didn’t talk much, Stephen consumed with taking in the sights. She decided to rattle his cage a bit. She checked the airspace around them for any aircraft, and satisfied that the skies were clear, increased the speed.

“Hold on to your seat, then. It’s about to get exciting as well!” She warned him with a mischievous smile and pulled the stick, making the Cessna climb, first slightly and then nearly vertically, while at the same time turning sideways. Stephen cupped the camera on his lap and gripped the edge of his seat with his other hand as the ground suddenly moved upwards and for just a few seconds they were flying completely upside-down. Then they began descending, still turning sideways, so that as they leveled up they were perfectly in line with their previous course.

“How’d you like that?” Alice laughed, seeing Stephen’s red face; he was breathing heavily.

“Oh my goodness,” he said, with difficulty, still gripping the seat. “I don’t know if it was awesome or terrible.”

“ANCE, did you just do a barrel roll? IN A CESSNA?” Voice of the Air Traffic Controller from the nearby Los Angeles International Airport came through the intercom.

“LAX, yes indeed we did. Any problem?”

“And you’re alright?” Even through the mechanical rendition from the intercom she could hear the disbelief. Not to mention the break of protocol.

“NCE is fine.” She looked again at her instruments to make sure that was true. But everything checked out, and as she looked out to see the wings, they seemed quite okay too.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Lieutenant Alice Boyd, United States Air Force. Just taking a friend for a little joyride.”

There was a moment of silence – or rather, static – before the Controller spoke out again.

“Well, congrats, that’s the first time I saw anything like that outside of air shows. Continue your flight, NCE.”
Alice laughed again and steered the aircraft to the North again, over the land.
“I won’t do anything like that again, don’t worry,” she assured Stephen who only just began to relax.
“I’m not sure if I’d survive that again,” he joked, getting himself together.
“We gotta go back now, though, if we want to be there before 3 PM.” Alice checked the hour and nodded to herself. “We’ll go over the Topanga State Park and Bel Air, we’ll pass Holywood and Downtown L.A. from the north and then make it south all the way back to Long Beach and back to Torrance.”
“Sounds good. No more barrel rolls?”
“No more barrel rolls,” she promised with a smile.
“Not that it wasn’t exciting,” he told her when they were walking out of the hangar some time later, the Cessna already back in Jimmy’s hands, being prepared for the next customer. “I’m glad I got to experience it. But I’m also glad I didn’t pee myself during...”
Alice stifled a laugh.
“Well I hope it was worth it, though?”
“Are you kidding me? This was definitely the highlight of my entire year!” He enthused. It was hard not to feel good around him; he was just so cheerful and positive.
“I’m glad I could help.” She marked a little bow, smiling.
“I need to return the favor somehow,” he mused as they walked towards the car park.
“No need for that, it was my pleasure.”
“Even so. What would you say for a thank-you dinner? I won’t take no for an answer.”
She shook her head. “I’d love to.” And, to her surprise, it was absolutely true: she was having fun with Stephen. He was like a human-shaped bowl of sunshine.
“Great! I’ll make a reservation somewhere fancy for... let’s say seven o’clock?”
“Sounds good.”
“I’ll come get you at six-thirty then, assuming I can get a place close enough to get there in half an hour. If not, I’ll call you with an update.”
“Great. See you then.” They were standing in the middle of the car park now.
“See you.” Stephen smiled to her again and Alice turned around to get to her car. Did she just agree to go on a date?

_Damn, girl. You’re on fire this week._
Alice didn’t know where Stephen would be taking her, but he said “somewhere fancy” and she supposed that meant she had to dress up. She was not really keen on that part, but there was nothing to be done for it; so as she returned home, she strolled into her room and opened the wardrobe, which was still pretty full – she has never taken most of her stuff away. Would she find a suitable dress there, though, or would she need to resort to the flimsy thing she’d worn at the previous day’s dinner at Uncle Simon’s? It was a pretty one but somehow Alice didn’t think it fitting for a date. Maybe it was a little too flimsy. Alice has never been on a date before – they skipped that step with Espinoza – and she felt like the sheer fabric of that dress didn’t offer much in the way of moral support. To her chagrin, however, she did not find anything in her wardrobe; there was only one other dress in it, the one she wore at the college graduation party, but it was completely inappropriate for a dinner in a fancy restaurant. She resigned herself to wearing the same thing as the day before when she suddenly had a stroke of genius: she trotted to the master bedroom, where her parents’ great wardrobe stood, still full of their clothes.

She felt out of place in this room, pilfering through her mother’s many dresses, with her dad’s suits, shirts and even a spare uniform still hanging in the other half of the wardrobe. She had to concentrate hard on the task at hand to avoid getting too sentimental. In a few moments, she chose a couple candidates and went into the adjacent bathroom to try them on, finally settling on a knee-length solid black dress with short sleeves and a boat neckline with an opening in the middle, not short enough to be – in Alice’s view – inappropriate, but quite enough to be suggestive. It fitted her surprisingly well; her mother was small, too, but not quite as tiny as Alice, especially in the breasts area, obviously – after all, her mom had given birth to and breast-fed two children. Even so, the dress lay quite smoothly on Alice, and when complemented with silver jewelry from her mom’s jewel box and her own black stilettos (a rather low ones, and her only pair), Alice barely recognized herself in the mirror. Her hair was pulled up in an elegant bun, although not quite as fancy as the one Jodie prepared last night. She was still debating whether to apply a red lipstick or not when the doorbell rang and she knew she was out of time. She grabbed a purse – also borrowed from her mother’s wardrobe – and walked down the stairs with some difficulty, both the fitted dress and the stilettos making it so much harder to move. She felt it was quite worth it, though, when she answered the door and saw the slightly disbelieving, but appreciative look Stephen threw her as he greeted her. He was looking quite dashing himself, too, in a midnight blue suit – her favorite color – and a light blue shirt, opened at the neck, no tie.

They didn’t talk much on the way to the restaurant, which was normal for Alice – especially that she was feeling quite nervous about the whole affair – but quite unusual for Stephen. He seemed pensive and focused, although Alice couldn’t quite imagine why. Maybe something had happened in the intervening hours between now and their parting after the flight that marred his mood?

“How ever did you get a table here?” Alice couldn’t help but marvel as they pulled in the parking lot of one of the most popular restaurants in Long Beach. Stephen gave her a wide grin, suddenly looking much more like himself. They took the elevator to the rooftop where a smiling waiter in black uniform took them to a nice table for two, just at the edge of the roof, with a stunning view of Los Angeles spreading before them, city lights already bright while the setting sun still illuminated the horizon like a blazing fire. Stephen’s odd mood seemed to have evaporated; he was, again, the cheerful, vivacious man she’d met a few days before in the convenience store in her old neighborhood, even if he bore little resemblance to the pimpled teenager who tutored her in French in school. He was doing most of the talking, and Alice was quite fine with it; she’d always rather listen than talk. Encouraged by a few well-rounded remarks, he spoke at length about his life in New York and his work at the UN.
He voiced his outrage at the amount of minutiae that seemed to be the topic of discussions and arguments among the highest functionaries of the organization.

“There are more important things to focus on than the language in which the countries’ names are written on their representatives’ office doors!” He exclaimed, stabbing his lobster forcefully with a fork. Alice privately agreed with him, quickly running through all the threats that lurked in the vastness of the universe for Earthlings wherever they went. Goa’uld, Replicators, Wraith, Ori… and those were just the few biggest ones.

“Quite so.” She nodded her ascent, taking a sip of the excellent local wine they had ordered.

“It’s ridiculous, really, how much time is spent on trivial things like that… when there are so many wars out there, people dying needlessly…” All of a sudden he checked himself, as if remembering whom he was speaking to. “Sorry. I mean no disrespect.”

Alice frowned. “Why would you say that?”

He shrugged. “Well, you are in the military, which is doing all the killing, but I don’t mean to make you feel like I’m blaming you… because I’m not, of course.”

Alice’s frown deepened. “The military may be doing the killing, but it’s the politicians who are responsible for it,” she said thoughtfully. “I can’t speak for anyone else, but I have always believed us to be the shield, rather than the sword.” Stephen raised his eyebrows, so Alice tried to explain. “No matter how sinister or wrong the politicians’ motives might be for starting wars, no one goes into the military wanting to kill people. Many kids enlist to escape the streets, or to prove themselves, but there are also many people who genuinely want to defend their country and their citizens…”

“How are we defending our citizens in Iraq?” Stephen interrupted her heatedly. Alice shook her head.

“I’m talking about motivations here, Stephen. Nobody wants to kill people, trust me. But a soldier has a duty to obey their commander’s orders, and the highest commander of all is a politician. If he says, go to Iraq, we go to Iraq. It’s the nature of the military, following orders.”

Stephen shook his head in disbelief. “This is the part that is beyond me. You willfully let go of your own free will!”

Alice smiled a bit condescendingly. “No, I don’t. Don’t you have a boss who tells you what to do?”

“Yeah, but I can always refuse her!”

“But if you do, you’ll probably get punished or even fired, won’t you?” Alice shrugged. “It’s the same with the military. The stakes are higher, and so are the punishments for disobeying an order, but we are not unthinking sheep. Most of the time our commanders welcome input from their subordinates, even if it’s contradictory to their own opinions. At the end of the day, however, the ranking officer is responsible for what happens, and they need to make the decision. You might not agree with the decision, but as long as the order is lawful, you have to follow it.”

Stephen looked pensive again as he mulled over her little speech. “What do you mean lawful order? Can an order be unlawful?”

“Of course. You’ve never heard of unlawful orders?” Alice was genuinely surprised. “Any member of the military, enlisted or commissioned, is required to follow lawful orders and disobey unlawful orders. That means that if I stood and ordered a subordinate to shoot at civilians, he
would be not only well within his rights to refuse, but it would have been his duty to do so.”

“I didn’t know that,” Stephen admitted. “Are there many such cases?”

“Not really.” Alice shook her head. “But it does create a sort of a… difficult situation to any serviceman.”

“How so?”

“Because you both obey and disobey orders at your own peril. In the heat of battle, in the chaos of combat, your superior shouts to you to shoot that way – and you’re supposed to decide, within the second it takes to act, whether that order is lawful or not. Are you going to be killing civilians who found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or the enemy who’s about to spring on your flank? It is not so easy to judge while bullets are flying every which way. And the thing is, it’s not really you who decides whether the order was truly lawful or not. It’s a panel of your superiors, after the fight is over, tucked away safely at the base, when they have had time to gather information and analyze it for hours upon hours.”

“Doesn’t sound like fun.”

“It’s not.”

“Have you ever refused an order?” Stephen asked curiously.

Alice shook her head. “Thankfully, I have never had to debate that.”

“But you’ve been in battle.” This was a statement, not a question; Alice told him and the others herself, two days ago, that she was in combat, by admitting she had the Air Force Combat Action Medal.

“These situations do not present themselves too often,” she said haltingly. What would she really know about it, though? Her service track was still very short, and her combat experience limited. That was something better asked of Jake; he’d been in Iraq, he’d know.

A waiter chose this moment to approach them and ask if they were enjoying their food, and they assured him it was splendid, which was quite true. This allowed them to change the topic, however, and the easy and cheerful atmosphere came back after a few minutes, and lasted until the end of the meal. Alice found herself pleasantly surprised at how much she enjoyed herself, even though she thought the evening was not really date-y; it felt more like old friends talking over food than anything else. Which, she supposed, was a good thing; she would have been totally lost if Stephen had tried to steer conversation onto more flirty topics. Alice was rubbish at flirting. Still, she felt vaguely disappointed as they were walking slowly back to Stephen’s car. What had she been expecting? The man was leaving the next day for New York. Soon, she’d be back in her remote Nevada military base before going even further away – on a deployment in space. There was no future in whatever she’d been hoping this evening could be. Stephen obviously knew this. Pleasant conversation with an old friend over a meal was quite enough; it was more than she thought would happen before setting out on the vacation.

They fell quite silent again in the car, Alice embarrassed at herself for having formed even those half-defined expectations. When they reached her house, Stephen pulled onto the driveway behind her own car and got out to say goodbye. It was completely dark, no light coming from neighbors’ windows. Alice smiled to herself thinking of Mrs. Hootfield who’d be straining her old eyes to spy through the darkness on her elusive neighbor right about now.
“Well,” Alice said, making her way around the car onto the little lane leading to the front door, at the curve of which Stephen was standing, waiting to say goodbye. “Today was great. Thank you.” She looked up at him and smiled. He was beaming down at her, but as she lifted her gaze at him, something in his expression changed and Alice felt some underdeveloped instinct give a twinge in her heart. The next moment his lips were on hers, one of his hands on her head, fingers weaving into her hair, the other hand on the small of her back, pulling her closer. For a moment she flashed back to that first fateful kiss with Espinoza, but this was quite different: there was a build-up to this, although maybe characteristically (for her, at least) unflirty; it had been a date, after all; they were both single, available, and the age gap was down to a few years; there was no impropriety in it. So what if it had no future? _Fuck this_, Alice thought, as it all flashed through her mind within a second it took to start reciprocating the kiss. Her hands went up, one grabbing Stephen’s arm, the other curved around the base of his neck. A minute later they broke apart, breathing heavily, Stephen’s smile somewhat triumphant, Alice’s cheeks blushed, but her eyes bright.

“So you wanna step in?” She said in a low voice, trying not to show how unfamiliar these words, this whole situation was. Stephen’s grin widened and he took her hand in his and led the way towards the front door.


Alice woke up late the next day. Her internal clock was in disarray; it was as if she had a jet lag. She was spending most of her time aboard the _Prometheus_ which used Coordinated Standard Time; her shift started at 4 am UTC every day, which was 8 pm PST. This meant that in space, she woke up at 2:30 in the morning, but just as her body became used to it, she was getting back to Earth, to Nevada, where her 2:30 was suddenly 6:30 in the evening, so she had to get accustomed to it anew. And then, a week or so later, she was back in space with the UTC schedule, making sure her organism was confused as hell most of the time.

The clock was showing nine-thirty when she finally opened her eyes and took a look around. Stephen was nowhere to be seen, but his shirt was hanging from the chair where he left it last night. Laying still and quiet, Alice thought she heard the sound of shower from the bathroom off the corridor to her room. She slipped from under the cover and, thinking of all the romantic movies her mother liked so much, she snorted and put on Stephen’s shirt. It went nearly to her knees. She looked into the mirror on the inside of her wardrobe’s door. Her hair was a mess of tangled orange. She hadn’t had a chance to remove her makeup the night before and there was a faded smudge of mascara under her eyes. Other than that, though, she looked no different than usual. There was no feeling of inadequacy now. No life-changing shift. She was still herself. She didn’t feel numb, but pleasantly satisfied. She wasn’t expecting anything, now. She knew Stephen was going to go back home, to New York now, and forget anything ever happened. She’d remember, though. It would be a good memory. A pleasant one. Something she didn’t need to be ashamed or conflicted about. They were two consenting adults who just had a bit of fun together. She couldn’t help but compare it with her first time with Espinoza. How he took her by surprise, swept her off her feet, and changed her entire world in the process. This may have not been so unthinkingly passionate, but it was deliberate. And at least she had a little idea what she was doing this time. Not much of an idea, granted, but she was learning. And she’s always been a quick study, after all.

Alice turned from her reflection and walked downstairs to the kitchen. She was halfway through making scrambled eggs when Stephen joined her at the counter, pants on but bare-chested, his hair still dripping wet.
“Good morning,” she said to him, smiling.

“Good indeed,” he agreed, beaming back at her. He opened the fridge and took out a carton of orange juice and then started hunting for plates and glasses in the cupboards.

They ate in a companionable silence, exchanging just furtive looks and smiles. It wasn’t until they nearly finished when Alice finally spoke up.

“What time does your flight leave?”

“Six in the afternoon,” he replied with a wistful glance at her. “I’m gonna need to get to my folks to pack about now, though.”

Alice nodded; it was as much as she expected. Stephen started clearing up and she went up to take a shower herself. Half an hour later, her hair washed, dried and combed thoroughly, in jeans and a t-shirt, she entered her room where Stephen was sitting on her bed with a photo album in hands.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said, gesturing to the shelf from which he took the album. Alice shook her head and sat down next to him, handing him his shirt. “I forgot how tiny you were.” He pointed at a photo of a twelve-year-old Alice next to Jake and Aaron, both of whom were then in the middle of their growth spurts.

“Happy times,” Alice sighed. It was before her dad’s death, before mom had slipped away. Childhood was never easy for Alice, but as far as happy memories go, most of hers were from before her fourteenth birthday.

“That your dad?” Stephen asked, looking at a picture showing a red-headed man with freckles, smiling gray eyes and high forehead, each arm around one of his kids. He was barely an inch or two taller than Jake at the time; soon enough, his son would outstrip him on that front.

“Yes, that’s my daddy.” Alice reached out and caressed the photo longingly. “I miss him much lately.”

“I’m sorry,” Stephen murmured. Alice looked up at him and smiled. He responded in kind, then closed the album, stood up, replaced it on its shelf and reached for his shirt to put it on. “I need to get going.”

Alice followed him downstairs to the front door. He stopped on the threshold.

“Thank you,” he said and impulsively stooped to kiss her one last time. She wasn’t sure what he was thanking her for: the sex? The date? The Cessna joyride? All of it? None of it? She supposed it didn’t matter.

“Take care,” she replied.

“If you’re ever in New York...”

“I’ll come by and visit,” she promised, knowing she wouldn’t, even if she did come to the Big Apple. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

And he was gone. She stood in the hallway, listening to his car’s engine start and fade as he drove away. She didn’t feel sad; if anything, she was pensive, still hung up over how much difference there was between what happened with Stephen and what had been with Espinoza.
Alice spent the day at the Hallaway Treatment Center again. She told her mother about meeting up with Stephen the day before, keeping only the very ending to herself; judging by her knowing smile, though, mom knew anyway. How was she doing it? Was Alice’s face really such an open book? Whatever it was that tipped her off, mother didn’t pry; she just smiled in an infuriatingly suggestive way when asking questions about Stephen. She looked a bit disappointed, though, when Alice told her Stephen went back to New York, where he lived and worked.

Alice went home that day quite late, and whiled away the hours until it was time to go to bed surfing the web and reading the latest issues of *Science* and *Nature* magazines. The next day, she was finally going to meet up with Aaron and the band; they were filming a music video down on Venice Beach and while they couldn’t just drop everything and spend the day with her, they invited her to hang around during filming. So the next day after lunch Alice got into her car and drove up to Venice Beach. It wasn’t hard to find her friends; they were out on the beach in front of the promenade with cameras and a large group of people. Standing in a little half-circle, they were listening intently to a man in a straw hat who seemed to be in charge. Not wanting to interrupt, Alice hung back for a while. There was a crowd of curious onlookers gathered around, mostly young people who seemed to have come especially to look at the band. Alice, curious, drifted over to a large group of girls and boys a few years younger than her, and listened as they gushed over how handsome the band members were (Alice looked critically on them, but while they were good-looking enough, she failed to see the attraction; she supposed that was the effect of having grown up with most of them). At some point one of the girls, at first look around seventeen years old, noticed Alice and turned to her.

“Are you here alone?” She said kindly. Alice raised her eyebrows ever so slightly, but then smiled at the girl.

“I am, sort of.” She nodded at the band. “You came to see them?”

“Didn’t we all?” The girl shrugged nonchalantly, but it was quite clear that she was excited. “They’re my favorite band ever! Aaron is soooo hot!”

Alice couldn’t help but snigger. “How did you know they were going to be here?”

“Oh, we didn’t. We got lucky. One of the fans spotted them here an hour ago and posted on the forum, so we came quick as we could… but if not that way, how did you know they were here?”

The girl became suspicious. “Are you even a fan?” Her tone became accusatory.

Alice snorted. “Sure I am. I don’t have your dedication, though…”

At that moment someone called her name and she turned around to see Aaron waving to her, big grin on his face. She waved back and then looked around at the fangirl. Her face was a mask of shock.

“You know Aaron Starr!” She cried in a high-pitched voice. Alice smiled at her.

“It was nice talking to you. See you around.” And she walked away to greet Aaron and the others. They were as delighted to see her as she was; however, there was not much time to talk, really, as they had to finish shooting before the sun went too low. So Alice hung back a lot, chatting to whoever from the band was free at the moment, and if nobody was, then she just watched them. The crowd of onlookers only thickened with time; she could still see the girl who spoke to her, though, standing there unwaveringly in the bright sun. Alice envied her a bit. She couldn’t think of anything or anyone she would spend so much time waiting for only to have a look. This wasn’t merely dedication; this was passion. And Alice has never known such passion, not even towards science nor flying, which were her two favorite things to do.
It was nearly five in the afternoon when the director pronounced the wrap of the shoot and everyone cheered. Immediately, the tech guys started disconnecting all their equipment and moving it into the two vans parked nearby. The band stayed put to chat with their fans and sign some autographs.

“Enjoying the fame, are you?” Alice asked with a mocking smile, standing to Aaron’s side and looking on the throng of youngsters pushing their way closer to get a chance for a handshake and autograph. One of the girls has just asked the singer to sign her breast with a red lipstick, and he rather enthusiastically obliged.

Aaron grinned at her but she knew him enough to know he was a little abashed by her comment. After that he wrapped the signing rather quickly and disentangled himself from the crowd. Alice followed him to the parking lot.

“You want to come up to my place for a while?” He asked as they walked towards his car. Several of his fangirls were trying to inconspicuously follow him, but were rather failing on the inconspicuous front. “I want to show you something.”

Alice shrugged. “Sure, why not? I’ll follow you in my car then?”

“I can give you a ride. I have a thing later tonight down in Santa Monica so I can drop you off here by your car then?”

Alice nodded assent and went around the car to the passenger door.

“What is it that you have later?” She asked as they were pulling out of the parking lot.

“A charity thing. You know, we go so that rich people may pay for the pleasure of gawking at us. The proceeds go to the local children’s hospital.”

“That’s very noble of you. Won’t you be bored though?”

“Extremely.” Aaron sighed. “But you know. Good cause. And our agent says it’s good for our public image.”

“Ah. Donald the agent? The one I met in Las Vegas?”

“Yep. Speaking of Las Vegas… you’re still in that area?”

Alice smiled at him but didn’t reply.

“Alright, alright, I get the message… but I hope you can at least tell me how you’ve been?”

“You know how. We talk on the phone and by e-mail.”

“Yeah, but you’re always so cautious about saying anything of importance… I don’t want you to tell my anything about your job,” he hastened to clarify. “I mean, I’d love to hear it, but I know you can’t talk about it. But from the little you’ve let on I gather that something is bothering you.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. “There are a number of things that may bother me on any given day. You’ll have to be more specific than that.”

“Well… I mean, it’s just small things. It’s like you’re worried about something. Or maybe preoccupied would be a better word.” He paused for a moment. “You mention enemies more than you used to in your e-mails.”
Alice looked at him, surprised. How could he have picked up on something like that? She used the word in a very vague context twice, maybe three times in her e-mails to Aaron, always in a non-specific way. *I’m getting tired of the routine, even flying training is getting old fast,* she wrote one time. *But I keep reminding myself that it’s worth it, that we have to get ready to face our enemies.* That was just after the Ori beachhead was destroyed, thanks to Vala Mal Doraan’s sacrifice.

“There isn’t a new war coming, is there?” Aaron asked half-jokingly, but his eyes flicked from the road to her for a moment and there was real concern in them. She thought about the Priors of the Ori stirring up unrest in the Galaxy and their humongous Supergate. She looked away before answering, to hide her face.

“Not that I know of.”

“Uh oh.” Aaron’s interjection made her look at him again. His eyebrows were raised even as he kept his eyes on the road. “Now you’re lying to me. That doesn’t bode well.” He paused for a moment and then added: “You promised you wouldn’t do that. Lie, that is.”

Alice looked away again and didn’t reply. They continued in silence until finally they pulled up in the underground parking of Aaron’s concierge apartment building. They walked up, taking the stairs rather than the elevator – Aaron lived on the second floor. Alice had been there only once, before she joined the F-302 program. When she visited him then, there were still boxes everywhere to unpack; as she entered now, everything was in its proper place, broadly speaking. Aaron had a tendency for messiness and she remembered his old room in the house he had lived in with his parents always had a slightly disheveled look. *Creative Chaos,* he called it. Alice wasn’t such a neat-freak as her brother, but their father taught them the importance of order; it gave her a sense of harmony with her surroundings. She smiled as she sat down on the sofa and took the cold beer Aaron offered her. Notebooks, pens, papers, one or two t-shirts hanging from the back of the chair, a broken guitar string just laying in the middle of the carpet. *So very Aaron.* She broke the silence with a quip about the state of his living room and for a while there they both enjoyed some easy banter, just two old friends drinking beer and teasing each other. Then Aaron talked about a new song that he was writing – she gave him a rhyme he couldn’t find himself, which he scribbled down quickly on a piece of paper he then proceeded to throw on a stack of other pieces already covering the coffee table. He told her about a girl he was now seeing, named Lisa, although he hadn’t yet gotten completely over Jeanie, the woman whom he had dated for over a year and who hid from him the existence of her child. Alice, haltingly and blushing a lot, mentioned Stephen, whom Aaron immediately remembered from school; he then used a combination of pleading and manipulation to get the story out of her. The bottle of beer, drunk on near-empty stomach had definitely contributed to her opening up to him. She mentioned Espinoza, whom of course he had met after the band’s gig in Las Vegas, and somehow Alice ended up telling him about what happened – in very vague terms he nevertheless understood – and how she was confronted by Mrs. Espinoza, and how she was unsure what to feel and how to act. If Aaron was shocked, he didn’t let it show.

“You shouldn’t feel ashamed,” he stated forcefully. “*You* didn’t do anything wrong. *He* was the cheater.”

“Yeah but I knew he was married.” Alice shook her head and felt the world spin for a second. She put down the nearly empty bottle. Technically one bottle wasn’t enough to get her over the legal limit but she had such a weak system that she wondered if she should drive home. She put it out of her head for the moment, though; she wasn’t sure how long she’d stay at Aaron’s, when he was going to go to his charity thing. Maybe she’d feel completely sober again by then? “Plus it’s against the regulations.”
“He wasn’t your direct supervisor, though, was he?” Aaron shrugged. “All I’m saying is that you’re assigning too much importance to a thing that doesn’t deserve it. Relax. These things happen.”

Alice snorted. “Maybe to you.” She hadn’t told Aaron that Espinoza was her first-ever partner, she hadn’t exactly told him anything that actually happened, but he inferred the correct meaning from her awkward story anyway.

“I still say what happened with Jeanie was worse.” Aaron grinned at her, but there was still real hurt in his eyes whenever he spoke of his ex. “So you see, you don’t have the right to feel bad. Stop worrying!”

Alice laughed. “If only it were so easy!” But having finally shared her nasty secret with someone—other than Espinoza and his wife themselves—actually made her feel better. Somehow… purer.

“Anyway, he’s away now and it’s unlikely I’mma see him again anytime soon. Our squadrons run on different schedules.”

“Which reminds me!” Aaron smacked his forehead with his palm. “I almost forgot. I’ve got something for you!”

Alice raised her eyebrows and watched as he disappeared into the corridor and came back a minute later with a gray box about twenty-five inches long and ten inches wide. There was a single blue bow taped to the middle of the box. Alice couldn’t help but snicker at that.

“What is it?”

“Open it.” Aaron was beaming at her as if it was him receiving a gift. Alice removed the bow and tried to open the box but it was securely taped. Before Aaron could offer to go for a knife, Alice took out her key chain where she always had a small pocket knife attached. She unfolded it and quickly got rid of the tape, then put it back to her jeans pocket. Only then she noticed Aaron’s questioning look.

“What? I always carry a pocket knife. It’s very handy.”

“Do you… you know… carry a gun?” He asked uncertainly, like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer. Alice shook her head.

“I have one in my car,” she replied truthfully. “But I don’t take it with me unless I expect trouble. Like, if I knew I’d be walking back home in the night through a rough neighborhood…” She shrugged. “But I spend most of my time on military bases, and you’re not allowed to carry a personal sidearm on the base.”

“Really?” Aaron looked perplexed.

“If you need a sidearm, the military will issue one to you, but there are strings attached. Usually all guns are kept in the armory under lock and key, while ammunition is stored somewhere else. Of course it’s different in a combat zone,” she added as an afterthought. “But fighter pilots have little use for sidearms. AMRAAMs trump any hand-held gun.”

“That I can believe easily.” Aaron laughed and then gestured at the box. “Come on!”

Alice spread the sides of the box and looked inside. Something long and black was there; Alice took it out and huffed in surprise. It was an instrument case of soft polyester, in shape resembling that of a guitar, but much smaller.
“I figured you couldn’t bring your guitar to wherever you’re going when you’re not there,” Aaron said softly. “How long it’s been since you played?”

“Too long,” she acquiesced without looking up. She unzipped the case and extracted a sleek, slender instrument from within. Deep red mahogany contrasted with white strings, the tuning heads and fret markers shined like polished silver, and a little ornate pattern encircled the soundhole. “Wow.”

“I thought maybe a ukulele would be small enough to fit your luggage when you go away,” Aaron continued quietly as Alice stroked the wooden body. “This is a standard soprano, nothing fancy but a good one, it won’t break or get out of tune easily. You know how to play guitar so it will be easier for you, although the chords for uke are slightly different, mind you. Will you take it? I mean with you? Can you?” He sounded uncertain again.

Alice didn’t reply but looked up from her examination of the ukulele and for a moment stared into his eyes. That was enough and he smiled. Then his face became serious again.

“I’d just hate you being away from what you’ve always loved. I know, maybe not as much as I did, or Jake… but still.”

Alice ran her fingers through the strings and a warm four-chord sounded off in the momentary silence. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“Promise me you’ll play it? At least from time to time.”

“Of course I will.” He was right; the uke was small enough that she could take it with her aboard the Prometheus. She could have taken her guitar if she wanted to but she hadn’t felt like playing for a long, long time. But it was true that she used to love it. Before they all parted to follow their own paths in life, Alice, Jake and Aaron were nearly inseparable, and music surrounded them and permeated their lives on all levels. In school, at home, at Aaron’s basement, in dark coffee shops and bright summer fairs, wherever Aaron’s band was playing, Alice was there too. She had learned how to play the guitar maybe even faster than Jake himself, but she never had the patience to sit and rehearse for hours on end, the way it was necessary to make a whole group of people sound good together. She continued to play for pleasure all through college, but as she entered the service, she found herself too busy with everything else to keep up an old hobby.

“I mean it.” The urgency in Aaron’s voice made her look up at him again. “I know you. I know how… engrossed you can get in work and stuff. But you need an outlet. Even if no one ever hears you play… just play. Sometimes. Just to let out the emotions through the music. I know you know what I mean.”

She did. She never really could take her feelings and put them into songs like Aaron did, or Jake, or any of the guys. But nevertheless, playing used to make her happy. Somehow, even not knowing how exactly, she had managed to learn to expel the negative stuff with the strokes of the strings.

“I do,” she assured him in a serious voice. “And I will. Play, I mean. You are right, this is perfect to take with me… when I go away. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” Aaron beamed again. “Here, let me show you some basic stuff. See, with a uke, you don’t strum over the soundhole, but here, where the neck meets the body...”

They didn’t have a chance to progress much further than that; no more than ten minutes later, Alice’s mobile phone started to ring. She didn’t recognize the number.
“Alice Boyd,” she said to the receiver. Aaron stood up and went to the kitchen to bring them something to drink; soda, this time. He was going to drive, too, after all.

“Lieutenant, this is Sergeant Rossky, I am sorry to have to disturb you on your day off but we are recalling all personnel and you are required in the base.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. Something must have happened that needed the Prometheus to travel somewhere, and with the full complement of pilots at that. Speculating was useless; she would of course get going immediately and soon enough she’d know.

“All right, Sergeant, but I’ll need at least...” She peeked at her watch. It was coming on eight o’clock, so at least there wouldn’t be much traffic. “Seven hours to get to the base. I’m in California.”

“I’m afraid that this is an emergency, ma’am. We’re leaving within an hour. The Prometheus may pick you up directly, perhaps?”

“How?” She couldn’t say what she meant more clearly, because Aaron was watching her with a big frown on his face, but she didn’t have a locator beacon on her which would allow the Prometheus to beam her up.

“We will send someone down with a locator beacon so we can transport both of you back up,” Rossky explained, proving that he understood the silent part of her question. “We just need a physical and secure location.”

Alice looked at her wristwatch again. “I can probably be at my house within 45 minutes, if traffic allows.”

“We have you registered in Cerritos, L.A., is that correct, ma’am?”

“Yes, it is.”

“All right, please make your way there, pick up your personal effects and call me at this number when you’re ready, ma’am. We’ll pick you up as soon as we’re in orbit.”

“Right. Thank you, Sergeant.” Alice disconnected and looked at Aaron with a mixture of apprehension and guilt. “I’m sorry. I need to go.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he said. “You’re lucky I need to get going myself, too, soon, so we don’t actually lose too much of together time.”

Alice smiled. “Yeah. Well, thank you for the present and everything...” She got up.

“Wait, I’ll give you a ride back to your car. Can you give me like fifteen minutes to get into the monkey suit?”

Alice shook her head. “Sorry. No time. But if it makes you feel better I don’t have time to go get my car at all. I’ll take a cab straight back to my house.”


“Don’t be ridiculous, Uncle Sam will reimburse me.” Alice laughed lightly. “I just need to remember to take the receipt.” They said goodbye and five minutes later Alice was standing on the intersection down Aaron’s street, the case containing her new ukulele in her hand. It was a busy part of town and cabs went up and down the lanes, but it took Alice another five minutes before
she got one. The cabbie was a young Latino guy who seemed delighted to have been asked to go as quickly as possible and took it to heart. They pulled up in front of her house barely half an hour later. Within the next ten minutes, she paid, took the receipt, got into the house, packed her things, locked the doors from the inside, and called Sergeant Rossky to let him know she was ready. Before a flash of bright light from her living room announced the arrival of whoever was beamed down to give her the locator beacon, she managed also to let the Hallaway Treatment Center know that she was being recalled for duty and would not make it back there the next day, as she had promised her mom.

“Ma’am, I’ve been asked to bring you aboard the *Prometheus.*” The airman Alice vaguely remembered from the ship offered her a small device that could be strapped to one’s arm and which broadcast a signal allowing the *Prometheus* to beam them both up. Alice took it, the airman picked up her bag for her and radioed the ship and a flash of light later they were both standing in the middle of the ring room, which doubled as an Asgard transporter drop-off point. The airman followed her to her room where he left her bag, collected the other locator beacon, saluted and walked away. Fiona was not there, but her bag was haphazardly put on her bed, open and spilling its contents. Alice changed into her flight duty uniform and set off towards Bolton’s office to report for duty.

“Good, you’re here,” he said without looking up from his papers, in lieu of a greeting. “I’m canceling the remainder of your leave tomorrow and the day after, I don’t know how long we’re gonna be up here.”

“Yes, sir. May I inquire what is happening? We’re not under attack?” It was one of the dark scenarios playing in her head ever since the initial call from Rossky.

“That remains to be seen.” He finally lifted his gaze towards her. “We’ve got intel that suggests that Ba’al is hiding on Earth, somewhere in the United States.”

“Ba’al, the Goa’uld?” Alice was perplexed.

“Same one. The Jaffa High Council sent their people to look for him.”

“Jaffa, here? On Earth? That can’t end well.”

“No indeed.” He waved his hand in a wide gesture which didn’t seem to mean anything in particular. “The SGC tried diplomacy but we’re out of time. The Jaffa have somehow sneaked past our satellites and radars and hit the suspected Ba’al’s hiding place. He wasn’t there but he contacted the Stargate Command to warn them that if he’s not left alone, he will detonate a Naquadah bomb placed somewhere in the States.”

Alice just looked at him with disbelief. The gall of that… creature!

“We don’t expect to need the 302s anytime soon,” Bolton continued. “So I want you to go up to the auxiliary control room 2 and help them out, they’re trying to scan for the Naquadah.”

“Yes, sir.” She marched out without further comment. With Marks being moved to the bridge as the *Prometheus’* new weapons officer, the auxiliary control room 2 was deprived of an officer and the most senior NCO on duty was a master sergeant, one whom Alice did not know. He greeted her respectfully as she came in, told her his name was Josiah Fletcher, and presented what they’ve done up till that point, which was a general scan on standard configuration. Alice set off to work immediately, changing the parameters and trying various ways, but a few hours later, when they’ve exhausted all possibilities, she was forced to admit defeat. *Prometheus* could not detect the bomb from orbit, no matter how hard they tried; this was surprising, as the ship’s sensors should have
been powerful enough to pick up on even a small amount of Naquadah. Alice had to contend with the conclusion that Ba’al must have found a way to shield the bomb. Even so, the crew continued their search as Alice reported to Colonel Pendergast and then Bolton their lack of any findings. The latter told her to stand down and get a few hours rest before she’d resume her duty at sixteen hundred hours, effectively reversing her usual schedule. When she reported to the engine room the next day, Sergeant O’Reilly informed her they still haven’t found the bomb. They had, however, a new target; they were now searching for a Jaffa mothership; SGC suspected it was somewhere near, since it was unlikely the forces trying to capture Ba’al would have come in a small cargo ship, which did not have hyperspace capabilities. Unfortunately, stuck in the engine room as she was, Alice did not hear any more news until hours later, when Doctor Chenkov came to relieve her. She went straight to the mess where a fellow 302 pilot explained how Ba’al turned a whole building into a Naquadah bomb and how they were able to transport it in its entirety into space, where it safely blew up.

“Marks told me it was a pain in the ass to collect all the pieces and return them to Earth,” Munoz said, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “Of course they had to make it look like the building collapsed in its place.”

“That’s a rather thin smokescreen,” Alice noted. “Easily disproved.”

“True, but the reality is whackier than anything anyone could imagine, ain’t it?” The older pilot shrugged placidly. Alice couldn’t contest that statement. She imagined trying to explain what she did for a living to her brother or Aaron. She didn’t even want to think about telling her mother; it would probably only exacerbate her paranoia.

The next two days went on quietly, filled by routine. Alice sent e-mails to her friends and family in Los Angeles, apologizing for having to disappear so abruptly. As usual, they were carried to Earth in a daily subspace communication package; she received some of their replies the very next day. They were all disappointed – they didn’t get to say goodbye or hand her birthday gifts. They did understand, though; it was a military family, after all. The only one from beyond the family was Aaron and he got to give her an early present, not to mention he was there when she was recalled. It must have piqued his interest, but if he had any more misgivings about possible new wars, he didn’t voice them in his e-mail. He just wished her a happy birthday from himself and the band and expressed hope they’d be able to see each other again soon. Alice smiled at her computer. That was unlikely. Although, to be sure, she still had plenty of vacation days to use, and she had promised to do so.

On third September, the day of her twenty-third birthday, Alice woke up early; her body clock was even more out of sync than usual, her duty schedule having been switched from four am Zulu to four pm. This meant she had to now wake up at two in the afternoon and go to bed at seven in the morning. Sure, in space ‘morning’ and ‘afternoon’ were just empty words, but it was still weird. Bolton and the rest of the squadron made her attend a kind of a birthday party; aboard the ship, every occasion to celebrate was good, so no one’s birthday or work anniversary could go unnoticed. Of course there was no alcohol and the ship’s rations left much to be desired, but at least they could spend a few hours together – Bolton dispensed them from their secondary posts for the occasion, although still if there were an alarm, the ones on duty would have to make their way to their birds in record time, as the mess was quite on the opposite side from the fighter bay. Alice hated to be the center of attention, but she was surprised to note that most people acknowledged that and left her largely alone, so that she could take part in the gathering as a quiet observer, her favorite role. Not only the entire squadron was there; a few other people from around the ship she’s met over the months of wandering from room to room, asking questions and poking buttons, also came; including her fellow engineers (even Hicks made an appearance), Kevin Marks, CV and even Matthews and Saunders from the ship’s Marine unit. At some point Colonel Pendergast came
by to wish her a happy birthday as well (Alice nearly bit her own tongue, stuttering thanks) and mercifully not long after that the party broke up and she was allowed to escape to her room, alone, Fiona having gotten back to her duty station. A few days later she had another anniversary: three years of service in the Air Force, but she kept very quiet about it and thankfully nobody noticed. She was quite sure Bolton knew — it seemed that he knew all his people’s files by heart — but he didn’t mention it, for which she was very grateful. She went quietly about her duty that day — there was no practice sortie for 302s during her shift, so she spent most of it in the engine room and auxiliary control room 2. Silently watching the sinusoid on the graph of her tablet, she reflected upon the three years in the military. Already, her days of initial training and her first assignment to an F-16 seemed so far away, as if in another life. Was there ever a period when she did not know about the Stargate, about other planets and galaxies? And yet it hasn’t even been a year since she was put aboard the Prometheus as her PDS. So much has happened within that time! She had been in combat in the air and on the ground; she had killed people; she also had rescued someone; she had been beyond the edges of their galaxy and back; she had had the chance to work on things and theories she hadn’t even imagined existed; she has learned so much. Oddly enough, most of her accomplishments lately seemed to stem from her knowledge and proficiency with science and engineering, and not her flying. That was worrying. She loved science, but it was flying that she wanted to do.

Yet practice sorties continued to be the only flying they were doing for the next few weeks, as the Prometheus kept patrolling the Solar System and occasionally traveling further for specific actions, usually of search and rescue. Reports of Priors of the Ori were now coming from all around, and each was worse than the other. More and more worlds were falling under the Priors’ influence. The SG teams were doing their best, but they still did not have any way of counteracting the Priors’ powers. Even without ships, sooner or later, they were bound to target Earth as well.

It was the last day of September when the Prometheus touched down for maintenance at Groom Lake again. True to her promise, Alice took two days off, right after the weekend. She hitched a ride with Fiona to Las Vegas on Saturday and took out a rental there; she had to drive back to Los Angeles and retrieve her own car. She stayed the night there, but didn’t go visit anyone this time; Sunday evening she was back at the Groom Lake facility, and on Monday, having still two days to herself, she sneaked into the second hangar on the base to see the progress on the second BC-304. Its construction began in June, not long after the Daedalus was rushed into service to rescue Atlantis. Colonel Carter was overseeing the project briefly between June and July but she has since gone back to Colorado Springs to rejoin SG-1 and someone else was supervising it now; Alice didn’t know who. By now, most of its hull was in place, but it looked much like the Daedalus did when Alice saw it for the first time: like an empty skull, the brain and blood vessels – or engines and other hardware like computers and wires – still not installed. It was nearly the exact same shape as the first ship in its class, and looking down on it from a railing high above the floor, Alice experienced a strong feeling of déjà vu. Except it’s been over a year and so much has happened since that the wonder was replaced by excitement and worry in equal measure. Now she knew what was out there and how important that ship was going to be; it was quite certain that the Ori would try to open a Supergate again at some point. The Earthlings needed the firepower to defend their galaxy and their planet in particular. This wasn’t theoretical anymore. For Alice, when she’d joined the Stargate program, the idea of a vital threat to Earth’s existence was hardly believable. They’ve got rid of the Goa’uld System Lords, and Anubis, and the Replicators; these threats, so real to those who, like Colonel Carter, have been there from the beginning, were nothing but hearsay for Alice. She knew about them, of course, and on a conscious level she understood how horrible they were, but it was in the same way that most Americans experienced Iraq; from afar, it was difficult to comprehend. It was quite a different story when you found yourself in the middle of the fight.

But it was different now. Maybe she wasn’t on the frontlines, exactly, but she witnessed the rise of
the Ori as a threat from the very beginning. She was there when they discovered the Ancient communication device that sent Doctor Jackson’s and Vala’s conscious minds all the way to the Ori galaxy. This was how the Ori were first alerted to their presence in the Milky Way, after all. That’s why the Priors came through. Even though she has never seen one on her own eyes, Alice knew how powerful they were, and how inadequate were the Earth’s defenses compared to what the Priors could do. All this technology they now possessed, and it was still not enough. It became clear just how futile would their efforts be if not for unexpected help from outside just a few weeks later, when Alice was back on the Prometheus, the ship on its way back from assisting an SG unit in a faraway part of the galaxy. She was at the gym, running on a treadmill, earphones in, when someone tugged at her arm. She looked around to see Fiona, her eyes wide and fearful, very unlike her. Alice immediately turned off the treadmill and stepped down, pulling on the headphones. *If I were any older I could act my age but I don’t think that you’d believe me, it’s not the way I’m meant to be,* the singer wailed audibly from the earbuds before Alice switched off her mp3 player.

“What’s wrong?” Alice panted; on the ship, the oxygen levels were a bit lower than on Earth which made working out somewhat more taxing for the body.

“We’ve just got a subspace communication from Stargate Command,” Fiona replied, her voice shaking just a tiny bit. She was making a visible effort to remain calm. “The Ori hit Earth.”

“What?!”

“We’ve been diverted to the Alpha Site, all Gate travel is suspended...”

“How did they hit Earth?” Alice interrupted impatiently.

“The plague… they brought the plague to Earth. Like the one that killed the Ancients? And it’s spreading fast on Earth. People are already dying from it.”

It became immediately clear to Alice why Fiona was so scared; she was worried about her husband and child. And then the realization came: Alice’s close ones were there too. Would the plague have already reached California?

Alice grabbed Fiona’s hands. “Tell me more.”

The older woman shook her head and looked down. “That’s all I know. There is no cure. There is no hope.”

Alice gaped at her for a moment; could that be true? Was everything lost? Would they, the hundred and twenty people aboard the ship, be the last Earthlings in existence? The galaxy was full of humans, of course, and they all came from Earth, but they were *not* Earthlings anymore. Was everyone doomed? Her mother and brother and uncles and cousins and friends and acquaintances and strangers… all gone? Could that be?

“No.” Alice’s voice was strong. “There is always hope. And I don’t believe for a second that anyone has given up.” Fiona raised her eyes to meet hers but remained silent. “I guarantee you that the entire SGC is hard at work to find a cure right now. There’s no evidence to support the theory that it was the Ori who invented the plague that nearly wiped out the Ancients. Colonel Carter and the rest of SG-1 will figure it out. They always do.”

“You really believe that?”

“Yes. They never give up, that’s what makes them unique. And neither should we.”

Fiona looked at her silently for a while longer, then squeezed her hands and let go of them. She
stepped back and nodded.

“You are right,” she said, her voice a bit stronger now. “Let’s go to the mess. If there’s any news, it’ll come there quickest.”

They spent much of their time over the next few days in the mess, whenever they didn’t need to be at their duty stations. Although crowded, the chow hall was oddly subdued. They kept mulling over each and every bit of news that reached them, but always in hushed voices, as if they were afraid to speak too loudly, like at someone’s deathbed. Alice found herself, surprisingly, speaking a lot about hope, and comforting everyone. Her unwavering belief that Colonel Carter would find a cure made others a bit more optimistic as well. Alice didn’t know why, but she was absolutely convinced that Earth would pull through. Perhaps it was a means of mental self-defense. Anytime she thought that her close ones could contract the Ori virus, that they could already be dead, she felt like her heart was going to beat its way out of her chest, so she redirected her thoughts to other paths. It was difficult; she grew accustomed to the very real possibility that she might die at any moment, but not her family and friends. The very idea frightened her more than anything else she’s been through so far.

And then, one day, Colonel Pendergast himself appeared in the mess, stood in the entrance looking over what must have been at least half of his crew, and then cleared his throat. A hush fell upon the room with startling speed. Everyone stared at him expectantly.

“We’ve received confirmation from Stargate Command that they have found the cure for the plague,” he began, but his subsequent words were drowned in a burst of cheers. Everyone was up on their feet, hugging each other and hooting and pumping the air with their fists. It took a minute for Pendergast to quiet them all down. Alice sat silently between Fiona and Allen, her backseater, and beamed happily at them. It was as if a huge weight suddenly lifted from her shoulders.

“They have already begun the mass production of the cure,” Pendergast continued when it was again quiet enough for him to speak. “It will be administered to everyone as soon as possible. We will now return to the Earth’s orbit to assist in the efforts to distribute the inoculation to other countries.”

“Sir, what’s the final death toll?” Someone asked. Pendergast frowned.

“We don’t know yet, depends how fast we can get the cure to everyone who’s already fallen sick. At least a couple thousand, though.”

He nodded his head to all of them and walked away in stunned silence. Two thousand people gone… probably more. The first burst of happiness faded; now they all started wondering how many people they knew might have died. For sure the plague hit the Stargate Command and possibly other military bases the worst, and who didn’t have friends or acquaintances all over the service? Alice had only to think of her brother and her uncle to begin to worry again. Fortunately, they were less than five hours of hyperspace flight from the Earth, and they were exceptionally allowed to make phone calls from the orbit.

“Thank goodness you’re okay!” Were Alice’s first words when she finally got through to Jake. “I was so worried you might be sick!”

“I was,” Jake admitted, and Alice felt her heart suddenly go into overdrive “But I got the inoculation and I’m better now. Still on bed rest, though. What about you? Are you okay? Where were you?”

“I’m fine, I was far away, we were forbidden to go back… I’m so sorry I couldn’t have been there.
Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about me, I will be back to perfect health in no time.”

“What about the others? Uncle Simon and mom and everyone we know?”

“As far as I know, no one we know got the influenza, except myself and a few other people from my base.”

“Did someone you know…?” Alice couldn’t finish the sentence, but Jake understood.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I. A bad way to go, that was.”

Alice felt a shiver go through her. Jake once told her that if he had to die, he’d want to go in battle, in the blaze of glory. They joked about it then; it didn’t seem so funny now.

“I’m so glad that you’re gonna be okay. I’ll probably get some time off this week, do you think I can get to 29 Palms to visit you?”

Jake laughed. “A bit of a super-duper-strong flu and you’re suddenly all over me? Come on. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m serious. I haven’t seen you for almost a year!”

“I know. We’ve gotta get our timing better. I was in L.A. like a week before you got there in August.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Can I come see you in your base?”

“I don’t think it’s the best idea, sis. One, we’re still quarantined. And two, I’m still in the infirmary. I don’t want you to see me in the hospital gown, it’s not very manly! Maybe when I get released we’ll be able to meet up somewhere. How about I come to your base in, say, two weeks?”

Alice sighed. Jake was right about the quarantine part; even though they had the cure, the plague – or the influenza for anyone who wasn’t part of the Stargate program – could still be infecting new people for a while. Of course his quip about hospital gowns was an excuse, but the first point being valid, Alice couldn’t contest it.

“I doubt I’ll be here in two weeks,” she replied. She wasn’t sure how would they proceed now; normally they’d get a week of shore duty while the Prometheus was serviced, but there were rumors they might get a while longer to attend funerals of people they knew and be with their families in case any of their close ones have gotten sick. “I’ll keep you posted.” Of course Jake could never come to her base; it was pointless to try to dissuade him now, though, when she didn’t know if or when she will be available for any meet-up.

“Alright.”

“I have to go now. Take care of yourself, will you?”
“Yes, ma’am!” He laughed. “Bye, sis.”

“Bye, Jake.” She disconnected.

Knowing that Jake had been so close to dying again was hard. She had once nearly lost him already; he was gravely wounded in Iraq and took a long time to heal up. She wasn’t even in the Air Force yet when it happened; but now she felt somewhat responsible. She was part of the Stargate program, a small gear in a big machine, not the least bit important, but still part of the whole. And it was them who have caused the Ori to take interest in the Milky Way and Earth in particular. In a way, it was her fault, too. Maybe she could have done more. Maybe she should have. As a fighter pilot, she was feeling quite redundant lately; they have not had any missions for a long time. Maybe she could contribute more as an engineer or even scientist. The plague wasn’t defeated through military prowess, but through science. It wouldn’t have been possible without Orlin the Ancient’s help, or without the Jaffa Gerak, made Prior, who renounced the Ori. But didn’t that mean that the Earthlings were still not advanced enough to deal with the current threats? And what about Atlantis? Wouldn’t concentrating on developing technology to help fight the Ori and the Wraith be a better use of Alice’s time than sitting in the engine room and flying practice all the time? Even if her contribution would be minimal, wouldn’t it be bigger than what she was doing now? Could she request a change of position? Should she?

She had all the questions, but none of the answers.
Chapter 12

Alice did not have the opportunity to meet Jake that time. The rumors about additional free time proved false, and they were back in space within a week. Major Davidson told Alice, when she came by the bridge to talk to Marks after her own shift ended, that there were plans to allow for more time ashore, but with the Ori having targeted Earth once already, the threat was now being taken more seriously by the high command. Mostly, since the outbreak of the plague was the first time ever that general population has been affected by alien actions on such a scale, many heads of state became much more concerned about the Ori and began pushing the IOA and the United States to take more direct approach. Thus, the *Prometheus* was now directed to scan the vast expanses of the Milky Way in search of the second Supergate, that everybody expected would appear sooner or later, and taking more active role in SG missions as they spread around the galaxy to gather intel and fight the Priors wherever possible.

It was merely two weeks before they were forced to go back to Earth, however. It was Alice who first noticed an irregularity in the measurements of the Asgard hyperdrive’s performance. As soon as she was sure it wasn’t an equipment error, she informed Doctor Chenkov, the head engineer, and he took it to Colonel Pendergast who ordered immediate shutdown of the engine. They dropped out of hyperspace in the void between two star systems and the engine room crew – Chenkov, Hicks, O’Reilly, Wu and Alice – spent nearly the entire day looking for what was wrong. Unfortunately, the defect was not in software but in hardware and so it had to be addressed directly at the source – inside the engine chamber. This could not be done without shutting off most of the primary systems and the defect being small enough, Chenkov recommended making for the Earth on 40% hyperdrive capacity. This meant that instead of reaching home within a day, they would be travelling for nearly two and a half.

Most of the crew received the news with understandable glee. They were not overly concerned with the engine problem, and coming back early meant they would be home for Christmas. Alice was less enthusiastic; she and the other engineers would have to deal with the defect first before they could get any time off. And so instead of heading to L.A. for the holiday, she was stuck at Groom Lake for three days before they resolved the problem. At least she got a chance for a closer look at the actual hyperdrive; it wasn’t often that they needed to open up the engine chamber. The thing was damn near unbreakable in normal circumstances; and sure enough, it wasn’t the Asgard technology that malfunctioned, but a part added by the human engineers that was meant to provide smoother communication between their computers and the alien hardware. Replacing it was simple enough, but required disassembling and putting back together a few layers of extremely fragile tech. Alice found herself doing most of the manual work, Chenkov claiming that her smaller hands were better suited to the delicate work. Alice had to admit there was something in it after Sergeant Wu tried to install a part, half of his body invisible under the Asgard engine core, and dropped it; Alice, as the smallest of all of them, had to squeeze further to retrieve it and then she attached it without more problems. Chenkov just told her to stay there and continued handing over various parts, instructing her where and how to install them. This minute work was then followed by what seemed like unending tests, so when they finally reported to Pendergast that the ship was spaceworthy again, it was past midday on Boxing Day. Thankfully, the Homeworld Command decided the *Prometheus* wouldn’t get deployed again until the day after the New Year, so the engineers could get some family time as well. Alice, with Bolton’s blessing, took the four days of the remaining week off to visit her family in L.A. again.

She arrived home late afternoon on 27th December. Another car was already parked on the driveway so she pulled up at the curb. It could only be Jake; nobody else had any reason to be at the house. Alice walked up to the door and found it unlocked; shaking her head, she entered and
immediately paused in the hall. Two distinct voices were coming from the living room, muffled a little by the sound of television. Alice put her travel bag on the floor and wandered into the room, stopping at the entrance again to take in the scene. Her brother’s considerable bulk was sprawled across the sofa, his auburn hair, a bit longer than usual, contrasting with the dark fabric of the armrest. In the armchair next to him sat another man, smaller in mass but equally tall, at least judging by the visible length of his legs; his feet were resting by the TV stand. He had very short blond hair which made him look almost bald, and square jawline that gave him a rather rough appearance. Neither of them noticed Alice until she stepped over the threshold and stood literally a foot from the back of the sofa.

“Well, well, you’d think marines would be more vigilant,” she said loudly and observed with satisfaction as both of them jumped to their feet, wild looks on their faces. This confirmed her suspicion: the other man must have been some marine friend of Jake’s.

“Allie!” Her brother exclaimed with surprise and then started laughing. “Robert, we’ve just been royally owned by a fucking boot!”

Alice shook her head at him again, crossing her arms on her chest. Jake stepped around the sofa to get closer to her and proceeded to envelop her in a bear hug. For a moment they said nothing, Alice just glad for this physical proof that her brother was alive and well. Then they disengaged and Jake stepped back. He waved at the other man to come closer.

“This is my friend, Robert. He’s a zoomie, too.”

“Oh?” Alice was surprised; she had pegged him for a marine. He had the look.

“Technical Sergeant Robert Dawson, ma’am,” the airman said, inclining his head respectfully. Apparently, Jake had told him about Alice.

“Oh puh-lease, Robert, this is Alice. You don’t need to ma’am her when we’re all on leave.”

“Well…”


“Robert’s fine.” He smiled at her. He was a few years older than Jake; this was not surprising considering that Jake was E-5, Sergeant in the Marine Corps, while Technical Sergeant in Air Force was an E-6.

“Robert’s a medic,” Jake explained. “We’ve met in Iraq, been friends ever since. He’s crashing with us for the holidays.”

“Really? You didn’t want to spend the time with your family?” Alice asked, and then bit her tongue but it was too late. She didn’t mean to pry, but the presence of the man was very intriguing to her.

Dawson was not offended. “My folks are visiting my sister who lives in Ireland now. No other family to speak of, so Jacob graciously invited me to spend Christmas here.”


“I’ll show you abnormally nice, sis!” He launched at her but she had already moved out of the way and fled from the living room, Jake running after her. She knew she had no chance; she never could outpace him. It never stopped her from trying, though, and she made it all the way to the top of the stairs this time before Jake caught up with her and with one massive heave got her on his
back in a fireman’s lift. Thrashing in his grip, trying to get him to release her, she couldn’t help but laugh, and by the time they were back downstairs, in the hallway, they were both in fits. Jake let her down gently, as always, and she punched him in the arm teasingly, but only succeeded in hurting her hand. His muscles were like rocks. She shook her head, flexing her palm, marveling at her brother. All this mass and not an ounce of fat on him.

“Well, that looked familiar,” Dawson commented with a big grin on his square face, which made him look a bit like a cartoon character. “Only my sister is nearly ten years older so I usually got beat by her.”

“Oh, brother, you got beat by a girl? I don’t care how old she was, you still a sissy!” Jake mocked mercilessly. Alice huffed, but decided to let it go.

“Alright, boys, anyone’s hungry? I hope you do have something in the fridge,” she added as an afterthought. With Jake it was never sure; the man was like a human vacuum.

“Ha! Woman of little faith!” Jake made for the kitchen and the other two followed him in. “We have something like half a roast beef, ready to be reheated. Aunt Helen’s gift.”

“There’s some eggnog left too, I think,” Robert announced. “And there should be pumpkin pie for dessert.”

Alice raised her eyebrows.

“How ever did you manage to prevent my dear brother from eating all of that until now?”

“Lots of persuasion and some wrestling,” deadpanned Dawson and Alice burst out laughing.

They set off to prepare the meal. Alice did little, more consumed with observing her brother and his friend banter over the pots and pans. A suspicion began forming in her mind and the more she watched, the more she grew certain that she was right.

Since she remembered, Jake was never much of a ladies’ man. Aaron was the heartbreaker of the pack; other band members had crushes or steady girlfriends, but never Jake. He joked that Aaron was doing 200% of the norm so he had to stay off to ensure balance in nature, but the truth was he never really expressed interest in any girl while they were at school. And then he was off into service in the Marine Corps where he could keep his private life well hidden from his family. He never mentioned any relationships, not once, not in person, nor by phone, nor in an e-mail. Alice remembered her mother guessing he was seeing someone the last time she had visited her; but that was just her mom’s hunch. Except it seemed it wasn’t just a hunch; only the object of Jake’s affection was not what they expected.

But why wouldn’t you tell me? Alice wondered. All these years and he’s never even dropped a hint. Could that be possible? And if yes, why wouldn’t he trust her? She’s never expressed any disapproval for same-sex relationships; quite the opposite. She remembered giving fiery retort on the subject to her conservative Uncle Simon at one time, before she went into service herself. Jake was there, he must have known she would never judge him, that she’d support him. Mustn’t he? Of course, he couldn’t just be open about it to anyone; not if he wanted to stay in the military. But he could have trusted his own sister enough to say something, couldn’t he? So why didn’t he?

She couldn’t ask; she would not pry. If he didn’t want to say, then she wouldn’t make him. It was his choice and she respected that. No matter how hurt she felt by his lack of trust in her, it was his right to make that decision. And so when they finally sat down to dinner, she kept quiet and continued to watch, Jake too used to her reticence to notice.
With Jake and Robert’s merry company, days of the leave passed quickly. The siblings visited their mother at the Treatment Center while Dawson went sightseeing; then they all descended upon Aaron as he came by his parents’ house, in the very neighborhood Boyds’ family home stood. Aaron didn’t fail to interrogate Alice on the use of her new ukulele. She had taken it with her to each deployment and played a little whenever she had a free moment and Fiona wasn’t in the room.

“It’s not particularly difficult,” she admitted. “Actually it seems better suited for me. I mean, I always struggled with a guitar, I just don’t have that much reach… it’s much easier to manage when you can rest all your fingers easily over the entire neck.”

Jake of course immediately demanded a show, but as she left the uke at the base, he had to contend himself with a solemn vow that she’d bring it the next time around. As neither of them knew how long that would be, it was a bit of an empty promise.

They’ve also visited both their uncles and their families, but spent the New Year’s Eve alone, just the three of them. As they consumed more and more beer, Jake and Robert became more touchy-feely, although neither of them said or did anything that could be unequivocally construed as romantic. Alice drank wine and paced herself carefully; Jake and Robert could sleep it off the next day but she had to drive back to Nevada. Indeed, the following morning, as she was leaving the silent house, her brother and his friend (or boyfriend, as she already began calling him in her head) were still fast asleep, Jake in his bedroom, sprawled over his too small bed, and Robert in the guest room. Alice entered Jake’s room, looked at him for a moment and, deciding not to wake him, walked away quietly. She left a goodbye note on the kitchen table, along with some freshly ground coffee, ready to be brewed, and headed out.

*  

They have been in space again for over two weeks when the Prometheus was recalled to Earth. It docked for less than a day before it flew out again – but without its crew. All of them, including Colonel Pendergast, were ordered to remain behind while SG-1 took the ship for some highly dangerous and very secretive mission. Normally most SGC missions were classified Op-Sec 2 or 3, which meant Top Secret, Operational Security Level 2 or 3. Technically, Op-Sec was just a Code Word, not any additional level of classification, but the Stargate Program required measures beyond normal and so they devised their own system within the system; five Code Words representing five deeper levels of classification. Most personnel under Homeworld Command, including SGC, Groom Lake facility and the crews of both ships, had clearance to anything classified Op-Sec 1, 2 and 3. Therefore, this new SG-1’s mission must have been at least level 4 or maybe even 5. Alice didn’t even know what kinds of information were so deeply classified.

Alice used this unexpected shore duty time to check up on the progress of the newest BC-304. Three months before, when she had seen it last, only the hull was nearly completed and heavy equipment was still in use. Now, however, the ship looked near finished. Alice walked down to the hangar to talk to the engineers. She remembered with a smile how Colonel Caldwell had forbidden her to approach the Daedalus when it was under construction because she was distracting the crew. Nobody bothered her now; she was such a fixture at the base that everyone seemed to know her at least by sight.

“Yes, it’s going much faster than the Daedalus,” one of the engineers she knew from the previous ship’s construction told her eagerly. “We actually mostly know what we are doing! That’s new.”
“Do you know what they’re gonna call her?” Alice asked, putting her hand on the sleek leather of the navigator’s chair; they were in the bridge and it looked pristine, ready for use. “Keeping up with the Greek mythology?”

“Somewhat, yeah.” The man smiled. “I hear it’s gonna be Odyssey.”

Alice nodded; it was a good name.

“How close are you to completion?”

“Pretty close! Most systems are installed, still dealing with a few minor things.” The engineer waved his hand dismissively. “And of course there’s still a plethora of tests to be performed. I think we’ll be ready for initial launch within the next three weeks or so, and operational within six.”

“That’s impressive,” Alice noted.

“Have you seen the other one?”

Alice looked at him, baffled. “What other one?”

“You don’t know? There’s another 304 under construction at the Area 37, the original hangar where the Prometheus was built.”

“I knew they were planning the next ship, but I didn’t know they have already started!”

“Well, it is supposedly halfway done already. But I hear this one is gonna be the last one for a while,” he added. “Money issues,” he explained seeing Alice’s raised eyebrows. “You would not believe how costly this whole process is.”

That made sense. To have constructed three Daedalus-class ships within a year and a half was no laughing matter. Even with the backing of the international community, the United States bore the brunt of the cost. Alice wondered for a moment how did the politicians explain away that sort of spending. Was that the reason why President Hayes still hasn’t acted on his campaign promise to cut taxes? Alice thought it very likely. She didn’t envy him; he was in a difficult spot. The scandal with Kinsey weakened him right at the beginning of his presidency, and he has not yet recuperated the support that got him elected in the first place. Alice was torn between wanting a strong president to face the IOA and influence them on the Homeworld Command’s behalf, and hoping his approval ratings would stay low all the way up to the next election; she hadn’t voted for him.

*  

Their time ashore lasted several days. When the Prometheus came back from wherever it had gone, it didn’t even dock; the entire crew was beamed up and the ship was trawling the galaxy again within a few hours. The familiar routine has set in; it was interrupted a few days later, however, when Bolton asked all his pilots to gather in the 302 bay.

“I need two volunteers,” he told them. “The Stargate Command is planning an operation against the Lucian Alliance and needs two 302s to support its ground teams. They will be operating from the planet, the target is a Ha’tak-class ship. Once the op is completed, we will pick up the two jets on our way back.”
Although nobody spoke, the excitement was nearly palpable; they haven’t had any real missions for so long, the pilots were bored enough to take any sort of action. This wasn’t a strike at the Ori, perhaps, but it was combat; it beat sitting on their butts and doing practice sorties.

“Any takers step forward,” Bolton directed and the eleven of them moved in unison. The lieutenant colonel chuckled. “Yeah, so I thought. Okay. Taylor and Allen, you’re up.”

The two pilots grinned while all the others looked at them with visible envy. Alice sighed. Of course Bolton would choose the more experienced pilots; both of them were from the original crew. It made sense; the rest of them just had to contend with it.

The two 302s were dropped off in the orbit of the planet the next day and the *Prometheus* went on its way, scanning the galaxy for anomalies which could mean a second Supergate was being constructed somewhere. Yet it was only a few days again when they were recalled back to Earth. They had a new mission; SG-1, minus Doctor Jackson, was beamed aboard and the ship immediately went into the hyperspace.

“Tegalus,” Marks told Alice at lunch the next day. “That’s the name of the planet. SG-1 visited them via Stargate a couple years ago. They were on the same level of development as Earth in the 50s. They even had their own cold war, except it ended badly for them.”

“I read that report.” Alice nodded. “I thought we were supposed to help them rebuild their civilization?”

“They’ve stopped responding to our radio hails months ago, until suddenly one of them came through the Stargate a few days ago. They had been visited by the Prior of the Ori.”

Alice shook her head. She could’ve seen this coming. *Those fuckers are everywhere!* The SGC now had a way to stop the Prior’s powers for a while, so maybe they were going to try to capture the Prior on Tegalus? Why else would they have the SG-1 aboard? Only, why didn’t the team go through the Stargate? And where was Doctor Jackson?

“The Prior told them how to build a weapon which could blast the Caledonians, the rival country, into smithereens. Our mission is not to let that happen.”

“How?”

“We’ve got some early plans of the weapon. It’s a satellite, if worst comes to pass, we can blow it up from the orbit. Doctor Jackson went through the Stargate to try to negotiate with them, maybe persuade them to dismantle it peacefully.”

That sounded very like Doctor Jackson, but Alice doubted if it would succeed. She guessed the condition of the Prior’s help to the Rand Protectorate was its acceptance of the Origin. If there was a small chance to talk them into a cease-fire before that, surely it would be impossible when they were converted into following the Ori. How typical for Doctor Jackson to try a peaceful solution anyway.

“It didn’t go well, did it?”

“Nope. We haven’t heard from Doctor Jackson since. He’s probably somewhere in a cell...”

“Let’s hope so,” Alice noticed the captain’s – he has been recently promoted – surprised look and hastened to add: “If he’s in a cell, it means he’s still alive. They could’ve just killed him.”

“Right.” He nodded and then checked his watch. “Well, we’re about to arrive. I gotta get back to
the bridge. If the intel’s good, it should be easy. We beam Doctor Jackson up, talk to the Rand Protectorate government rep, if they refuse to dismantle the satellite, we blow it out of the sky. Easy-peasy.”

“If the intel’s good,” Alice repeated and they exchanged a look. There was no telling what they would find. It was entirely possible that Caledonia didn’t exist anymore, or that the weapon would be directed against the *Prometheus* the minute it dropped out of hyperspace. Sure, the Asgard shields would probably hold, but it was still a risk.

Alice watched Marks go, lost in thoughts, absentmindedly rolling an apple in her fingers. She didn’t know how long she was sitting there – five minutes or maybe fifteen – before she was brought back to reality by an alarm, sounding General Quarters. Even though she was not on duty, she got up immediately and headed towards the 302 bay. It was on the other side of the ship and she was only halfway there when she heard a loud bang and the *Prometheus* shook and veered off course. A great burst of electricity blew the main lights off in the corridor Alice had been walking, and right next to her, a pipe erupted and a freezingly cold liquid hydrogen came pouring down.

Alice instinctively ducked under the pipe, avoiding being hit by the stream, and then jumped towards the valve, positioned a little further down the hall. There was chaos around her; people running and screaming orders to each other, sparks flying every which way, alarm still going off in the background. She got to the valve within seconds and tugged at it, but it wouldn’t budge; she didn’t have enough strength to move it. She turned around.

“You! Airman! Help me with this!” She cried to a man with a fire extinguisher, running across the corridor. There was no fire yet – at least nowhere she could see – but just one of the sparks coming off the wires and cables could ignite the liquid hydrogen, and then they’d be screwed; it was highly flammable and had the potential to explode and deal even more damage to the ship.

The airman hesitated for a moment, she saw, but the silver bars on her shoulders didn’t leave him any choice; he ran up to her, put the extinguisher down and grabbed the other side of the valve. He pulled while she pushed; slowly, the half-wheel turned and the leaking coolant began to dissipate until it stopped entirely.

“Good job, thanks. Carry on!” Alice told the man and he immediately picked up the extinguisher and ran off. Alice looked around; she was at the crossing of two corridors, there was also an elevator, but it was clearly out of order; sparks were flying off it. Alice turned towards the fighter bay again. It took her maybe three more minutes to get there, but as she arrived the chief of the deck spotted her and waved for her to get closer to him.

“They’re gone!” He shouted, trying to get himself heard over the sound of the siren. “Mitchell and Teal’c took your fighter!”

Fuck! She was too late. It was always a calculated risk that some of them might not make it to their birds in time, that is why they had their duty shifts, so that there’d always be at least six of them ready to fly solo, with two spare birds for whoever from those off-duty made it – except these two were now on a planet somewhere, on the special assignment. There was no time to get disappointed now, though; they were under attack and although Alice didn’t know what was going on, she had to make herself useful, if not as a pilot, then as an engineer. Without another word, she turned back and ran towards the engine room; it seemed that the Rand satellite weapon was much more powerful than expected if it managed to slice through their Asgard shields. Surely they have responded in kind, but there was no guarantee that their missiles were successful. Was there?

Alice veered off course and stepped into the auxiliary control room 2 to check the situation. One of the computers was on fire, two airmen were trying to smother it with extinguishers, carbon dioxide
veiling the room in a white cloud of gas. She made her way towards one of the other consoles when the voice of Colonel Pendergast creaked through the speakers.

“All hands, brace for impact!”

Alice acted on pure instinct; she jumped back towards the door and was on the threshold when the ship was hit again; it shook, harder than before; Alice grabbed the side of the door with her right hand while swinging her left arm out and catching some protruding pipe in the corridor outside, as the wall on the other side of the room ceased to exist and all air got sucked out into the void, the airmen screaming as they flew off into vacuum, loose fragments of equipment following them. Alice managed to hold on, but immediately felt her lungs contract at the sudden lack of oxygen and the depressurization; however for the moment all her energy was directed into clinging to the wall. A sharp pain in her left shoulder almost forced her to let go, but that would mean death; only a second or two have passed and suddenly the edge of the door she was grasping began moving; the sensors must have picked up the loss of pressure and were sealing off the compartment. Alice lost her grip on the edge and a paroxysm of pain went through her left arm; if she didn’t let go, she’d get cut in half. But she couldn’t, if she did she’d fall into space. Another second has gone by, the door now forcing her towards the middle of the entrance, closing on the two sides, her arm flexing and stretching unnaturally. She was going to die; there was nothing she could do. She was about to die.

The hell you are! Some voice screamed in her head. Her fingers were slipping off the pipe, her feet were up in the air, she could feel the force of the vacuum sucking her out along with the air whooshing from the corridor. But she would be damned if she gave up. Never! She made a herculean effort, grabbed the edge again and pulled with all her might. Because she was still holding onto the pipe in the wall outside, her left arm sprawled across the now-closing door, nearly half of her body was inside the corridor; and that was the only reason why she was able to heave herself a little further, then made another thrust and managed to swing her left leg around the door. Using her foot as an anchor, she pushed herself around the edge of the door, got her second leg planted on the other half of the closing hatch, now only a foot apart; she was now half-laying on the door, still pulled with the air towards the hole in the opposite wall of the room. Even though the artificial gravity was still on, it had no effect on her, such was the force of the vacuum sucking everything out. Alice made one more effort, changed the angle of her right leg so that her foot wouldn’t get trapped between the closing halves of the door, and let go of the edge just in time to save her fingers. The metal clunked heavily as the two sides ground together, engaging the air-tight lock, and all of a sudden the gravity was working again and Alice slid down onto the floor, her left palm still wrapped tightly around the fragment of pipe that saved her life. Maybe seven seconds have passed. The corridor was rapidly pressurizing again, air flowing in from the life support system. Alice tried to take a shallow breath and for a moment she couldn’t, but she was too tired to panic for the moment; she couldn’t move either, she just slumped on the floor, her forehead pressed against the cold metal of the door that had nearly halved her, her left arm extended up, still clutching the pipe. She was unable to let go. She didn’t feel anything. Her head was swimming, her eyes, though open, were seeing only darkness. She wasn’t thinking. Some weird, detached part of her brain looked at her sorry state and told her if she didn’t breathe, now, she would die. But she was already dead. She was dying.

“Lieutenant. Lieutenant!” The words didn’t make sense to her, but when they were followed by someone grabbing her shoulders and shaking her, she felt it; a spasm shot from her left side and made its way to her brain. Her head rolled back and she inhaled sharply from pain; the intake of air made its way into her veins and her brain, and her lungs remembered how to operate. Quick, shallow breaths dispelled the heavy fog from her brain and the rest of her body began sending signals, informing her she was aching all over. Her left shoulder was on fire and she couldn’t feel her fingers. She tried to move them but they didn’t seem to listen to her. Her head came up
automatically to scrutinize the situation. Her vision was blurry but she could see none of her fingers moved no matter how hard she tried. She felt cold panic sweep through her body.

“Lieutenant, you’ve gotta move!”

She understood the words, this time, but she couldn’t comply. She was locked inside a small bubble of reality where the single most important thing was to regain control of her fingers. She had to move them. She had to. She didn’t consider what would happen if she couldn’t do it; thoughts such as paralysis or loss of function did not cross her mind. It was pure, animal response; she had to get her fingers moving. She had to go of the pipe. She had to.

“It’s no use, she’s in shock!” She heard someone say behind her. It didn’t break through her bubble. She was still concentrated on her left hand, wrapped around the pipe.

“Here, airman, help me with her!” The same voice called. Someone’s arm came into her line of sight and touched her palm. She didn’t feel it. She had to move her fingers. Why wouldn’t her fingers move? The pain in her shoulder intensified by the second, her whole body was hurting, but it didn’t break through the bubble either. She had to move her fingers.

The alien hand grabbed her palm and pulled at it, but Alice didn’t feel it. Her fingers wouldn’t budge. She felt someone touching her back, supporting her to sit straight. Another arm appeared within her view and began unclasping her fingers from around the pipe, one by one. Her fingers wouldn’t move. They’d just flap back, lifeless. Having finished, the alien hand slowly lowered her arm by the wrist to her side. Alice couldn’t look away; she kept staring at her immobile fingers, now resting on her thigh, even as the fire in her shoulder burned white-hot. There was something jutting out from it, but she couldn’t concentrate enough to realize what it was. Then someone wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her up to her feet; she lost her hand from her sight and thus was finally confronted with reality.

The corridor was dark; what little light was there, was red. Emergency lighting, the thought passed through her mind but it didn’t mean anything to her. There were no more sparks nor any visible gasses. The sound of the sirens came from further away, and there was no one in the corridor that she could see.

“We need to get out of here and seal off this compartment, ma’am. Can you walk?” The voice came from her right side. She turned her head to see a young man standing right next to her; it was his arm that was wrapped around her waist, and her own right arm was on his back, he was clutching her hand in his above his right shoulder. She ignored his question and stared at her palm. She tried to twiddle her fingers. She saw them move inside the airman’s hand. She did it again. They listened.

She inhaled deeply. Somehow this little thing managed to break her bubble. She suddenly knew where she was and what had happened. She was alive. Something was very wrong with her shoulder, but she was alive. She survived. She breathed in again. The cold air felt sharp in her ducts, as if it was made of tiny crystals; but with every intake, her head was swimming a little less, the darkness and blur of her vision were receding, logical thinking was coming back. Unfortunately, she also began registering the pain; she really felt it now. Her body was limp, her knees didn’t buckle only because the airman supporting her was taller than her and she was essentially hanging off of him. She looked down to her legs, bit her lip to stop herself from screaming – her shoulder was agonizing now – and commanded her muscles to move. They listened, too.

“I can walk,” she tried to say, but only a croak came out of her mouth. Now she felt how dry her lips were. She tried to wet them with her tongue, but there was no moisture there either. Each
breath was painful now; her shoulder throbbed with every heartbeat; her entire body ached; and she 
still couldn’t feel nor move the fingers of her left hand. She kept her eyes off her left side, though; 
she didn’t think she was ready to see the full damage, now that she was conscious again.

The airman must have understood the meaning behind her husky attempt at speech. He made a 
tentative step, looking at her carefully and she matched him. They wobbled along the corridor 
slowly; someone was following them, she could hear his heavy footfalls.

“Sheal off corridor three-sixty.” It was the other man’s voice. The reply came distorted, sounded 
artificial. Radio, Alice thought.

“Sealing off.” The sound of moving metal came from behind them; it was awfully familiar and 
Alice shuddered involuntarily, her right hand clasping inside the airman’s palm, as if she had to 
grip that door’s edge again. They were in a new corridor now, and the alarm was much louder 
here; there were people around, too, but Alice couldn’t focus her eyes on them. It was dark. And 
then the sound of siren changed and a voice began broadcasting.

Abandon ship. All personnel to report to the nearest beam out site. Abandon ship. All personnel to 
report to the nearest beam out site.

The message was repeating. It took Alice a moment to understand what it meant and why the 
airman supporting her suddenly picked up the pace. She couldn’t keep up with him and her feet 
dragged a little, but he was strong and she was light, and so he basically carried her the rest of the 
way to where two corridors met, where already a large group of people were standing. Nearly as 
soon as they made it there, a bright light enveloped them and the sudden brightness hurt her eyes, 
so she closed them. There was no more alarm. No more sound of the electrical wires shorting. No 
message. No nothing.

They’ve abandoned ship. Alice wanted to open her eyes and see where they were but she couldn’t. 
The weight of everything that happened crushed her. She was falling into the darkness. It was all 
over.

*

She is twelve and she is falling, falling, falling from the tree house. The laughter dies on their lips 
and their faces are now identical masks of horror. Alice is falling, falling, falling down. Her hands 
and feet are up in the air, extended as if she was hoping there would be something to grab, but no. 
There is nothing. She is falling, falling, falling onto the ground. The impact knocks the wind out of 
her, a spasm of pain shoots through her back and chest, her head makes contact with the grassy 
turf and everything goes dark. She fell.

*

The first sensation she registered was a sound. A voice. Someone was talking somewhere nearby, 
but she couldn’t understand the words yet. Her brain seemed fogged, confused. She couldn’t 
remember where she was, how she got there, what was happening. She was lying on something. 
Soft. Her head was a little higher than the rest of her body – a pillow? She could see light through
her eyelids. It was bright, sharp. She didn’t feel like opening her eyes just yet. Her thoughts were still lazy, going in circles. She felt quite numb. It was rather pleasant.

She didn’t know how long she was just hanging there without moving or thinking about anything in particular. It could be a few seconds or a few hours. She didn’t wonder at her state. She was completely incurious. But eventually something began to bother her. The voice was still going on there, next to her. Nagging. She didn’t want to hear it, but now that she registered how annoying it was, she couldn’t not listen. It was beginning to make sense, too.

“Wake up. I want you to wake up now,” it said. “Come on, Lieutenant. Wake up now.”

But she wasn’t asleep. Why didn’t the voice know that? Oh, her eyes were still closed. But she didn’t want to open them now. The light was too bright.

“Come on, Lieutenant. I want to see your eyes. Wake up!” This voice was strangely familiar. It carried a sort of authority and something Pavlovian deep inside Alice responded. She opened her eyes and immediately had to squint, the bright light dazzling.

“Atta girl,” the voice praised. Alice’s vision was blurry, but she made an effort to focus on the voice’s owner. A familiar figure; she searched in her mind for a moment before she paired the physique to the name: Samantha Carter, Lieutenant Colonel. Alice blinked and frowned. How did she get here? Better yet, how did I get here? And where the fuck is here? She thought. She shifted her gaze to look around.

She was in a bed. There were railings on each side, the kind hospital beds had to prevent patients from rolling over. The ceiling was of white plaster. A single, bright bulb was hanging from it, giving off the annoying bright light. There were walls, white too. No windows, but a metal door. This looked like a hospital, but it also didn’t look like a hospital. Everything was wrong, somehow. Unfamiliar. Or was it her brain’s fault again?

“How are you feeling, Lieutenant?” Carter asked after a minute of Alice’s quiet staring at her surroundings. That stumped her for a moment. How was she feeling? She tried to reassess that. Her mind was still all fogged up and her body felt… numb. Just numb. A cold trickle of fear found its way into her otherwise lazy thoughts. Was she paralyzed? Was that why she didn’t feel her body? She looked down at her chest, which was going up and down in rhythm with her breathing. Okay, that was no proof. She focused on her right hand, lying at her side. It seemed to take an unusual amount of time – a second, maybe two? - but it moved when she willed it. Relief swept over her. She wasn’t paralyzed. She fiddled her toes and observed with satisfaction as the sheet covering her moved slightly. Then she turned to her left and was shocked to see some sort of white bulk encasing her entire left side, totally enveloping her arm, which was sticking out at an odd angle. A cast, she finally remembered the word. It was a cast. A closer look revealed it to go all the way down to her midriff and covering half her chest. She was dressed in some sort of dark green shirt, cut open on the left side to admit the cast. She still didn’t remember what had happened.

“Where am I?” She croaked, her mouth completely dry. She looked back at Colonel Carter.

“Here, drink a bit.” The older officer handed her a ceramic mug without a handle. Alice took it in her right hand and nearly spilled it upon herself; her arm was very weak. But she managed to correct her grip and then lifted it to her mouth. The cool water felt like a balm on her dried lips and tongue. She reminded herself not to gulp everything in one go; there was maybe only half a cup anyway. A few small swallows later she handed the mug back to Carter. Somehow the water seemed to help unfog her mind, too.

“We are still on Tegalus,” Carter said, replacing the cup on a small wooden stand at the side of the
bed. “Our doctors tried to put you back together with what the local hospital could offer, but I’m afraid you’ll need to have another surgery when we get back to Earth.”

“Tegalus...” The name sounded familiar.

“What do you remember, Lieutenant?”

Alice frowned again. What did she remember? It was so difficult to concentrate! Why was it so difficult? And why didn’t she feel anything? And then it dawned on her: she was drugged.

“Morphine?” She asked, looking up at Carter questioningly.

“The local version of it,” Carter confirmed. “You were pretty badly wounded.”

“How?”

“We were on the Prometheus, remember?”

Yes, she remembered… the ship where she was a fighter pilot. They had a mission. To this… Tegalus. It was a planet. There was a war. And some sort of weapon…

“Why couldn’t we destroy the satellite?”

“The plans that we had were incomplete. There was a shield that our missiles couldn’t penetrate.”

Shield… their own shields failed. Asgard technology was defeated by an Ori one. Alice’s memories were coming back faster now. They were hit by the weapon. She was trying to get to the 302s, but was stopped halfway there when they were hit. Her squadron scrambled before she made it to the bay. She went back… she wanted to go to the engine room but decided to check what was going on. In the auxiliary control room 2. She went in there just as they were hit again… And as the details of the ordeal came back to her, she felt a sharp stabbing pain in her shoulder. She blinked. Was it real or did she imagine that? She looked at her arm, enveloped in the cast. She wasn’t exactly sure what happened to her shoulder, but she remembered that she couldn’t move her fingers.

“What’s wrong with me?” Her voice was small, tentative. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

“The second hit punched a hole in the wall of auxiliary control room 2. You managed to hold onto the door and pulled yourself out of the room and into the corridor before it sealed itself. But as everything was being sucked into the vacuum, a sharp splinter pierced your shoulder. Additionally, the effort you had to make to hold on compromised the ligaments and tendons in your arm.” Carter paused for a moment. “It doesn’t look so good, but as soon as we’re back on Earth our best doctors will take care of you and you’ll be as good as new.”

The fake cheer in her voice punched Alice like a fist in the stomach. More than the description of the damage, that was the testament to just how screwed she was. She remembered that dreamlike few minutes after the door had closed and she was sitting on the floor, staring at her hand, willing her fingers to move. There was nerve damage, must have been. Her left hand would be useless now. If she ever regained some sort of control, it would be tenuous at best. She’d never fly a fighter again. She’d be medically separated, or forced to retire. If nothing else, her career in the military was over. Would the Homeworld Command allow her to stay on as a civilian contractor? Without the use of one hand, she’d never be allowed to serve aboard a ship again, but maybe she could work at the Groom Lake, building new ships or doing research? Yes, research; she could still think, right? And write. She could still be useful. Her life wasn’t entirely over, was it?
“What happened to the *Prometheus*?” She asked, although she didn’t have to; she knew. Carter’s answer only confirmed what was the only logical conclusion.

“It was destroyed.”

“How many…?” Alice couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Thirty nine. Colonel Pendergast, too.”

Alice closed her eyes. She might as well get all the bad news in one go.

“My squadron?”

“All good.”

“Marks? The engine crew?”

“Marks is okay. He was injured, too, but not seriously. The engine crew made it out, except Chenkov. He ordered the rest to evacuate but stayed behind to ensure the power flow to the Asgard transporters.”

Alice didn’t respond. She kept her eyes closed and waited for the tears to come, but there was nothing. It wasn’t that she wasn’t sad; but she was too furious. She didn’t speak for over a minute, while the anger boiled inside her.

“If the ship is gone, how are we coming back to Earth?” She supposed they could wait for the *Daedalus* to get back from Pegasus. Or maybe the Odyssey could be rushed into service to get them here? Then it struck her again: where was _here_?

“The Rand Protectorate and Caledonia have a cease-fire. The Rand Protectorate will surrender the Stargate to the Caledonians so that they may leave to another world.”

“They agreed to relocate?”

“It was this or be annihilated,” Carter reminded. “But to be honest I don’t think they are convinced to this plan either. At any rate the Stargate is about to arrive to the capital. We’ll leave as soon as we can. What happens next for the Caledonians…? I don’t know. But I’m quite ready to leave Tegalus for good.”

Alice silently agreed. For a moment they were both lost in thoughts. Alice’s mind was wandering, jumping from one thing to another. Concentrating on a single idea was still rather difficult.

“How do you know so well what happened to me?” She blurted but then checked herself.

“Ma’am.”

Carter smiled. “Sergeant Johnson told me. He was the one who found you, alongside an airman.”

Alice recalled only the young face of the airman, but someone was definitely walking behind them as they stumbled towards the designated beam out site.

Both of their heads snapped up when the metal door screeched and a man in *Prometheus* standard-issue blue uniform entered, stood at attention and saluted to Carter.

“The Stargate has arrived, ma’am. Colonel Mitchell has ordered immediate evacuation of all Earth personnel through the Gate.”
The lieutenant colonel nodded. “Thank you, Airman. Please ask the nurse outside for a wheelchair for Lieutenant Boyd here, if they have such things.”

“No,” Alice contradicted immediately. “I can walk.”

Carter looked at her disbelievingly.

“I will walk,” the younger officer reiterated, throwing off the bed sheet that’s been covering her. She was dressed in a dark green, unfamiliar uniform, apparently Caledonian. “Help me with this,” she gestured to the airman, pointing at the railing on the side of the bed. He stepped closer and lowered it with an audible creak. “Thanks.” She sat up straight and turned her body left to let down her legs. Carter came around the bed to stand next to her.

“Are you sure about this, Lieutenant? You must be very weak.”

“I’ll be fine,” Alice assured her, though by no means she felt sure herself. Now that her feet were touching the floor – she was short enough that only toes were in contact with the ground – she wondered if it wasn’t just reckless to refuse a wheelchair. “I just want to get out of here.”

Carter put her hand on her right shoulder to steady her, and it was good that she did so because as soon as Alice slipped off the bed and put her weight on her feet, her knees buckled and she would have fallen if she didn’t lean on her right arm, propped on the edge of the bed still. Carter’s steadying grip helped her regain her balance, although she was somewhat listing to the left, the weight of the cast pulling that side of her body down.

“I’m fine,” Alice said, but had to bite her lip. The effort reverberated through all her limbs, recognized in her brain as pain. The effect of whatever Caledonian drug the doctors have put into her was wearing off. It was still rather a dull ache than the fire she remembered from the ship, but it was starting, and she knew from experience that more would follow quicker now, unless she got a new shot. Alice took a few deep breaths before she began walking, concentrating on each step at a time. The first few were rather shaky, but her body remembered how it’s done soon enough. The senior airman held the door for her and Carter walked next to her, ready to help if she were to fall. It may have not been a long way; from the room to the elevator, and then to the exit from the building, to a car waiting for them on the driveway; but for Alice, it seemed like the longest route ever. She had to pause a few times to rest, but each time resumed walking before Carter had a chance to suggest a wheelchair again. The truth was, nowhere in the hospital they saw a wheelchair, they weren’t even sure if the Caledonians used them. They did, however, have cars, and Alice thanked her stars for it, because, although the drive was short, she was sure she wouldn’t be able to walk that far. The car itself was a curious thing; it looked a lot like a London black cab, except it was deep red and had a yoke instead of a steering wheel and gear.

The Stargate was put in a huge brick hangar, like an abandoned factory, except there were many people inside, mostly wearing Prometheus blue uniforms, but also some Caledonians. They approached a group of them, among whom stood also Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell, Doctor Jackson and Teal’c.

“Oh, Lieutenant, good,” Mitchell said noticing them coming up. “Nice to see you up and running.”

“Thank you, sir, although I doubt I’d be running any time soon.” Alice tried to smile, but it came out more as a grimace of pain.

“It may take a while, but you’ll be alright. Trust me.”
Alice remembered that Mitchell crash-landed his 302 during the battle over the Antarctic, and was gravely injured. He did make a full recovery, though, and was now leading the SG-1. Alice didn’t know what was the nature of his injury, and couldn’t possibly guess how it compared to hers, but she assumed it was way worse; she could still walk. So maybe there was still some hope. Not much, but a little flicker; it was all she could count on right now.

“This is the last of your people, Colonel,” declared a woman with dark hair and a harried look.

“Thank you, Minister. Daniel, you want to dial us out? Sam, will you go first with the wounded?”

“Sure.” Carter nodded and gestured to Alice to follow her. They walked slowly towards the great ring of stone erected in the middle of the hangar. It wasn’t really stone – it was Naquadah – but it looked that way. Alice has never seen it before. She found it ironic that she’d finally have the chance to see it only now, when the Prometheus was gone, and so was, most probably, her career in the Stargate program. It looked bigger than Alice had thought it would, more imposing.

It appeared at least a dozen other crew members were injured, some of them much worse than her – they were lying on stretchers, accompanied by Prometheus’s doctors and medics. Marks waved to her, his other arm in a sling. Alice smiled in return. And then Doctor Jackson stepped to the DHD and pushed seven symbols which would take them home. The chevrons illuminated on the ring and the burst of unstable vortex flushed outwards like a jet of water. It immediately calmed to create a rippled surface of the event horizon. Alice found herself staring at it in fascination, the pain notwithstanding.

Carter produced a GDO from a pocket and input her code, then turned her radio on.

“Stargate Command, this is Carter.”

“Colonel Carter, it is very good to hear your voice!” Came a crackling reply. “We were worried! What’s your situation?”

“Sir, I’m afraid it is not good. The Prometheus has been destroyed. About three quarters of the crew managed to beam down to the planet, we request permission to return through the Stargate. We have wounded.”

There was a moment of silence, and when the man on the other side spoke, it was in a heavy tone. “Request granted. Come on home, people.”

Carter gestured to Doctor Jackson to move ahead and then ordered those injured to go through. They proceeded in an orderly fashion; first the stretchers were carried into the event horizon of the wormhole, then the rest followed, Alice among them, Carter stepping right after her.

It was a very curious experience; the only other thing that Alice could compare it to was jumping into or dropping out of the hyperspace, and yet it was completely different. She didn’t actually feel anything, and yet it was a very singular feeling; entirely impossible to describe. It was dizzying to be on a planet thousands of light years away one second and the next one step onto a platform in the Stargate Command, Cheyenne Mountain, Earth. This was her first time there, too, so she looked around curiously as she continued down the platform. Through the glass directly in front of the Stargate she could see a row of computers and a few people standing behind them; one was a general, so Alice presumed it was Hank Landry, the CO of the base. They were being funneled out of the Gate Room into a corridor on the right, marines from Gate Security Forces standing around, their guns pointed down. Alice was about to cross the threshold when she heard her name spoken by a familiar voice. Very familiar. She turned on the spot, surprised, lost her balance, and nearly fell down. She managed to right herself – as much as the cast allowed her – and lifted her gaze to
look at a marine sergeant, standing right next to the platform, his rifle hanging on the strap, pointed
down. His auburn hair was neatly trimmed, and he looked even more imposing than usual in the
cammiss and helmet.

“Jake?” He gaped at her with the same dumb expression on his face she imagined was on hers. For
a moment neither of them made a move, and then someone brushed off Alice’s left side, snagging
on her cast. The tug sent a paroxysm of pain from Alice’s shoulder to her brain and she moaned,
hers knees buckling beneath her again. This time, however, she didn’t manage to keep her balance
and landed on all fours on the floor – or, rather, on all threes, as her left hand was unmovable inside
the cast. This did nothing to help with the pain – quite the opposite, actually.

“Allie!” It took Jake maybe two seconds to appear at her side. He put his hand delicately on her
right shoulder.

“You alright, Lieutenant?” Carter asked anxiously from behind her. Alice couldn’t reply; it was
taking all of her self-control not to scream at the moment. If there was any remainder of the
Caledonian painkiller in her system still, it had no more effect; her shoulder was on fire again. “We
need to get you to the infirmary immediately.”

“I’ll take her, ma’am,” Jake offered and, without waiting for confirmation, he put his hands on her
waist and hoisted her up, angling her so that she landed in his arms, cradled to his chest on her right
side, her left arm sticking out with the cast. This maneuver was not painless for Alice, but once
fitted snugly in her brother’s grip, a bit of the pressure on her shoulder let off, and she was able to
take a careful breath. Jake set off at a brisk pace through the door and down the corridor, Carter
keeping up with him.

“I take it you two know each other?” She asked on the way. Alice chuckled, but it hurt so she
stopped.

“You can say that, ma’am,” Jake answered as Alice was too occupied trying not to moan again.
“Alice is my sister.”

“No! Really?” There was shock in Carter’s voice. Welcome to the club, Colonel. “She told me she
had a brother in the Marine Corps, but she never mentioned you were working in the SGC!”

“I didn’t know!” Alice complained, but it sounded more like a wail.

“How come?”

Alice’s cheek was pressed to Jake’s chest so she didn’t really see his face, but she felt him shake
his head. They were entering an elevator now.

“I had no idea Alice was part of the Program, either, ma’am. We both kept the secret from each
other. We’re different services so it would make sense nobody made the connection. Besides,
Boyd isn’t that uncommon a name.” He paused for a moment. “But what happened?”

“Long story,” Alice groaned.

“The Prometheus was destroyed. We barely escaped alive,” Carter explained curtly.

“Not all of us did,” the younger officer added in a whisper. Neither of them replied. They entered
the infirmary. It was full of activity; the wounded were being triaged in order of who needed
medical attention more urgently. Lesser wounded were redirected to the Air Force Academy
Hospital and those who needed urgent care were distributed among the base medical personnel to
look after. Jacob put Alice down gently on a bed. Immediately, a doctor in a white coat stepped
closer to check up on her. After a few questions, he ordered a nurse to administer a sedative. Alice wanted to protest, but her shoulder was now throbbing with pain close to what she had felt only right after sustaining the injury, aboard the ship. So she didn’t say anything, and a minute after the injection she was already drifting away. Before she lost consciousness, she realized Jake was still holding on to her hand, and she squeezed his reassuringly. And then everything went dark again.

*

Waking up this time was easier. Maybe it was the alien medication which had made it so hard previously; or maybe it was because she was coming to on her own now, and not prompted by anyone else. When she opened her eyes, most of her cognitive functions seemed back to normal, or at least close. It was silent in the room, the light was muted and grayish, coming from the large window on Alice’s left. She was definitely in a normal hospital now. The walls were white, pastel-yellow blinds covered the windows, blue curtains hanging on each side. An assortment of monitors surrounded the bed, and a chair stood on its right side, a large figure sprawled across it. Alice smiled. Jake’s steady breathing was the only sound in the room; even the monitors were silent, although she could see they were on. Alice’s eyes slipped down and to the left, to examine her shoulder. It was enveloped in plaster, but it wasn’t the same cast as before. It was thinner, the surface smoother, and it covered less of her body; it started at the base of her neck and went diagonally down to the middle of her side. It was propped up with a plastic stick attached to her waist. She could see her fingertips sticking out from the very end. She didn’t try to move them; she was too afraid to find out they didn’t.

It must have been early in the morning. The dawn was coming, the room becoming gradually brighter. Alice didn’t move, lest she woke Jake up, but lying in the same position was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Whatever painkillers she was given started to fade, and a dull ache began in her shoulder. In fact, all of her body was sore, like after an intense workout. Her mouth was dry again, and breathing required an extra effort, like in high altitudes. *You’re alive,* she reminded herself. *Unlike so many of your colleagues.* She closed her eyes, thinking of Colonel Pendergast and Doctor Chenkov, the two people she had known that were lost for sure. How many more? She might not have known everyone’s names aboard the *Prometheus,* but she’s met each and every one of them at one time or another, in the mess, the gym, the corridors. She felt sick thinking about the thirty nine families who would never see their close ones again. Like Spinner, lost somewhere very far away, never to return home, not even for their own funerals. Memorial services, that was all they’d get. Alice sighed deeply.

Maybe it was her sigh, or the light now shining bright through the gaps between the blinds, but at that moment Jake stirred and with a huge yawn, sat up straighter in his chair. He noticed Alice looking at him and jumped up to get closer.

“Allie!” He exclaimed and took her right hand into his. “You’re awake! How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad, all things considered,” she replied in a hoarse voice. “Can I get something to drink?”

“I’ll ask a nurse.” Jake let go of her and walked out of the room. He was gone maybe thirty seconds. He came back holding a plastic cup with a straw. A nurse was walking behind him.

“Good morning, Lieutenant!” She greeted her brightly and picked up Alice’s chart to make some annotations on it, looking over at the monitors. Alice used the time to have a few swallows of water, reveling in its cool wetness. It was soothing on her dry mouth and throat.
“Your vitals look good!” The nurse announced, replacing the chart back to its hook at the foot of the bed and then smiled at Alice. “How are you feeling?”

“A bit sore, but otherwise fine.” Alice didn’t think going into details of her condition was called for at the moment.

“Good. The doctor will be in very soon. Just try to relax until he comes.” With another bright grin, the nurse left the room. Alice thought it must have meant she didn’t have any drugs prescribed yet; or maybe it was just too early to administer them? One needed to be very careful with opioids.

“I presume I’ve had a surgery or something?”

“Or something, yeah.” Jake smiled and turned to drag the chair closer so he could sit by her. “They had to cut you open to repair the damage. Your shoulder is pretty fucked up right now, but they told me it could return to full functionality eventually.”

“Could?” Alice picked up on the use of the word. “So they’re not sure.”

“Who’s ever sure of anything? But they used some cutting-edge technology, based on stuff we’ve procured through the Gate over the years. You’ve literally had the best damn care in the whole wide world.”

“Ah. We’ve procured?” Alice’s eyebrows went up. “So what is your actual position at the SGC? You’re not a member of an SG team, I’m pretty sure I’d notice that, I’ve read almost all available reports...”

“Ah, but you didn’t notice Robert.”

“Robert, your friend?”

“The very same. He’s SG-15.”

“That’s the medical unit, isn’t it? That’s probably why I didn’t recognize his name. They rarely make it to the kind of reports I’d read.” Alice shook her head. “But you didn’t reply to my question.”

“I’m not in an SG team,” Jake said. “I’m in the base SF.”

“I thought the Security Forces were all Air Force.” She was surprised.

“Most of them are. But there is a rifle squad of marines there too, just to make sure you sissies don’t run and hide every time there’s some danger.”

Alice rolled her eyes, but let that pass. “So you’re the squad leader?” He was the right rank.

“Yep.”

“But you don’t actually go through the Stargate, do you?”

“Sadly, no. I’ve put for reassignment to an SG unit over a year ago, but they haven’t okayed it yet. They will, eventually.” He sounded nonchalant, but Alice knew him enough to realize that it was something he really wanted. She thought of all the dangers awaiting anyone who stepped through that Gate and shuddered. Her big brother was a professional and he knew how to take care of himself, but how do you protect yourself from the Ori? Or any of the other villains still at large out there? It was different for her, she argued with herself. She was much safer in the cockpit of her
302 than he would be running around with a rifle on the ground.

“Colonel Carter told me that you drive an F-302?” Jake continued after a moment. “That was the special training you’d attended back in ‘04?”

“Yeah. A space-fighter drives somewhat differently than your standard Viper.” Alice grinned, but then her smile waned. “I don’t suppose I’ll be able to fly anytime soon.” She didn’t add: if at all, but she thought it.

“Recovery is a pain,” Jake acknowledged. He’d know, the injury he’s sustained in Iraq took some serious time to heal up too. “But it ends.”

Alice didn’t voice her doubt at that. It only ends when you get better. She turned to look at the window. What if I never get well enough to fly again? She still hasn’t tested her fingers. You fucking coward. But she wasn’t able to, not now. Not yet.

“How long have you been with the SGC?” Alice asked, just to turn her thoughts from the depressing musings.

“About a year and a half. I was getting transferred at the same time you had your special training.”

“So you’ve never actually been to 29 Palms?”

“Not since coming back from Iraq, no.” Jake shrugged. “Seems that we both hit the jackpot at the same time. That is… you don’t regret joining the Stargate Program, do you?”

He sounded uncertain. Alice frowned. She hasn’t yet had time for a deeper evaluation of her life choices. Did she regret it? She thought about flying in space; learning so many new things; defending her home planet; meeting all these new people, making friends; all these experiences she wouldn’t have had if she had stayed in the seat of an F-16. Maybe it was the end of it now; maybe she would never fly again. But even so… no, she couldn’t bring herself to regret the decision.

“No.” She shook her head emphatically. “It was worth it.”

Okay, Boyd. Stop being a sissy. Alice took a deep breath and looked at the fingertips of her left hand, protruding from the plaster. She concentrated on them and willed them to move. For what seemed like the longest three seconds of her life, they wouldn’t. But then the signal from her brain finally came through and with an immense sense of relief, she saw them twiddle at end of the cast. She had control over them. Even if she never recovered full function of the arm, she would be able to use it, if to a lesser extent.

“Yeah, they were wondering about that,” Jake said in a low voice. Alice looked up to see he was observing her carefully. “You tore a ligament and strained the others pretty bad. There was some nerve damage too. The only good news is that the piece of shrapnel went in at a relatively low velocity, nothing like a bullet, so it didn’t fracture the bones, although it cut right through the soft tissue, muscles and all. They had some jolly good time tying it all up in there.”

Alice looked away. This only confirmed what she already knew; there was no way she’d get out of that without some loss of motor function in the arm.

“They did a good job, Allie. You know you were actually operated on in the OR at the SGC? They literally have the best people in the world. And the best equipment, alien and human alike. You’ll be alright.”

Depends on what you define as alright, brother.
But there was nothing to it; it was impossible to predict just how bad it would be. All she could do is to follow doctors’ orders and, once the time for it came, do a lot of physical therapy. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad. Maybe the loss of function would be minimal enough that they’d let her fly again. She doubted that, but she couldn’t lose hope. If she did, she might just give up right from the start.

At any rate, a long convalescence was awaiting her now. It would be weeks before the cast was off, then months in a sling until she could begin physical therapy for the arm, which would probably take even more time if she wanted to regain all possible functionality. Six months, probably more. And then she’d have to train and qualify again to fly. It seemed such an impossible amount of time. What was she going to do? I’ll go nuts from idleness, she thought and grimaced.

The prospects were not good.

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The doctors kept her at the hospital for a week. She missed the memorial service for the fallen Prometheus crew, but Jake brought her the news about Tegalus. Or rather lack of it: they only knew that shortly after their evacuation, the talks between Rand Protectorate and Caledonia fell, and now SGC was unable to re-establish a wormhole to the planet. Presumably, the hostilities began anew, and the Stargate was buried somewhere under the rubble. Alice didn’t know how to feel about that. On one hand, the Caledonians had the option to leave; by staying, they doomed themselves. On the other, however, she tried to put herself in their position; if another country threatened them with annihilation and there was a way out, but she’d have to abandon her home planet for ever… it would be extremely difficult to just give up Earth, even if that meant salvation of her people. Earth was home.

Jake visited her nearly every day; she was at the Air Force Academy Hospital, and he had an apartment in town, so it was an easy drive. He could only come after his shift ended, though, usually in the evening. A few other people visited, too; Bolton came by to praise her on a good escape, Fiona came by to wish her speedy recovery, and so did Sergeant O’Reilly, who brought flowers and blushed a lot, confirming Alice’s suspicion that he had a thing for her. She found it cute, so she smiled at him kindly, which only made him redden more.

She was forbidden from walking further than to the bathroom and back for the first three days. Afterwards, the doctor gave her a green light and she went on exploring her surroundings. She still had to pause frequently and the cast, although smaller and lighter than the one from Caledonia, pulled at her so she was listing slightly to the left. Nevertheless, she went on a stroll on the Academy grounds every day. Technically, when he was giving her the okay to walk around, the doctor meant only the hospital’s terrain; but Alice found it rather boring, so she ventured outside. Her Common Access Card allowed her entry to pretty much the entire Academy, but she kept well out of the way of everyone so as to not bother them, observing the life of the school with interest. She’s never had that experience herself; she went to a civilian college, graduated and then joined by going through Officer Training School. It was completely different at the Academy. The young men and women here were not students, they were cadets. They had to contend with not only the learning program, but also a rigorous schedule, strict rules of conduct and extremely high expectations. They went about with serious faces, their shoes shined and their uniforms spotless. They carried their books in their left hands so that their right ones were free to salute. They were organized in squadrons, all participating in the same Cadet Wing. Alice watched them with a sort
of detached curiosity. She realized the first-class cadets were in the Air Force as long as her. Most of them were only a year her junior; some two, and some were her age or even older. If she hadn’t graduated high school early, she’d probably have chosen the Air Force Academy. Her father went through the Naval Academy in Annapolis, and her Uncle Simon – West Point. She didn’t think she’d have any problems graduating here; she’d always been very focused on learning, and even at CalTech, imposed a rather strict schedule on herself, although it was more an attempt to avoid unnecessary human interaction than anything else. Athletics were not an issue, either; aside from close combat, she’s always been on top with the physical training. That tended to happen when nearly your entire family was in the military and obsessed with keeping in shape. That was also how she first learned to shoot: her dad taught her and Jake. The strict military rules didn’t bother her all too much. In fact the only thing she could think of that could have posed a problem for her had she joined the Academy were people relations. She’s never been good at it and being a member of a cadet squadron was quite a different thing than having the same classes with people in a civilian college. You had to eat with the same people, study, work out, train with them; you didn’t have much chance for contact with the outside world. In the first five weeks – during the Basic Cadet Training – you couldn’t even receive phone calls. That rule relaxed afterwards, but it was still a good bet you’d be spending most of your time with the other cadets. Alice didn’t think that would be very easy for her. On the other hand, maybe there were more people like Archer or Spinner out there, someone she could truly befriend? She couldn’t deny that she was feeling a sort of emptiness in her life now that Archer was constantly away and Spinner was gone. She grew attached to them; to have this link severed was hurtful even to such a recluse as her.

But of course, the Air Force Academy wasn’t only about teaching kids about life in the military; they also had normal classes and had to study hard, like any college student in the country. Alice saw them standing in groups, talking about assignments and projects. It was yet too cold, but Alice would bet her ukulele on the fact that they often studied outside, sitting on the grass, in warmer months, same as she had done at CalTech in her time. At one point she walked on a group of second class cadets in a heated discussion about the three-body problem. She bounded a corner of a building and found herself nearly among them; it took the young man speaking at the moment a few seconds to notice her. She saw his eyes slide off her left hand enveloped in white plaster and then to her right shoulder, the only place on her BDU where her rank insignia was visible, since her other sleeve had to be cut in half to allow for the cast. Then his hand went up while his heels clicked together and the three others followed suit, saluting her. She rendered the salute back somewhat less elegantly, slanted over to the left as she was.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to walk in on you like this,” she said, smiling.

“No, ma’am, it’s us who shouldn’t be standing here,” the boy acknowledged. He was only two years younger than Alice but she couldn’t see him any other way than just a kid. She wondered if she were becoming arrogant or condescending, but she realized with surprise that she didn’t really care anymore. She had survived something that by all accounts should have killed her. Many of her colleagues were gone. She hasn’t done anything particularly heroic; just saved her own neck. And yet, it changed the way she felt about herself. Somehow it made her worthy of respect that she didn’t think she deserved before.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation,” Alice noted. “The three-body problem, eh?”

“Yes, ma’am. We’re Physics majors,” he replied. “I was just explaining that it’s impossible to solve.”

“Is it, though?” Alice smiled even wider. It was one of the things that the knowledge brought through the Stargate allowed them to understand, and a very important part of calculations required for operating a spaceship – or a space-fighter. “Just because our current level of science doesn’t
permit us to solve it, doesn’t mean it’s impossible. If you assume from the start that it’s not possible, then it never will be. A good researcher never stops asking why and how.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell him!” Another boy said with a triumphant look at his friend. “You can’t keep up this no can do attitude if you wanna be a 61D, mate!”

“He’s right,” Alice observed before the other cadet had time to rebuke. “And you don’t wanna miss out on that. We’ll need all of you brilliant kids in the service. Plus it’s exciting!”

“You can talk, ma’am,” the boy complained, gesturing at the badge on her chest: the pilot’s wings.

“Well, it’s all fun and games until it’s not.” She pointed at her cast. “But trust me, being a scientist in the service is a very good choice right now.”

They nodded assent, but she could see it was rather halfhearted. No matter if they were in the Academy, the AFROTC, or the OTS, nearly every cadet wanted to become a pilot.

“Alright, I’ll let you do what you do. Carry on!” Alice smiled to them again and they saluted and walked away. She continued on her stroll, pondering the encounter.

It was her last day there. After she was released from the hospital, Alice was put on convalescent leave and allowed to travel home, to L.A., as long as she didn’t drive and took proper care of herself. She took a commercial flight from Colorado Springs airport and had to take a cab from LAX. She spent six days home, traveling the city by taxi, and visiting all of her close ones. Her mother was understandably shaken at her sight with the oversize cast on her arm; after losing her husband, and seeing already her son gravely injured, it was all she could do not to panic at her daughter being wounded as well. Alice reassured her that she was going to be alright; it was a lie, of course, she still didn’t know how her recovery was going to progress. But she had to hide her worries from her fragile mother. Eileen was doing so well now; she hadn’t had an episode since the one nearly two years prior; the doctors reduced her medication drastically so all the worst side effects were gone, too. Even her daughter’s condition, though understandably disquieting, didn’t make her spin back into the depression and anxiety she’d so often experienced at every minor worry in the past. She was nearly the same woman Alice had known from a child; more cautious and less energetic perhaps, but stable and happy. After Alice got back to her bedroom at home after the first visit, she sat down on her bed and cried for what seemed like hours. Overwhelmed with what had happened to her, with the pain which hasn’t yet gone completely away, with the difficult recovery ahead of her; knowing that her planet was in danger and there was nothing she could do now to help defend it; and her mother doing so well she could very well soon be ready to go home, live her life to the fullest again. Something was changing, Alice could feel it; her life was at a pivotal moment. And now she realized what kind of decision she was facing. Maybe the injury was a blessing in disguise. Maybe it would make the choice simpler, the consequences easier to bear. She knew what she had to do.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alice was trying to zip her bag one-handedly; it was not going so well. In the five weeks that elapsed since the Prometheus was destroyed, she had to learn how to do a lot of things without using her left hand. The cast was removed just yesterday, but she had the arm secured tightly with a sling. A knock on the door interrupted her silent struggle with the zipper.

“Come in!” Alice half-turned to see who it was. She was surprised to see Colonel Carter; she didn’t realize the senior officer even knew where she lived at the base.

“Hello, Lieutenant!” The lieutenant colonel greeted her, closing the door and stepping inside the apartment. It was bare; Alice never had much stuff and everything fitted into two suitcases and a go-bag.

“Colonel, I didn’t expect to see you.” Alice smiled. It was nice of her to come.

“Yeah, I thought I’d check up on you before you go. Do you need help with that?” The older officer pointed at the half-zipped bag.

Alice shook her head. “I’ll get it, ma’am. I need to practice. It will be at least six more weeks before I’m allowed to begin physical therapy.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Please, sit down.” Alice gestured to the sofa. “I’m afraid I don’t even have coffee to offer...”

Carter waved her hand. “No need.” She sat down on the sofa and Alice put the bag down on the ground and dropped onto an armchair opposite her.

“So,” the older officer began with a rueful smile. “I presume there isn’t anything I can say to change your mind about this?”

Alice shook her head. “I’m afraid it’s a done deal, ma’am. Besides, there isn’t much I could do for the next few months if I stayed.”

“Still, we could use your brain.”

“Well, ma’am, in a way you will be. I’m planning to do research into artificial intelligence systems, with the future use on board of our space vessels in mind.” Alice shrugged, which was a curious experience, because she was able to do it only with her right shoulder. Nevertheless, it sent a ripple of dull ache through her left one. “Of course my eventual dissertation will need to exclude any classified data, but there is no rule that says I can’t draw on the knowledge we’ve brought through the Gate during the research phase, as long as I take proper precautions to avoid any leaks.”

Carter nodded thoughtfully. “That sounds interesting.” She paused for a moment. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

Alice sighed. Sure wasn’t the word. “I feel like it’s what I’m supposed to do.” The colonel’s pale blue eyes were boring into her searchingly, so she continued haltingly: “Even before what happened on Tegalus I began feeling a bit... redundant, if you know what I mean? We were
constantly on practice mode, nothing was ever happening that would require the F-302s engagement, and even as an engineer, it felt like my particular skillset wasn’t being put to use. Don’t get me wrong,” she rushed to assure. “I was glad to be of service in any capacity… but the most useful I felt was when I was your research assistant during the deep space reconnaissance mission we went on before this Ori hell has broken loose.”

The lieutenant colonel nodded again. “I understand.”

“I’m actually looking forward to having a chance to do some of my own research,” Alice continued in a lighter tone. “Although I have to admit I still can’t believe they’ve let me do this.”

“How so?”

“Well, the Air Force has spent an awful lot on training me to pilot an F-16 first, then an F-302, and now they are willingly putting that on hold for me for four and a half years so that I can get a degree? I didn’t think it would fly. Especially that it’s the middle of the academic year.”

“Well, Lieutenant, I think you’ll find that the Air Force can be very flexible if it’s in its best interest.”

“Yeah, but what’s the reward for the Air Force here?” Alice shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Carter chuckled. “You still undervalue yourself, Lieutenant. The Air Force might not really care about your getting the degree, but I assure you everyone is really interested in what kind of research you might come up with at the AFIT. Even if you can’t work on Gate-related technology directly, we’re quite sure it’s going to be something brilliant.”

Alice huffed. “No pressure, then.” They both laughed. “So that’s why they okayed it?” Alice had wondered about it ever since she was informed that her request to be reassigned to Air Force Institute of Technology to do research and ultimately get a PhD was granted. “They actually think I might contribute in a meaningful way?”

“Of course.” The older officer looked surprised. “That, and we take care of our own. It was something you obviously wanted really bad. I assume it had more to do with your mother’s conditional release, though.”

Alice looked away for a moment. “My mom is better now, but the doctors who led her case felt it would be prudent to release her into a relative’s care.” She didn’t add that her mom’s brother was reluctant to help, too busy laying the groundwork for his congressional campaign in the fall. And Jake spent most of his time at the SGC, only coming back to his apartment for weekends, so he wasn’t very well disposed to take care of a sick person. “So she’s coming with me to Ohio. I hope that by the time I’m done with my degree, she’ll be completely self-sufficient and ready to go back home in L.A.”

“I’m sure she will,” Carter said reassuringly.

“Anyway it was like serendipity.” Alice smiled, amused by the thought. “You know, me getting hurt and needing a long recovery. Mom’s feeling better and being released from inpatient care. It kinda all fell into places.”

“Yeah, sometimes things just do.” Carter stood up. “I have to go. I’m glad I had a chance to talk to you, Lieutenant. Study hard and think up something useful, shall you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alice stood too and walked the senior officer to the door. “Thank you for coming over. Good luck in the fight with the Ori.”
Carter nodded solemnly. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Alice closed the door behind her and took a deep breath. Then she turned around and went back for her bag, still only half-zipped. She finally managed to finish that, and looked around on the apartment without regret. Her day-to-day was going to change much now; she would be living in Ohio, at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, where the Air Force Institute of Technology was located. Her mother would be living with her again, readjusting to life on the outside, while Alice would be studying and doing research. Her shoulder would heal; she didn’t yet know if it would ever get back to the way it was before the injury, but she was now ready to accept whatever lay before her. What would she do after she got her degree? She didn’t know. Would she be allowed to go back to flying space-fighters? Or any fighters at all? There was no way of knowing. But she realized now there was also no point in worrying about it just yet; she had four years ahead of her before that decision would have to be taken; and it wouldn’t be hers, anyway. All she could do now was to enjoy what was coming, and try to make the most of it.

Alice took the midnight blue bag into her right hand and stepped through the door. Jake was waiting for her downstairs; he would drive her back to L.A. where they would pick up their mother and all her things and then drive all the way to Ohio. The new life was beginning now.

Chapter End Notes

Hello.

Thank you for reading. This is the end of "Midnight Blue". But Alice's story is not finished yet. The Part II of the story is already in the works, and it will be published on AO3 soon enough.

Thank you for your comments and kudos. They mean the world to me. They are what keeps me going. Thank you.

I hope you enjoyed this story... and I hope you will continue enjoying it with "Azure", which is the tile for the Part II :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!