

Eternity

First book in a series of
science fiction/romance short stories

by

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Captain Kimberly Colleen Terry, KC to her friends, a six year veteran of the Rowdizian Earth-Alliance Wars, cursed the dim yellow glow from the persistent caution light. Resetting the Master Caution did nothing to extinguish the indicator. She tried, but she still didn't believe the low level indication of the ship's Weapons Energy Stores. How long had her squadron, well what was left of it, been in battle, 25 minutes? Something was terribly wrong. She had engaged four, and destroyed three enemy fighters. Add that to the two strafing runs on separate battle cruisers, and she shouldn't have depleted her ship's stores so fast. A quick look over her right shoulder confirmed her wingman was still in position. Terry pressed the transmitter button with her thumb, "Hey, Jeff. Still no visual on any leak?" The fleet and the battle grew smaller in her rearview mirror.

Lieutenant Jefferson Andre Norton, Terry's Wingman for the last year answered, "Negative Captain. No leak detected, and I still have... aahhh... 65% Weapons Energy Stores. I guess you're just a little trigger happy." Jeff strained again to get a better look at lead's fighter exterior, even though his position was less than a meter from Terry's Cobra.

Terry shook her head and barked, "Damn... whatever. Doing no good out here. Besides... I still have missiles. The war's behind us about 5 clicks and the Rowdizians look hell-bent to kill us all... Give me some room... we're coming about... Check Zero thrust, 160 degree positive pitch, then kick it with a 150% burn..."

"Roger." Jeff acknowledged.

Terry continued, "On my mark... 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Mark..."

The pair of Cobra close quarter attack fighters off the Galaxy Class Heavy Cruiser, *Nova Wind*, pitched nose up in unison and pivoted about their central axis. One hundred and sixty degrees into the maneuver both craft fired their main engines until they reached 150% thrust. Terry and Jeff strained at the g-force pinning them to their seats. With the power of the 150% burn arresting their away speed and then accelerating the crafts toward the desperate battle, their lives would soon be again at risk.

Terry thought, "We'll need a butt load of luck to win the day. We're evenly matched in technology, but the Rowdizian forces outnumber us 3 to 1." She ordered, "Jeff,.. set maneuvering thrust in... 3, 2, 1, Mark.... You take the lead Buckwheat. Captain Trigger Happy will cover your ass for a change."

Jeff's excitement of having the responsibility of lead was openly displayed as his voice pitched higher and louder with each spoken word, "Aye, Captain... Let's kick some Rowdick ass!"

The pair quickly closed the distance to rejoin the battle. Enroute, a blinding white flash obscured the distance. Lt. Norton yelled, "Can't see. What the hell was that?"

Terry shot back, "Shit Jeff, I can hardly see, but on my radar there's a debris field where the Rowdizian battle cruiser *Urrpvic* was positioned." She explained.

Lt. Norton whistled, "Damn, Captain. That's one of their capital ships. Over 8000 crew and 250+ fighters. With her gone that gives the Alliance the upper hand."

Terry observed, "I've got multiple bogies, and looks like they're running. Check three at 2 o'clock, P negative 25, hot damn."

Lt. Norton whooped and yelled, “Weeee Haaaaa, Military Power on my mark,” in each cockpit, hands danced on selected switches, “We got your ass now... 3, 2, 1, MARK.”

Both fighters, with engines increasing to military power, banked right and pitched 25 degrees nose down, overtaking the three enemy fighters running for the safety of their mother ship. Jeff’s first shots destroyed his intended target, the lead craft. The other two fighters split and the starboard ship was tagged by one of the Captain’s Mark 23 smart missiles. As Jeff continued a hard left turn to reengage the third target, Captain Terry, positioned off Norton’s starboard, was able to maintain a perfect formation as if both fighters were one. She, acting as wing, monitored the radar and especially watched the space to their flanks and rear for any threat.

As Jeff became fixated on the target, Terry became concerned, “Watch out Lieutenant, we’re getting too close. Suggest Maneuvering Thrust on my mar....”

Lt. Norton, too focused on the escaping fighter, fired his pulse cannon the very second his helmet toned a target lock. The juking enemy craft darting starboard exploded from a direct hit. Thousands of fragments obscured the path of both Terry and Norton. Neither could help but fly through the debris with Captain Terry penetrating the greater concentration.

The body of the dead Rowdizian pilot splashed on her windscreen. Her ship violently shook from the multiple impacts of debris and Terry yelled to no one, “OH, CRAP,” after several red warning lights and yellow caution lights joined the lonesome persistent “ENERGY STORES” on the annunciator panel. An irritating, wailing, warble sound pierced her skull. This time she didn’t playfully sing, “YOU’RE... FUCKED.... YOU’RE... FUCKED.... YOU’RE... FUCKED.... YOU’RE... FUCKED....” like she would during the systems warm up and self test of preflight. Terry’s ship was stricken. She methodically surveyed her situation. As luck would have it, things could be worse, and they were. The automatic synthetic foam fill had fired from the sudden loss in cockpit pressure. She reasoned a portion of the destroyed fighter must have penetrated the sealed life support chamber of her single seat Cobra gunship. But that wasn’t the worst thing that had happened.... Terry looked to her left and noticed the port elevon and thruster cluster missing. But... she figured things could be even worse, and they were.... Whatever punctured the cockpit seal had ripped a four inch gash in her survival suit below her left bicep and just above the crook of her elbow. Now, she was screwed. On the positive side, cabin pressure was back up, so the synthetic patch was holding, but for how long? The bigger the hole, the less permanent the seal. At the first sign of systems failures, Terry had shut down all unnecessary power, but her ship was spinning counter-clockwise on the Y axis at about 100 RPM and the spin had to stop. Noting Thruster Fuel was at 19%, she thought, “How much would it take to arrest the spin while wasting gas through the missing port array?” Her helmet hissed....

“Hey captain, you alright?” Lt. Norton called, worried about her prolonged quiet and the ship’s extensive damage. When his call went unanswered he became more serious, “Avenger Zero Six, this is Avenger One Nine....”

Terry responded as she sat transfixed, watching drops of her blood exit the tear in her suit in the weightless environment. The drops floated up, then slowly accelerate to

splat on the cockpit walls and instrument panel. Terry answered, "One niner, this is zero six, I have to stop this spin before I can really assess my situation, standby." Terry transferred what little remained of the Energy Stores to the Thruster Fuel. The fuel gauge now read 22% and that would have to do. She fired the thrusters and the spin quickly slowed, but the thruster gasses exhausted first and the ship still remained spinning at about 8 RPM. She looked at the gauge and cursed to herself.... SHIT.... ZERO....

Terry now had a grand view of the closing scenes of the current battle. The Rowdizian fighters were recovering to their carrier ships as the enemy fleet maneuvered and accelerated to retreat. Allied fighters and quick, maneuverable, light cruisers and destroyers gave chase, hoping to take out a few more craft. The fight was now very much one sided. Terry's ship drifted toward the fleet, but she had no control. Her helmet hissed again....

"Captain, from what I can see, your Cobra's toast. Not sure if there's any salvage potential, plus you have two un-stowed Mark 81 Vipers. Not sure salvage can safely capture your ship and return it to hangar. Your rotation barely exceeds the safety envelope." Lt. Norton had positioned his craft to within a few feet of her spinning wreck.

Terry's reply was unenthusiastic, "AAhhh, roger, Jeff... . Might want to stay back a bit. Besides the warnings on the un-stowed missiles, I have an over-temp warning on the ship's battery, port engine, and life support failure. I need to figure..."

Lt. Norton interrupted, "Damn it, KC just punch out. I'll call rescue and we can be eatin' dinner and having a hot shower within the hour."

Terry measured her predicament and said, "I prayed this morning and after meditation just knew this wasn't my time to die. I..."

"Hell Captain, get out! Rescue will be here in 30 seconds. Noooo prob...."

A defeated voice cut in and answered, "Jeff... my suit's torn."

Lt. Norton's heart sank. After a short pause he keyed his mike, "Well Captain, you do offer somewhat of a challenge." he released the transmit button and pounded the instrument panel.

Terry continued, "Jeff, I thought it through. I don't have enough life support to make the hangar deck, even if you could negate most of the other problems. My Life Pack is damaged and what's left of this ship has more leaks than a colander. Besides, I still can't land with two hot missiles..." She switched her intercom to the fleet channel and broadcast, "All ships, this is Captain Terry, a.k.a. Avenger zero six. Systems over-load imminent, stand clear."

The rescue and salvage ships coming to her aid did an immediate about face upon hearing her news. She saw the ships running except there was Jeff, a few feet away, holding formation.

Jeff was at a loss of what to do, "KC, I..."

Terry switched back to the unit channel, "Jeff, back off, I'm sequencing the Auto Destruct system.... Please."

"Hold on.... Just like you, I had no premonition of death during prayers earlier."

Terry cut in, "You don't pray."

"Good time to learn. Last night's briefing was a tad bit melancholy, more so than most, so I thought... I've survived this long, someone or something has my back."

Terry chuckled and keyed her transmitter, "That would be me."

"Look, just stop whatever you're doing... I got an idea."

"What the hell... speak.... Oh, and by the way, the battery and engines just went critical."

"Okay, We'll use the spin."

With each revolution, Terry could see Jeff backing off.

Jeff transmitted his plan, "Duct tape the hole in your suit; might buy ya some time. Jettison your engine packs first and then the battery. Then use your survival radio to communicate."

"Wasn't going to make a difference," thought Terry, "in the end there were those two damn missiles." She ejected the systems as Jeff instructed and watched as the engines and battery slowly drifted away. All ship's power was down. Even the Master Caution system. She chuckled, "Well that's one way to ignore the lights." She sighed, switched on the survival radio and transmitted, "I did what you asked, now what?"

Jeff measured her spin, "Aaahhhh... You have to ask. Fire those nasty little Vipers into deep space."

"Can't... system fail. Probably the same reason I couldn't stow them. Besides, genius are you having a blonde moment? I have no power.... That little explosion to your nine o'clock was my jettisoned battery."

Jeff cursed himself for not thinking. "Okay then, how's the suit?" He willed some good news.

"Your trick worked somewhat. It re-inflated a tad and I think you might have bought me a few more minutes." Terry saw nothing but wasted time and energy saying, "Come on, Jeff... drag-up and go home."

Jeff became terse, "Would ya give me a second, a plan's coming through."

With her life support failing she offered, "It's getting cold, very cold. Just..."

Jeff maneuvered his ship to be somewhat perpendicular to her spinning craft thinking, "I don't need that radome." He waited until their ships were at right angles to each other, then thrust forward and lightly bumped her port side just forward of the cockpit. The selected location containing the reinforced oxygen tank kept his pointed nose from penetrating too deeply into her fuselage. As Jeff backed off immediately and smiled seeing her spin had almost completely stopped.

The fleet frequency boomed with, "Lt. Norton to Salvage 21. Spin has stopped. Come grab Captain Terry's ship and return it to the hangar deck of the *Nova Wind*."

A sad voice replied, "Sorry sir, protocol. Can't with the two hot missiles"

Jeff thought, "Screw this!" He repositioned his fighter behind his leader's stricken craft. Noting the two gaping holes where the engine packs had been attached, he nosed his fighter into one of the voids. Scraping and screeching filled the interiors of both ships as they joined. "You okay, KC?"

"We still can't land, I have no skids to deploy."

Jeff joked, "No worries, If we make it, you get to scrub my back tonight, deal?"

"Jeff, you pull this off, I'll scrub your whole body."

"Aye Captain, then it's a must do."

Both joined crafts, now as one, slowly approached the *Nova Wind* flight deck.

Controllers ordered them to stay clear, but Jeff ignored the warnings. This action was famously characteristic of Jefferson Norton and one reason he was still a lieutenant. He reported the Captain injured. At 200 meters from the hangar, Jeff rolled both ships to land upside down. The warnings changed to words of nervous encouragement when hangar control realized the crazy plan. The conjoined fighters gently touched down and skidded only a few feet before stopping. Space suited ground crews moved in the vacuum of space and carefully attached safety pins in the missiles to make them safe. An overhead gantry lowered lines to lift the damaged ships so their crew could escape. The immediate area was made secure and sealed so an atmosphere could be obtained.

Captain Terry released her harness and tumbled to the reduced gravity flight deck. She struggled to regain her breath. Lt. Norton arrived in time to help her slide from under the suspended fighters. The PA boomed, "Lieutenant Norton report to operations, Captain Terry to sickbay." The message repeated as Jeff helped Captain Terry to her feet.

Jeff steadied Terry by her shoulders and asked, "I wonder how much trouble I'm in this time? I'll see ya in the mess."

As Jeff stepped to Ops, Terry called, "Jeff, I'll wait, and thanks!" She waved away a pair of litter bearers and took a few minutes to look over the extent of damage to her ship. Her arm was starting to throb. She watched the repair crews pour over both fighters and listened to the ground crew's main debate of how to get the fighters apart without causing more damage. Captain Terry took hundreds of pictures when she overheard one mechanic say, "She's not worth the trouble."

Incredulously, Captain Terry demanded, "What are you talking about?"

Seeing he was misunderstood the Chief of the Deck begged, "No Sir. I mean, the ship is too damaged to repair. Salvage some parts, yes, but look here," he motioned her to the left wing, "not only is the port tip and elevon missing but a good portion of the main spar is gone. And the spar's one piece tip to tip. That's the first thing laid, then they build the ship around it."

Terry laughed, "Well hell, Chief, put your hand in the hole by the spar to give me some scale for a picture."

The Chief did as instructed, then asked, "Shit! Captain Terry, I have a better one. Ya seen this yet?"

The warbling wail of the Master Caution screamed for a few seconds before a tech, reinstalling a battery, located and pulled the circuit's electrical breaker. The missiles had been removed and the landing gear was being extended as the ship was righted.

The Chief continued, "Look here!" He splayed his fingers to give dimension to the damage, and slowly swept his open hand through a massive gash in the port ventral fuselage. "Whatever it was, penetrated the cabin just under the forward left console. Hell Captain, if you don't own stock in EmergiSeal, you should. That, or do a product endorsement. Shit's only good for up to golf ball size damage. That hole of yours is bigger than a softball." The ground crew erupted in laughter. Terry rolled her eyes and the Chief, realizing his misinterpreted comment, turned bright red.

"I understand Chief." Terry slapped his shoulder, "Thanks." Seeing some more of her blood had escaped the duct tape patch, she felt a little light headed and decided it was time to make for the infirmary.

The passageways were filled with crew running materials and bodies to their point of need. The *Nova Wind*, she would learn, was heavily damaged and had over 1500 casualties out of her present crew of 6300. Captain Terry stepped gingerly. The decks were awash with a mixture of leaking lubricants and blood throughout the spaces. She chose 'right' to go to the Sick Bay near the flight deck, because she would also learn the main infirmary was choked with hundreds of wounded and suffering. The hangar decks were heavily reinforced, designed to protect the ground crews and fighters from attack. The extra reinforcement also protected the main part of the cruiser from damage should an accident or hit in the hangar set off the munitions and volatile fuels. 'Aircrew Sick Bay' was small and generally treated minor ailments because wounded flight crews usually didn't make it back for treatment. Entering sick bay, Terry was happily greeted by a flight nurse in an OD flight suit.

"Good afternoon Captain. What can we do for you today?" The nurse passed a scanner over Terry's right neck retrieving vitals, labs, and Terry's medical history.

"Got this scratch out there this morning." Terry tugged at the tape and blood gushed from the hole and ran down her sleeve. A pool of the crimson tissue splattered on the floor and their legs. Seeing what she had caused Terry said, "Sorry."

Noting the amount of blood, the nurse quickly guided the wounded captain to a stretcher. "No need to be sorry, Captain. That's more than a little blood." The nurse called for help and an orderly arrived as she was cutting off the survival suit's sleeve. "Run and get Doctor Carter!" she instructed the acne faced youth. "Tell him, possible nicked brachial artery." The nurse slapped an old sphygmomanometer above the wound and pumped. As the cuff inflated, the flow decreased to a drip. She then started an IV in her patient's right hand, cut off the rest of the survival suit, and waited for the doctor. "Well that explains the rapid heartbeat and the low blood pressure." She offered to herself.

"Is everything okay?" asked Terry, she was beginning to feel lightheaded.

The nurse looked into Terry's beautiful green eyes and said, "I'm surprised you made it off the hangar deck."

Captain Terry was surprised by the answer, "Please call me KC. What do you think?"

"Only if you call me Tracy.... I think whatever tore your suit entered your arm just above the elbow and damaged your brachial artery. Your little patch kept you from bleeding out. Keep your arm still. Let it hang dependent. There you go, just let it hang by your side.... Whatever is in there is continuing to cause damage whenever you bend your left arm."

The flight surgeon entered and looked at the two women. "Which one is the patient?" He noted both women were in flight suits and both had a fair amount of blood on their hands, arms, and legs. At the same time, he watched both women point to KC, identifying her as the patient.

Tracy explained her theory to the doctor, and added the fact that soon after the injury the patient reported there was very little bleeding and she had not applied a bandage. KC, moving the arm, must have driven the object deeper into the tissues and probably damaged the artery later.

"Yeah, I saw the blood trail.... I'm Doctor Carter.... Like the tourniquet. How

long's it been on?"

Tracy answered, "About 8 minutes."

Dr. Carter retrieved a pair of gloves and said, "Fine.... Let's start a unit of whole blood, but first I want to take a look at this little scratch."

Tracy maneuvered to help remove the bandages. Dr. Carter carefully looked under the dressing, and studied the wound. Blood continued to ooze from a 1 inch cut to the inner aspect of her bicep near the elbow.

Taking a deep breath, he instructed, "Terry, release a little of that restriction from the blood pressure cuff... little more..." he listened to the hiss of air escaping from the valve. Suddenly, he commanded, "Stop, stop, stop." Blood spurted from the cut, and just as quickly stopped. The spray caught Dr. Carter on the chest. He looked to the two women while he thought through the challenge of the procedure, and after several seconds, said, "Shit, I can do this. We need to prep a clean room in sick bay and call in a scrub nurse from the backup crew. Tracy, can you help?"

Tracy said, "Sure, but what about the operating theaters?"

Dr. Carter answered, "Be tomorrow before she's seen. There're casualties all over the place. Captain Terry, this isn't an emergency that will get you to the head of the line. You may have to wait 24 hours to have that taken out."

KC suspected there was another unspoken option, "But... what other choice do I have?"

Dr Carter scratched the side of his nose and said, "This is really a simple, straightforward surgery. I can inject anesthesia into your armpit and do a regional block; you'll be awake. We'll keep the blood flow restricted, find the damage, and throw in a little stitch or two. After that, we sew up the muscle and work our way out. Probably leave a small tube in for a few days to help drain any leakage. You'll be as good as new and back to flight status in a few weeks."

Wide eyed KC asked, "You're kidding, it's that bad?"

Dr. Carter patted her on the shoulder and reassured her, "I would call the injury serious. You could bleed out, or if we keep the pressure up to reduce the bleeding, we could kill the lower arm."

KC had an apprehensive look, "I would call that very serious, and I really don't want to be awake while you're working on my arm."

Dr. Carter worked to reassure his reluctant patient, "Look Captain, with the drape and the anesthesia, you won't feel or see a thing... Aaahhh... You'll hear us talking, and if you want, you can use your personal music player for a distraction. We should have no problems. All you have to do is relax. Want something to relax?"

KC paused for a few seconds to weigh her options. After a large sigh she said, "Sure.... What the hell. Let's do it."

Dr. Carter announced, "Great! Tracy, give our good Captain here two milligrams of Ativan IV, and prep the room."

The surgical theater for outpatient services became a flurry of activity to prepare for KC and her surgical team's use. Tracy gathered the instrument packs and other supplies, and another nurse from the backup staff assisted. As planned, the procedure went smoothly; without any complication. Recovery was uneventful. A two inch sliver of

decking from under the forward left pedestal was retrieved from her upper arm. Aside from that, good old Lortab eased the pain.

Later that night, Jeff knocked on the wall outside KC's hospital berth.

A tired KC beckoned, "Enter."

"Hi Captain, how ya doin?" Jeff smiled a toothy grin. He could see her well proportioned figure under the thin sheet and her injured arm was protected against the far wall. Her flaming red, shoulder length hair was askew on the pillow. He also confirmed, through the thin sheet, she was a true redhead.

Hearing Jeff's voice, KC brightened, "I found out what happened to my Energy Stores. Chief said there was a malfunctioning sending unit that read full when the fighter was only 60% filled. I told him to use it as a teaching aid because any Cobra purges all of its plasma before recovery and should always require a specific amount of plasma to refill the tanks. This wasn't a little mistake."

"Damn... KC!" Jeff tensed, ran his fingers through his hair, then said, "Thousands of lives could have been effected by such an oversight."

Jeff seemed distracted. Puzzled at his display, KC asked, "You seem to have gotten away with something, what's up?" She pulled the privacy curtain further back to give herself a better view of his striking features.

"The Colonel called me on the carpet to chew me out for that stunt I pulled bringing you in. About half way through the ass chewing, he started laughing. Couldn't blame me for what I did and said he'd put me in for a Distinguished Flying Cross...." Jeff shrugged his shoulders, "Go figure." Jeff then grabbed a chair, magically spun it around with one hand, and planted himself in the seat, inches from her berth.

KC countered with, "I, for one, am glad you did what you did," her right hand reached across the distance and took Jeff's hand, giving him a warm squeeze, "I prayed for help, I prayed for your steady hand, and I prayed those damn missiles wouldn't fire."

Jeff reared back, "That's an awful lot of praying, KC. Do you believe we were guided by my skills, or helped by divine providence?" Jeff, feeling a closeness he had never experienced, returned the shared tenderness.

KC closed her eyes, thinking of the last 24 hours. A tear formed and ran down her face, before she confided, "Jeff, I told you earlier today, this wasn't my day to die. I... we've had some really close calls. Hell, both of us have been amazed we lived through some missions. Through my studies and beliefs, I've embraced the Ancient Eastern philosophies. I can't seem to get behind the traditional Christian belief of a Heaven and Hell... no.... Too many religions, too many different philosophies. I ask myself, can they all be right?" KC's fingers lightly traced the back of Jeff's hand and inner thigh.

Noticing and enjoying KC's tender advances, Jeff asked, "Okay, today wasn't your day to die. We both agreed a long time ago that our presence on this plane of existence would be ended at any time. Hate to say it, but I'm about three years beyond a pilot's life expectancy and your about five years tempting fate. So, you think you've used up your allowance?"

KC carefully rolled to her right side to better talk with her wingman. The sheet slipped, revealing her firm, ample breasts. Her nipples were taugth with desire. "Are we

alone?” She smiled and waggled her eyebrows upon seeing his reaction.

Jeff, was confused, “Yes, ma’am, the bay is empty.” Jeff soaked in the chance to witness her lovely, naked features.

“Tell me of your family’s spiritual beliefs.” She had trouble covering herself with her stiff left arm and her right arm supported her position. “Do you mind helping cover me before someone comes in and gets the wrong idea?” Her smile was an invitation.

Jeff stammered his answer, “Yes, I mean, No. It’s just, I agree we need to cover you before someone comes in and sees the two of us.” Avoiding the bandage, Jeff gently drew the sheet and accidentally rubbed her breast, bare shoulder, and hair. “I’m sorry, I’m a klutz. Excuse me, maybe I should go.” He started to leave.

“Wait, you didn’t answer my question.” She also noticed his growing interest.

He stammered over the one syllable word. “What?”

“Your family’s spiritual beliefs.”

Jeff offered he was raised in a morally responsible home, but his family wasn’t big on organized religion. There was belief in a supreme being; the family celebrated Christmas and Easter, but that was about it. No formal church. He couldn’t remember even one day anyone in the family attended church. But his family was spiritual in the sense that they didn’t tempt fate and only treated others as they wished to be treated.

KC was really interested, “I was brought up with a belief in the individual spirit, and how that spirit never dies. We, our spirits, just use these bodies as a host for the time we spend in this conscious state, learning and expanding our knowledge... . Strange, Huh?”

“Not really. So, you believe in reincarnation? There is support of that belief in some Eastern philosophies.” Jeff asked leaning back in the chair.

“I guess... no, I would have to say every day my faith grows and more simply, I do.... You see, let me repeat.... I was taught the spirit lives on forever and only temporarily resides in a host’s body. When one dies the spirit is released. That spirit, over time, gains the knowledge of the universe. Can’t use the collective knowledge when in the body of a host, but when we enter the spiritual plane we... share... with others... are one... something like that. Bet you’d never guess I was odd girl out with my friends.”

“I would never think you odd.... Your family’s beliefs would then support *deja vu*... . Have you ever had a solid experience like that?” Asked Jeff. Now some of the deep talks they’d shared over the months since he was assigned as her second, explained yet added to her mystery and beauty.

“You won’t laugh?” she softly pleaded.

“Never, no ma’am. Thought would never cross my mind. Unless you get really far out there.” He laughed and she joined him.

“Serious though,” she adjusted again and the sheet fell, but this time her right arm was able to readjust the cover, “I’ve had visions of flying off the deck of the *Yorktown* to engage enemy aircraft.” She closed her eyes to relive the vision.

“Well, hell yes. We were both stationed on the heavy cruiser *Yorktown* for a short...”

“I was in a piston powered aircraft and taking off over water.” KC looked to Jeff with a knowing look and said, “It was so real, I felt I was there. Jeff... I could smell the

oil and aviation gas of the radial engine... I felt the rush of the carrier deck falling away as I became airborne. I engaged other piston powered aircraft... meatballs... Japanese.... It was all so real, in fact, yes... I truly believe I was there.”

“Well, we all know Earth history and the naval battles of World War Two.”

KC continued, “Jeff, I was rocked by the explosion aboard the *Columbia* and felt the searing heat, and my skin charred as the orbiter burnt up on reentry.” She shivered, remembering the event.

Jeff looked into her eyes in the dim light of the bay. “You mean the accidental fuel leak and blast on the destroyer *Clumbanus*? I too, had my whole life flash before my eyes. I thought we were dead.”

“Jeff, that was the trigger, but I distinctly remember dying a horrible death that morning. I can swear I was there, in the shuttle *Columbia* when it was lost.”

Jeff stared at her covered breasts then quickly flushed with embarrassment, closed his eyes and said, “So you always come back as a pilot.”

“No... no.... But it’s funny. One evening I was falling asleep when the ships PA system announced the *Lexington* was joining our battle group, and my mind flashed to the township in the old Americas. I was near a bridge, shooting a rifle, or musket at soldiers in red uniforms.”

Jeff sighed, “KC, the more we fight, the more I find myself thinking our luck is running out. That’s why I’ve taken up the ritual, ‘a little prayer won’t hurt.’ Statistically, each time we launch, is one launch closer to our, or at least my, death. Just a matter of time.” Jeff shook then hung his head.

KC again took Jeff’s hand, but this time brought his fingers to her lips. Her breathing became more labored as she took the end of his index finger into her mouth and sensuously sucked, then licked, the tips.

Jeff, breathless, choked a confused question, “KC?”

“Jeff, our play in the gym and mess hall borders on the “get a room.” Its been over a year since we started flying together. That’s a relationship of trust a couple can only hope to achieve. We spend more time together than any husband and wife.... I’ve grown to love you. I agree with your concerns and have the same thoughts as you. We’re not long for this world. This isn’t the time or place, but in a few days I want you in my quarters. I’ve been attracted to you for months. Just afraid to say anything.”

“KC, I’m tired, you’re tired and its been a stressful day. I...” He gave up.

They wanted each other. There wasn’t anymore veiled invitations or coy attempts at secrecy. Jeff moved and as best he could, carefully took KC in a halting embrace and kissed her deeply. He explored her features. The discomfort of her left arm was masked by her want of him. KC lightly slid her fingers down his back and finally found Jeff’s rigid shaft and stroked its length. The more Jeff explored the more KC became aroused to his touch. They groped to fulfill the lust and love they held for the other. Jeff fingered her hot wet mound and used her sweet juices to tease KC’s engorged clitoris. Their passion was abruptly interrupted by the sound of the dogged hatch being opened, and the two lovers recovered to an appropriate pose as Tracy entered the space.

Too brightly Tracy said, “Well, hi you two. Just came to collect some vitals and I’ll be gone. How are you doing KC?”

"I'm fine." KC said, smiling and hiding her frustration.

Jeff quickly gathered his composure and excused himself, "I'm beat, and must be ready for morning briefing in a few hours." Maneuvering to keep his back to Tracy in order to hide his erection, he said, "Goodnight ladies."

Tracy dreamingly said, "Goodnight Lieutenant." As she followed his muscular six foot plus frame squeeze past her in the narrow space.

KC offered an even, "Goodnight Jeff."

As the wheel spun the dogs to secure the hatch, Tracy asked, "Is he seeing anyone? I mean he's one fine hard-body. He looks tasty."

As her eyes grew heavy, KC offered no claim. she said, as she faked falling off to sleep, "He's a great guy, married to aviation. You know..."

KC felt so much better after several days rest. The drain was out and she was working with physical therapy to strengthen her arm. She harbored some disappointment because, without his lead, and because the heavy cruiser, *Karma*, took terrible fighter losses in the last battle, Lieutenant Norton was transferred to the *Karma* for temporary duty. KC had to admit, she was developing some very strong feelings for Jeff, and that was a problem. He, or she, would be over protective and that could lead to mistakes in battle. On the surface, KC felt she could separate her feelings from her duty, but deep down inside, she knew better. Soon, if he ever returned to the *Nova Wind*, she would have him reassigned to another squadron. What was it they agreed on, that every flight was one step closer to death.

Command reported the Rowdizians must have taken a terrible beating. Their standard operating procedure was to counterattack within days of any battle, no matter the outcome. There had been over a week of down time for each side to measure their losses and prepare for the next engagement. Alliance forces had moved closer to Rowdizian territory in preparation for an attack on the Rowdizian home world. Intelligence had little to offer in the way of information so informed decisions could be made. By the sixth week, and with reinforcements from the Alliance home world, the fleet strength was more than battle ready. No longer needed on the *Karma*, Jeff was reassigned to the *Nova Wind*. Captain Terry was finishing a session of physical therapy when a hand caressed her waist.

"Is there anyway I can help you with your workout?" Jeff hugged KC to his side.

"Careful, you'll get sweat all over your pretty flight suit." KC said, turning in his arms and returning the embrace. "Missed you." she cooed.

Jeff's lips nearly touched hers and he breathed, "You can't imagine how much I felt like a fish out of water every day I was on the *Karma*. The staff were accommodating, but I didn't know anyone. It was the loneliest duty I've ever pulled. No one wanted to form relationships. They were all haunted by doom..." Jeff's hand pulled her tighter and he kissed KC tenderly. "What's more, I couldn't get you or our last interrupted time together out of my mind. God, KC... I adore you."

KC ran her fingers up his sides and across his chest, finally taking Jeff's face in her hands. Returning the kiss she suggested, "How about a shower? My quarters, now."

"Haven't had a better offer in weeks." Jeff and KC supported and carried their

shared love and passion down the passageways to their previously interrupted rendezvous. The occasional tear of fabric signaled their eagerness to satisfy the needs of the one they had come to trust and love. The shower only heightened their desire for the other's tenderness. The lovers fell into the bed, eager to explore and test the skill and ability of their shared need for intimacy. Excited yet timid hands explored the sensuous areas that aroused their lover. Too much time had elapsed since the first time either one had felt a hunger and attraction for the other. Any touch that gave or delivered pleasure was tested and when the recipient's response indicated a want, the giver of the desire pleased more. For hours they teased, touched, tested, and drove each other to heights of ecstasy never imagined. Their lust was fulfilled many times over until each was totally exhausted and breathless.

The clock signaled 0437 hours. KC and Jeff were again drenched in sweat. KC spoke of her need to share her life with Jeff and of wanting a future filled with hope and children. Soon the conversation returned to cultural philosophies, and Jeff was intrigued, "So tell me again, what happens to a person when they die?"

Letting his softness fall from her teasing hand, she laughed, "Well that's one way to change a subject. Why are you asking now?"

"Just thinking that during my time on the *Karma*, we had a lot of down time and without you, I thought of what you and I talked about these past few months. I actually became more focused on what happens after death. I've been praying more. KC, I really feel it's just a matter of time. I'm not afraid to die... I just wished I had a foundation and a belief in what happens to the soul when one ceases to exist.... So please, your thoughts... what happens to a person when they die?"

KC repositioned in the berth where she was reclined against Jeff's chest. He held her from behind, his arms around her chest. Her head rested against his shoulder and neck. Jeff cupped her breast and tested her engorged nipples. KC enjoyed his stimulation and teased Jeff's inner thigh, coaxing another erection. When relaxed and comfortably positioned she continued, "I believe the body to be a shell to carry and nourish the spirit or soul. When the body ceases to function the soul is released to return to the center of the universe where it can share its experience and knowledge with other spirits awaiting rebirth into the next shell that will offer dimension, feeling, and sensation. I believe the soul, or one's spirit, lives for an eternity and throughout time collects information to fulfill the spirit's thirst for knowledge. Some believe there to be barriers to the release of a soul that will entrap the spirit for a time or eternity."

Jeff's playful hands continued to explore her soft abdomen and firm, tempting breasts, "What do you believe would be so powerful to trap a person's spirit?"

"I was taught, some believe that a person's unremorseful ability to cause harm to another would entrap the perverted spirit and others believe something as simple as the freezing of the shell at the time of death would have the same effect." KC took Jeff's hand and gently kissed each finger. She could feel her juices flowing, wanting another physical encounter with the man she desired. She also knew they both would be distracted if they continued to fly together.

Jeff had protested, but in the end, understood the devotion they felt for the other would interfere with their individual duties and their ability to maintain a cohesive

fighting unit.

KC asked, "How can we continue to have a loving relationship and be so sure that our minute to minute, and at times, life effecting decisions won't be guided by our relationship and, thereby place someone in jeopardy? Jefferson, I don't mean just you and me, I'm talking about others that depend on our ability to make decisions that effect, at times, thousands. We are dependent on the other pilot's uninterrupted concentration."

Jeff felt there was no easy answer, "I could be assigned to another squadron and we wouldn't be so prone to distraction. We'd still be able to meet and share our love with one another between missions." He lightly touched his finger to her thigh and traced a whisper of a line to her breasts and neck. He was leaning to nibble her ear when...

The grating sound of the klaxon sounded General Quarters. The PA announced, "All hands, man your battle stations. Pilots report to your ready fighters. Attack imminent. Rowdizian forces are on an intercept course with our fleet. Repeat, all hands, report to your battle stations and pilots report to their ready fighters."

KC and Jeff were dressed in seconds. Jeff asked, "Where to? I don't have an assignment."

KC agreed, "Me neither. And I don't think I've been returned to flight status. Let's head to operations and see what's going on!" she suggested.

"Agree!" Jeff grabbed KC and they embraced like the touch would have to last for ever. Then just as quickly, they were running through the passageways, dodging sailors, and drinking in the excitement of unknown risk. A dozen times during their dash, the ship was rocked by heavy explosions from enemy missile strikes. The concussions knocked crewmen to the decks. When KC and Jeff reached operations, the division commander relayed the grim news that a passageway had been hit, killing more than two dozen pilots. He quickly ordered all available crewmembers to find and man a serviceable fighter. As Avenger Zero Six and Avenger One Nine raced to the launch bay, they were thrown to the deck several more times as the *Nova Wind* rocked from the continued bombardment from enemy missiles. One time, as Jeff reached to help KC up, she protested and pulled him to his knees.

Over the wail of speakers calling all to action, and the cries of wounded suffering through the terror of expected certain death, KC had received a mental flash of her fighter exploding and pleaded, "Wait!" Her head bowed and hands folded. After several seconds she shouted, "Jefferson, I just have to give time to God and ask for Him to help and protect us... I love you," she kissed him tenderly and shouted, "and today's as good a time to die as any.... GO!"

Arriving in the launch bay, they found four fighters in position, silently awaiting their assigned crews never to come. KC and Jeff jumped into the nearest available Cobras. A launch specialist fired the catapults when each pilot saluted and signaled their ready. When the fighters cleared the launch tubes, the pair were bewildered by the devastation already wrought.

KC ordered, "Jeff take the lead, I'm rusty and haven't logged an hour in weeks."

"Aye, Captain.... Because of the debris, let's have maneuvering thrust and weapons hot on my mark." Again, like a ballet of graceful midgets, their fingers danced in orchestrated steps across panels of precision and waiting death... after several seconds

Jeff signaled, “3, 2, 1, Mark.”

Both craft coasted as thrust was reduced and the Avengers maneuvered to strafe a burning but still deadly Rowdizian Pocket Destroyer. KC reported all systems 97 to 100% operational. The enemy’s defensive guns were devastating but lacked the quick response to adjust for the Avenger’s evasive maneuvers. The combined impact of the pair’s pulse cannons, added to damage from previous attacks, and finally breached a vital section of the Pocket Destroyer’s hull. A cascade of rippling explosions signaled the ship’s death. An 80 degree positive P helped the Avengers escape the millions of pieces of lethal shrapnel released by the final moments of the destroyer’s life. Jeff cried a victory yell and soon found a trio of enemy fighters closing on their position.

Jeff reported, “Looks like they want to play chicken. Steady on the center then you take port and I’ll take starboard when they split. Zero thrust, Yaw axis to track and engage at the pass... 3, 2, 1, Mark!”

Both ships cut their engines to zero thrust and concentrated fire on the center, lead fighter. As expected, when the closing flights passed, the enemy wings split to circle back to attack the two Cobras that had just destroyed their leader. Jeff and KC, however, pivoted around their central axis and after 130 degrees of rotation found their assigned targets arcing about in a large radius turn to cut off and kill the Avengers. KC and Jeff both received tone locks and fired self guided Viper missiles destroying both targets.

Jeff commented, “Here we are in a target rich environment, outnumbered, and look at the radar, oops better turn... KC, return to original heading, then maneuvering power... on my mark, 3, 2, 1, Mark.” The pair re-formed and quickly selected their next victim, and raced to engage.

Allied and enemy fighters swarmed around the capital ships with the Rowdizians concentrating their efforts on the allied mother ships. KC noticed the enemies’ new tactic was ignoring the pesky fighters. She saw on her target display several empty areas where Alliance Galaxy Class ships were once positioned. The battle wouldn’t last much longer. She called Jeff.

“Hey partner, Taking out the fighters is a waste of energy and weapons. If you want a chance of sleeping in a bed later, we need to concentrate on their mother ships.” suggested KC.

“Enough said Captain. You would think about sex at a time like this... Follow me.” Jeff had selected the nearest and largest ship of the enemy battle group.

KC observed, “That’s what I love about you, Jeff. Find the biggest bully in the schoolyard and stomp on his foot.” She sealed her observation with a kiss. Military bearing be damned, an ataraxis enveloped her psyche and she felt her hours were numbered.

As the Avenger group rolled in to target the Rowdizian Battleship *Shiffvic*, three other pairs of Cobra fighters joined in the attack. Their combined efforts concentrated on the main weapons and energy stores of the leviathan. The tactic worked. With a noticeable sudden expansion of hull plating, the *Shiffvic* erupted along her structural bulkheads. Nothing would save the more than 10,500 beings. Yet the battle was far from over and neither side was ready to yield.

KC laughed to herself. Fragmented machines and beings littered the void. Her

mind flashed to long ago visits to her grandparents. Their home was several miles down a graveled country road. Her father would cuss the constant assault of loose stones kicked up by the tires. A body bouncing off her canopy jerked her back to reality.

“Hey Captain, you okay?” Jeff asked.

“I’m fine. Why?” replied KC.

“You were a little loose after that last pass....”

“Just having one of those associations again. ‘Flack so thick, you could walk on it.’” She explained.

“I don’t get it. ... Look, another six Cobras are hanging with us. I’ve assigned chalks one through eight, KC you’re chalk two.”

KC, embarrassed at her lapse, returned a sharp, “Roger.”

A drawn out southern accent interjected, “Lead, chalk three, that was an analogy to the World War Three cliché, referencing heavy anti aircraft fire.”

Another voice corrected, “That’s World War Two... . Energy weapons were the standard for WW III.”

KC again laughed and Jeff couldn’t believe the banter, with such a critical engagement surrounding them. He commanded, “Flight, check that enemy Corvette maneuvering against the *Nova Wind*... . Follow my lead, target center mass, aft of bridge.” He also knew the loose talk was a therapeutic way of reliving the stress of expected death.

The new Avenger flight released a volley of missiles as they closed on the threat. Still not fully repaired from her last battle, the *Nova Wind*, although twice the tonnage of her attacker, could not afford to trade punches with the smaller ship. The two warships exchanged shots in the classic naval broadside battle. The 16 missiles from the Cobras found their mark, and crippled the menace. The Corvette, *Dungruevic*, didn’t ignore the Cobras. Her weapons officers slaved several batteries of pulse cannons toward the Avenger flight while continuing with the ship’s primary attack. Another volley of missiles preceded the Cobra’s rhythmic release of pulsed cannon energy. Chalks five, six and eight were destroyed simultaneously by the corvette’s defensive guns. Seconds later, the blinding flash of chalk three signaled its end. Chalk seven lost a wing, thereby losing control, and flamed into the *Nova Wind*. The fighter losses were regrettable, but their efforts paid off. The *Dungruevic* began an uncontrolled, slow, spinning drift away from Jeff and KC’s home. As the three remaining Cobras of Avenger flight pitched up, KC’s fighter took a cannon hit aft of the cockpit. The only light on her Master Caution Panel not illuminated was “LIFE SUPPORT” and it was dimly blinking a hint of something yet to fail. What remained of her stricken ship slowly tumbled on a collision course with the enemy war ship. At first her mind relaxed and accepted the end.

Jeff saw what was left of KC’s fighter continue toward the enemy ship. His earphones hissed, “Jeff, I’m toast. Think I’ll go crap on this Rowdick trash heap.... Love you.”

“KCeeee.” he wailed.

She didn’t wait for a reply. Not dead yet, her physics class kicked in and yelled, “You still have an option!” The wreckage’s spin pointed her away from her trajectory with each revolution. She just had to time it right, and... she ejected and the seat rocket’s

thrust kicked her away from the cockpit's disintegration when it impacted the corvette. Skimming across the *Dungruevic*'s hull and barely missing a traversing cannon battery, KC was clear of the obstacle in less than a second. Her slow tumble allowed her a birds eye view of the raging duel as she drifted toward the battle's nucleus. Starburst explosions, pulsating expanding energy waves, and maneuvering opponents firing missiles tracing countless webs of spent gasses, colored the vacuum in a surreal painting of mistrust, envy, hate, and greed. The starbursts were the most beautiful. Thousands of bright pinpoints of burning fuels and metals racing outward from a each massive release of energy. Unlike an explosion in a gravity environment where the debris was pulled in the direction of the mass, in space the fragments continued their original course until acted on by some other powerful, invisible force.

KC looked at her watch, then her life support readings. She thought, "Damn, the suit was down 10%. Let's see, two hours... I've wasted 12 minutes daydreaming!" Her slow spin allowed her to witness the massive explosion of the *Dungruevic*. She chuckled, "At least I helped destroy you." Quickly, she plugged her helmet jack into the survival radio and switched it on. No worries, the radio battery would outlast life support by a factor of 20. As she listened, an occasional scream for help from the dying could be heard on the guard frequency. She decided she would not transmit unless a friendly ship was close. The Rowdizians were rumored to slowly torture their prisoners to death, and they monitored all the Alliance channels. KC armed a failsafe trigger to allow the radio to transmit a beacon after two hours. Damn military thought of everything, right down to marking where your body rested. As she drifted she reasoned luck didn't seem to be on her side. The closer she floated toward the action, the more she closed on the enemy's positions. Something better change.... It was so quiet. At times she would hold her breath and listen to the relaxed slow beat of her heart. A check of her watch and life support readings agreed she had about 30 minutes to go. One thing that had yet to challenge her was one of the millions of pieces of debris rocketing in every imaginable direction. Soon after the thought, she saw a hatch on a collision course and lifted her legs in time to avoid the deadly impact. Any second a rocketing micro missile would end her life, so she prayed.

At first, she watched the brilliance of the fight from an outside perspective. Now she was inside the bowels of the beast. In every direction were the results of the struggle. Two sides, both secure in their belief of right. Both determined to destroy the other, having never shared the experience of a peaceful thought since the start of the war. The starbursts were everywhere. The display reminded her of family times and holiday celebrations. In the vastness of the universe, and with the backdrop of the celestial heavens, the display was awe-inspiring. She thought of Jeff and how she would miss his touch. She prayed he was safe. KC shivered from the cold. Another check of life support read 10%, and there was no malfunction. She reasoned environmental control must be failing. Another burst, then another, and another. My God it was beautiful. She cried. It was so cold. The fighting seemed to stop. Stricken vessels burned, and when efforts to save a doomed crew failed, another brilliant explosion painted the heavens. "Strange," she thought, "someone seemed to be launching escape capsules." But not just an occasional one, all ships had a capsule launch, and at times she witnessed thousands of

life rafts launch when a ship was destroyed. Yet, the battle seemed to be over, the fighting had stopped. No retreat. Everything had just... stopped. Most of the fires are out and the combatants have aligned in orderly formation. She asked herself, "Did we lose...? Did we win...?" Still, an occasional life boat would launch.

KC thought, "It's so cold. Where are the stars? It's so dark!" She felt it strange that she was now numb to sensation, yet sensed, "I've been picked up, by a salvage ship?" Her sensations continued to tease, "I'm in a cavernous, brightly lit, foreign hangar bay. I can't move! Oh, my God they're Rowdizians! Hundreds of them! Damn, their long faces, those big, dark, round eyes, pointed nose, and long necks that support their V shaped heads. I'm moving, and that six fingered creature said, "agree it is sad." Jeff? JEFF! HELP ME!... You're crying. Have they hurt you? The Rowdizian officer seems to be giving you support and comfort. You're in your dress uniform? You never did like the stiff "leather neck" feel. You're glad they found me? It's been three days? I'm glad you found me. Yes, pick me up. Come here, let me whisper my love for you. A single flower? It looks like a black rose. Jeff, I love you too. The creature said the black flower is a Rowdizian symbol of tragic loss. You can have the ashes after they are sifted for solid matter? Oh, God no. I'm not! What's this? Fire. It's warm, no hot, and it feels so good, so...."

This is one fantastic dream.... I am again outside the ship and... accelerating? How? They are still launching escape pods. No, those are pinpoints of light. And all the lights are moving in the same direction. Faster. The stars are stretching. Faster. Hundreds, no, now thousands of lights joining with I. We are one, going home to, to the origin. To rest.... To share.... To evolve.... Such calm.... So pure.... So peaceful.... Such knowledge.... Such love.... Such pain....

No, stop. STOP! The pressure, it hurts. STOP. Why? NO, QUIT PUSHING, I am content with the soft noises, warm liquid, and soft light. Stop, STOP. Quit PUSHING. It hurts, I can not move. Where is the warm soothing liquid, it is so cold. Screams.... I can't breathe, I SCREAM. Look... blink... the noise is that being, and what, yes take it. It feels good, tastes creamy, rich, smooth. Suckle? Ummmmmm.

A commanding voice protested, "I know it has been three hundred years since the Great Rowdizian-Earth war. Tens of millions died on both sides. We live in peace, but our only daughter couples with a human. Look, the pup's eyes are large and round, and a deep cobalt blue, not black. And it has a soft, weak chin, not the strong, sharp angle of a male Rowdizian. Then the final twist, just because her mate's distant, great father was a hero of the Great War, our daughter insists we name the newborn male... Jefferson... Rossvatia... Norton...."

"Oh, daddy, quit. The newborn has six...."

In bounced an exhausted, tall, uniformed man, full of grace and dignity. He cooed, "Isn't the baby beautiful?" Then with deep respect, "Greetings Ambassador Rossvatia." Turning, he took his mother-in-law's hand and gently touched it to his lips. "Matron Rossvatia, your beauty is, as always, breathtaking." When he straightened, Jeff said, "Flight was late, problem refueling on Mars. Had to literally run the last kilometer."

The new mother spoke, "Jeff, the newborn's a male."

The proud father beamed, “Look grand-paw, he even has your cute little pointed nose.”

The room erupted in joyful laughter.

Jefferson continued the contented suckling at his mother’s breast. The new, clearer, oddly familiar voice and speech reminded him of another time. A strange flash of blurred memory relived a moment of shared love and trust. Jefferson continued kneading the soft, warm tissue around the nipple and dreamed of mysterious, wonderful, adventurous things.