



“Kindergarteners,” The wing commander complained, “I’m running a damn kindergarten, I could have sworn I was assigned to command a fighter squadron.”

Training Wing Thirteen

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Bradley Gordon turned his craft to the right, flying between the asteroids. It wasn't flying, of course, as there was no air, but the pilots who were trained on aircraft refused to give up the term. He was Amanda Diaz's wingman, provided cover on the right. Wingman was another term that the pilots had refused to abandon, but Amanda didn't mind. Amanda thought about Earth since she was defending it, but she hadn't been visiting in almost a year. The war was keeping her busy.

After all, Earth needed pilots, lots of pilots. Losses were staggering. There was no room in a spacefighter for an escape pod and it really didn't matter anyway. Most pilots dissolved into particulate matter in the resulting explosion when their ships were hit. It reminded Amanda of the stories she had heard about World War One. Pilots going into battle without parachutes, crashing to the ground in a fiery blaze. She could relate to that. Perhaps the only difference was that the enemy didn't attack out of the sun, out here in space, the sun was far too small to hide anything. In this case, they liked to hide behind asteroids, but there was nothing there today.

Bradley skimmed low over the moon. All the towers were belching smoke, the atmospheric generators were in full swing. He enjoyed weaving in between them. It was strictly against protocol, but hey, who cared. The game was how close you could get to the towers. On the fifth one, Bradley almost clipped off a weapons support strut, so he broke it off early. Amanda just watched from overhead. She had no interest in such bravado. Landing was always a bit tricky, but it was better today. The ship only bumped off the ground about four times and then finally slid to an uneasy stop.

When they clambered out, Amanda noted that even with its new atmosphere, it was still stupidly cold. It was like winter, all twelve months a year. At one-tenth gravity, the air was still leaking out into space, but there was now enough of it to breathe, but it was still cold. Amanda found the temperature uncomfortable. Mostly because the military had still not accepted women. All the uniforms were still the same. As a result, Amanda's shirt was at least two sizes too large, in order to accommodate her anatomy. It hung loosely over her frame. On top of that, the military still hadn't gotten their limited brains around the extra parts of the uniform women required. Her breasts tended to heave about in a way that was both humorous and perverse at the same time. Bradley and the rest of the men were relentless in teasing her about this, calling her Princess Leia, after Carrie Fisher's complaint that space princesses don't wear bras. I drove her crazy, but she refused to say anything. She didn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing how much it annoyed her.

Her technician handed her a heavy, fur-lined coat. It was the only luxury she allowed herself. The dry soil crunched under her feet as if they were tiny fragments of broken glass. The sound was oddly loud. The moon was a place of placid silence, with no insects, wind or rain. It had an eerie quality to it, almost frightening. Noises tended to make you jumpy because the only noise you usually heard outside was an alien attack. No one knew why noises made pilots jumpy. It wasn't the ones you heard that got you, it was the ones you didn't.

On top of being cold, it was dryer than a desert. There still wasn't enough air to start a water cycle, so you couldn't stay out long. The air would steal all the moisture from your body. Bradley stayed for a few seconds. The sun was setting, and you could just see an orange haze on the horizon. It was still a sight to see and one that was still quite fresh. As fresh as the air they were breathing. They hurried into the nearby command bunker. Once the sun went down, it would keep everyone inside.

Bradly gave the officer in the briefing room a snappy salute. Amanda followed with a lazy one. "Standing bye to report, sub-colonel," Bradley said with a toothy grin.

"I see you haven't learned to stop being a child," the commander snorted.

"I only did five today, sir," he boasted.

"You should try to be more like Captain Diaz. She knows how to fly." Even though she was in the room, the sub-colonel tended to avoid looking at her. It was a way for him to try to deny she was here. Still, he was paying her a compliment, simply by mentioning her name. I was quite the break from his usual attempts to ignore her presence. "What did you see?" He asked.

"It looks like the enemy has abandoned their forward base," Bradley reported.

"Or moved it," Amanda retorted.

"What makes you say that," the commander demanded.

"We all know they attack us as soon as the sun goes down." The enemy was predictable, and they knew just when to attack ... when it was the most difficult for the defenders to respond. "They knew we'll want to hit them before it gets dark, so it makes sense that they would relocate to make finding them harder."

"Hum," the sub-colonel muttered, "Bradley report to the maintenance section, I want you working on the new upgrades. Diaz, I want you training the new recruits."

The flight captain scowled, "Why me? I don't understand sir."

"Mr. Gordon needs to learn the value of our machines since he can't seem to learn how to fly them respectfully. This leaves you in charge of training." The commander explained while sneering at Flight Lieutenant Gordon.

"But sir," Amanda tried to protest, but one glance from the sub-colonel put an immediate halt to that maneuver.

"Dismissed." He ordered disdainfully, "Execute." They both gave the superior officer a salute. Bradley's was a more respectful wave as befitted military protocol. But Amanda's had more similarity to giving the colonel the finger than respecting his rank. The door closed behind them with a whoosh.

"Kindergarteners," The wing commander complained, "I'm running a damn kindergarten, I could have sworn I was assigned to command a fighter squadron."

Gordon slinked off to the hanger, like a scolded child, but Amanda charged down toward the mess hall as if she were an angry bull elephant. The junior officers she passed snickered. Amanda's charging tended to create a jiggle motion that the younger men found amusing. She knew some women on the base had reputations and she understood wondering around like this was adding to hers, but she didn't care.

She stormed into the mess hall. The cadets all rose in unison, wearing their crisp, freshly pressed uniforms and gave her a rigid salute ... with just the right kind of wrist snap they drill into you at the flight academy. She wasn't impressed.

"Flight captain," one of them addressed her, "when do our training classes start?" This one was a little too eager. She didn't like that. The eager ones tended to wind up as blips on the weekly report ... after they become smudges on some nameless asteroid.

"Yesterday," she snapped, "Follow me."

She led them down a corridor toward the training center. They followed her with no more individuality than a group of ducklings following their mother. From Amanda's point of view, these raw recruits were also about as smart as your average waterfowl. She directed them all to a long table and instructed them to sit. Turning she pointed to an art deco recruiting poster hanging near the door.

"What's the most important part of the Mark I Spacefighter?" She asked with a look so sharp you could cut your fingers on it.

"The Mark I," a student sputtered, "I thought we'd be flying real fighters, not obsolete curios." His disgust was palpable.

One of the female students looked at him like he was a middle school soccer player. Part reprimand for being so stupid and part pity for his ill-considered thinking. "They don't trust new cadets with the latest fighters, flyboy."

In the corner was an older serviceman, a technical sergeant, who was sweeping the floor. Waging an uneven struggle against the moon's ever-present gray dust. "Once you can fly the old stuff, you can fly anything. Isn't that right flight captain?"

Amanda softened, just for an instant, but her hard edge returned as if it was one of those trick birthday candles you can't blow out. "Your fighter is worth something, you're expendable. Never forget that. Your job is to bring your fighter back in one piece. It's worth something. Now, who knows what's the most important part of the Mark I Spacefighter?"

The young girl with the attitude raised her hand. I made him look like an anxious schoolgirl, so she immediately withdrew it. "The stick," she replied, trying to recover some of her lost dignity. Amanda shook her head in disappointment.

The cadet with the dreams of flying Mark II's was next and he planned to make the most of it, "The fire button," he remarked proudly.

"Wrong, wrong, totally wrong," Amanda snapped, deflating everyone, "It's your eyes. You need to be constantly looking. For this job, you need eyes in the back of your head. Speaking of your head, it needs to be turning constantly. Don't stare straight ahead or you'll end up as a shower of sparks before you even know what hit you."

The technical sergeant stopped briefly when she mentioned being hit. He shifted slightly on his two mechanical legs and wondered if any of the cadets had noticed them. He'd been a pilot once and left both his real legs in the asteroid field. But he'd been lucky, there was enough left of his spacefighter to

pilot it home. The intense cold had frozen his blood so that he didn't bleed to death, but he would never fly again. His service was reduced to keeping the place clean. He thoughts drifted to estimating if any of these new talents would be so lucky as to end up sweeping the floor.

"Don't they show up on the radar?" One of the fresh-faced kids asked.

"They have stealth technology," a petite girl snapped, "moron. If you stare at your radar screen you'll never see them coming."

Amanda moved on. "Now Oscar's first move will be to head straight toward you, unloading his guns as he approaches."

"Why do they call them Oscar?" One of the fresh-faced one's asked. Amanda thought they looked like kids. Not a real fighter pilot among them, just kids off the street. For all she knew they'd been they'd been playing hopscotch the day before.

"It's from the old play the Odd Couple," one of the female students broke Amanda's thousand-yard stare. "The old-timers thought that the aliens were making a real mess of us."

"So?" one of the fresh-faced boys asked. He had enough zits to confirm he was no more than an inexperienced teenager.

"Oscar's the messy one," the young female cadet replied.

"Now Oscar doesn't like to play chicken," Amanda reported, "So he'll turn early. Keep inside his turn. You ship is slower, but it turns better. Hold your fire, it's hard to hit Oscar from the front, but once he turns you'll get a straight-on shot at his fuselage. That's when you pour it on. Pull in behind him and pump as much as you can into his backside. If he pulls away, let him go. He's much faster than you, so if you try to chase him, you'll just be wasting fuel."

There's always a smartass in every classroom. "Shouldn't you start firing as soon as you see him? What if he gets you while he's approaching?"

Amanda was used to handling assholes, so this one was no problem. "If he gets you on approach, well then, you won't have to worry about the rest of the maneuver, now will you?" The class giggled. Amanda was saddened by the sound. It reminded her of high school. "Let's see what you've got smart-ass. Number one get in the simulator. Give me a run on an Oscar, let me see what I have to work with."

"The name is Ken ..." he started to say.

She cut him off with an acid tone that was accompanied by the smell of ozone. "I don't care what your name is. I don't want to know. For the purposes of this training session, you are number one. Now, get in the simulator. Show me something besides your gaping mouth."

As if he was sticking to Amanda's script, the Oscar in the simulation headed straight for him. He panicked like a passenger on the Titanic. He turned away before the Oscar did. In a flash, the enemy was behind him and the simulation ended. He was out of the simulator in a flash, throwing the hatch open like the hood of an old jalopy. He stormed out of the room in a huff. Before he made it to the door, two of the other students grabbed him.

“Let him go,” Amanda advised them, “He’ll be back.” She turned her attention to the only cadet who looked like she had to shave on a regular basis. “What about you, number two, what’s the matter with you? Too busy to bother to sight up out of high school?”

“No,” she sneered, “I stopped off to screw your little brother on the way here.”

“Get in there,” Amanda practically pushed the girl into the simulator.

Inside, the girl let the Oscar head right toward her. She displayed absolutely no fear. She timed it just right before he could fire she dipped down underneath him. He dropped his nose to follow. As soon as he did that, she straightened up. This gave her the whole top of Oscar’s ship as a target. She raked it full of holes. Flame was pouring out of his fuselage. He turned around to start running away and the girl pulled right up behind him. She held her figure on the trigger and sent spray after spray of fire into the retreating Oscar until it was nothing more than a ball of flame.

She did a barrel-roll through the remaining debris and flipped open the simulator canopy.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Amanda enquired.

“I did some flying before I left home,” number two announced proudly, “And I was the local champion for *Flying Aces* at my school.”

Amanda froned, “I mean where did you pick up such bad habits? You should never keep your finger down on the trigger for so long. You’ll use up all your energy reserves. What were you planning to do against his wingman? Shoot spit-balls at him?” Amanda shook her head and made a check mark on her clipboard. “Right, number three,” she turned to another cadet, “show me some better habits.” Number three saluted her, pushed the still stunned number two out of the way, and got in the simulator.

The rest of the cadets were a mixed bag. Some ran too early and let Oscar get in behind them, ending up as dust smudges. Others chased after Oscar like crazy people. Oscar weaved and skipped until the cadet ran out of energy, then moved in for the kill. A few got close, but no one managed to score a kill. Number nine played it smart, when he drove Oscar off, he let him run away. At the conclusion, she lined them all up, except for number one.

Amanda looked at them. “You are now subject to military orders here. At the top of the military hierarchy is the Prime President of the World Order. At the bottom is you, the lowly cadet. Don’t expect to get the best equipment, you won’t get it. You get what equipment the sub-colonel and I think you are ready for. If we don’t issue it to you ... you don’t need it. I don’t care what your recruiter told you. You’re here now and there is no going crying home to mama. Pay attention and do what I tell you to do. And if you don’t, I’ll shoot you myself. Is that clear?”

“Yes, flight captain!” they shouted back in unison.

“Dismissed.” Amanda released them from the training session, “Now get out of my sight.”

Amanda strode back into the mess hall and grabbed a tray. She strode through the mess line like an angry footballer, who been called off-sides. The cooks threw food on her tray like they were ladling out sewage. Trouble was it didn’t taste much better. On her way out, she spotted number one typing

something on a pad. Amanda threw her tray on the table across from him without saying a word. She sat down on the bench unceremoniously. "Writing home to your mother?"

Number one didn't respond, he just slid the tablet over to the other side of the table. It drifted to a stop right before Amanda. "What do you expect me to do? Fix your spelling so that your mother doesn't recognize what a waste of breathable air you are?"

"It's my resignation," number one spat back.

"Don't compound your error with even more stupidity." Amanda pushed the pad back. "Learn from your mistakes. I've made every mistake that's possible to make in the simulators. That's the best place to make them ... in the simulator. Now I have ten confirmed kills." She started eating as number one picked the pad back up. "Number one," she stopped him as he was just about to leave the table, "if you ever walk out on one of my training sessions again, I'll blow you out an airlock. Dismissed."

On the way out, another flyer put his hands on number one's shoulder. "Don't let the flight captain get to you." He smiled, "There were twenty-four members of her training class. She's the only one left."

Amanda sat uncomfortably in her bunk, shifting from side to side. You could see the lines of frustration growing on her face. She put the datapad down in disgust.

"That's supposed to be relaxing you," Ava Kolchak explained to the frustrated Amanda.

"Well, it's not." She declared with all the subtlety of a bull moose in a bad mood.

"So, what about Bradley, your new wingman. He a hunk, you going to get some of that." Ava asked. For some of the girls, this was all there was to life, chasing Oscar and men. But with Ava, she was genuinely concerned. She had noticed that Amanda was starting to display, what the old pilots called, the thousand-yard stare. Ave had known other pilots with the same look. Now they were all statistical data and empty bunks.

"He a pig," Amanda responded.

"Well, of course, he is," Ava responded, "They all are. But at least this one is cute."

"Oink, oink," All the other girls in the barracks started making pig noises as if they were trying to attract a few slices of ham for themselves. The noise level rose until no one could hear themselves think. Then it dissipated as abruptly as it began.

"I don't care about cute," Amanda snorted, "I want someone who is going to watch my back while we are in combat, not leer at the rest of me once we get back to base."

"Nothing wrong with a little of both," Lt. Kolchak replied. "Besides it might help you get rid of your Princess Leia moniker if folks knew you were involved."

"Ah," the flight captain dismissed her remark.

"Besides," Ava replied, "you need to learn to live a little, loosen up. It's not like we have great prospects of retiring to live long and happy lives."

"I think there are enough widows and widowers around here already," Amanda rejoined. She went back to brooding. Sometimes men can look hotter brooding, Ava realized. However, it didn't suit the flight captain at all.

Amanda had all the cadets line up in the underground flight hanger. They stood about nervously, standing in front of a wing of Mark I machines.

"OK," Amanda announced, "The sun is down and for the next two weeks the outside temperature will hover just above -150 degrees. Too cold for us to land outside where there is more room. You have to learn to take off and land down here." She carefully looked the cadets over, evaluating which ones she thought could do the job and which ones would require babysitting. "The bay is protected by a forcefield, so nobody takes off until the red light on the walls there turns green ... and no nobody gets out of their cockpits until it goes back to green again."

"Getting back in is the tricky part." She paced before them, "you'll have to slow down until the fighter is just able to fly. Otherwise, you won't be able to fix your angle of approach. If you come in too fast, you end up like those marks on the far wall." The flight captain pointed out some serious dents at the other end of the hanger.

"Looks like all men," Number two remarked.

"How do you know that?" One of the young men took the bait.

"Men," Number two remarked, "always coming too fast."

"That will be enough of the chit-chat," Amanda barked, "Mount up. I want to see each one of you take off, circle around the base once and come back in for a landing. Remember, it's your first duty not to break anything. You I can replace. Number one," Amanda smiled briefly, "execute."

Number one fiddled with his flight suit nervously as the others when into an observation platform. From behind the glass enclosure, the cadets all watched as number one slid into the cockpit and lowered the canopy. Turning the engine on, he taxied his way into position, as close to the back of the hanger as possible. There he sat, engines at the idle.

Once the hanger light changed to green, he pushed the throttle fully forward. The handle of the throttle had a plastic fighter at the top of the stick, so it couldn't be confused with the second control. That one raised the landing gear. On top was a plastic wheel. It was one of the few upgrades the Mark I had been given. When Amanda was training on the Mark I, a third of the class bellied out on takeoff, because the stick jockey had used the wrong handle.

Number one's fighter roared to life and slid across the hanger. "Pull up," Amanda screamed into the COMM system. The fighter lifted less than a second before reaching the hanger door. Six more inches and it would have joined about a dozen wrecks at the bottom of the 500-meter chasm. "once around the park please." The flight captain ordered.

The class watched on the radar screen as the tiny dot moved in slow jerky turns until it was headed back towards the base. "Slower," Amanda screamed, "Slow down."

“If I slow down any more, I’ll drop out of the sky,” Number one showed a bit of strain over the COMM system.

“That’s the whole point,” Amanda yelled, “To get back down.”

The cadets watched as the Mark I reappeared in the hanger door and shot across the floor at an astounding rate. It hit the floor with a crash and then seemed to slide toward the back wall as if the landing had been made on ice. Half the students shielded their eyes as the fighter finally slowed and stopped just short of the wall.

“What did I tell you,” one of the girls chuckled, “always too fast.”

“Adequate work, number one,” Amanda remarked, her voice back to a normal tone. “You might even make a pilot yet. I doubt it,” she added quickly, “but there is always a first time. Number two, you’re up.”

Two launched her fighter early, maybe too early, the top of her canopy only missed the ceiling of the hanger door by a few inches. “Ease off, Number two,” Amanda instructed, “the Mark I doesn’t respond like it’s an avatar in a video game.” The rest of the cadets watched as the fighter made a gentle curve on the screen and then disappeared.

“Number two,” the flight captain screamed.

“What?” They all heard number two’s voice over the system.

“Turn the radar jamming hardware off ... now!” the flight captain ordered.

“What’s the matter?” She responded like she was teasing the captain. “We won’t have it off during combat missions.”

“You’re not in combat, cadet,” Amanda hollered back, “Get it back on.”

The other cadets watched the blip return to the screen. It was right outside the hangar door. All eyes shot over to the entrance and watched Number two graceful glide in ... only she didn’t touch down. She headed straight for the back wall. Flight Captain Diaz shook her head disapprovingly. Then, at the last moment, the fighter touched the ground and did a 180-degree turn so its engines now faced the back wall. The craft glided to a stop and number two switched off the engines.

“Number two,” Amanda announced, “If I find out that you damaged the landing struts, I’ll have you greasing support spanners for a month.”

Number three and four were a little more middle of the road. They had learned from watching the first two. Number five was better. He managed to get his fighter to the ground just after getting into the hanger. He slid to a stop well before the back wall. One of the most impressive landings to date. Then he popped the canopy open.

“Shit,” Amanda yelled, “Nobody move. Number five can you get your canopy back down?” Nothing moved. Amanda could see the top of the pilot’s ears and his fingers turn black. The cadets must have seen this too and rushed for the door. “I said, nobody move! That’s an order! Attention! Execute now!” The student froze and came to attention reluctantly.

It seemed like an eternity, but the hanger door light changed from red to green. “Emergency crews to station,” Amanda commanded. She headed for the door. Once she was outside, the cadets followed. Orders or no orders.

Everyone could see their own breath as they raced across the hangar floor. It was stupidly cold, but at least not so cold that exposed skin froze in the open air. Once they got to the Mark I, the medical crews were already taking him out of the cockpit. Amanda breathed a sigh of relief, he was still breathing. He would never fly again, but at least they wouldn’t be planting him in the ground tomorrow morning.

That is if they buried him at all. Sometimes the crews just dragged the corpses to the top of one of the mountains in spacesuits. They stacked them up there like cordwood, where the lack of air and the cold would preserve the bodies indefinitely. Sometimes, if you flew low enough over the base you could see great stacks of them on the mountain. Amanda always avoided flying over the area, it was too depressing.

“OK, number six you’re up.” The flight captain declared.

“What?” Six responded, “After that?”

“Yes,” Amanda snorted, “after that. You don’t have to go to a funeral. So, class is *not* over. Not only that, you get to learn from other people’s mistakes. Make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to you. Now, get going, number six.”

Six took off and made the loop, heading back to the base. But she was going way too fast. “Slow down,” Amanda yelled. The blips speed never changed on the scope. “Slow down! SLOW DOWN! You’re out of control, you’re out of ...”

All the cadet’s eyes turned to the hangar door, but nothing came flying in. At high speed or any other speed for that matter. Outside there was a bright flash.

“Now,” Amanda announced as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, “training class is over. Dismissed.” As the cadets stood in awed silence, Amanda Diaz strode out of the observation room.

Outside she stopped for a moment ... and whipped her eyes.

The rest of the classes went tolerably well, at least her cadets didn’t have any more crashes. Gone, however, were the jokes and the snide remarks. The group became deadly serious. Even number two started flying like a normal student, no flourishes, no barrel-rolls.

On day three Amanda had her Mark II moved into the cadet hanger. She fully expected every one of the cadets to gawk and drool over it. But they kept their distance. Amanda started taking them out for formation flying. She didn’t make it easy on them. The Mark II was not only faster than the Mark I, but it also had a better turning radius. Even number two had a tough time keeping up and matching the turns, but they slowly improved. However, once they started improving, Amanda upped the stakes. She put on more speed and decreased her turn radius. Back in the hanger, the debriefing was as difficult as the flight training. Amanda never let up on them.

She had them all lined up and was giving them her usual dressing down when the klaxons went off. Red lights flashed in conjunction with the blaring sounds.

“OK,” Amanda yelled over the klaxon screams, “Everyone mount up.”

“What?” all the cadets cried in unison. Even number two looked nervous. “You want us to fly into combat? Were cadets!” Number four protested.

“Think of it as advanced training,” Amanda declared, pushing her students toward their cockpits. Her students finally got the message, but the flight captain stopped number two. “Now you can turn on the electronic warfare systems.” Number two gave her a forced smile.

The cadets usually flew as tight as they could to Amanda’s Mark II, but now they were practically hugging her. Instead of Oscar sending only one or two raiders, there were over two dozen. Amanda fully expected number one to turn tail and run, but he stayed in formation. He remained even after Oscar didn’t turn. They flew right past the squadron as if they weren’t there.

Once they were passed her, Amanda’s Mark II seemed to stop dead in her tracks. Then the fighter turned 180 degrees and charged after the enemy fighters. Her students had difficulty turning around to follow her ... mostly because she had not shown them the trick of merely turning directly around. Amanda closed on an enemy fighter and blasted it into small fragments. It didn’t just disintegrate, as usual, it exploded in a massive fireball that scorched the exterior of Amanda’s fighter. Now she understood why Oscar wasn’t interested in dogfighting. They were after the base. It was clear their plan was to fly directly into the base and explode.

She spent almost no time picking another target. Had she been watching one of her cadets do this, she would have given them a serious dressing down. She was so intensely focused on destroying the bomb-loaded fighters she didn’t notice the second wing of enemy fighters now closing on her tail. One of the Oscars headed directly for her. As she might have done herself, he held his fire, closing to point blank range. Once he fired, Amanda Diaz would be no more than a memory.

Before Amanda could have a chance to notice the fighter on her tail, Bradley Gordon’s Mark II blew past her from the front, missing her canopy by inches. He opened up on the trailing Oscar fighter and in moments it was converted from a coherent mass of metal and flesh into a cloud of assorted molecules and spare electrons. “You’re welcome,” Bradley teased the flight captain for her lack of vigilance.

“Do you have support?” She asked.

“Three-quarters of a squadron,” Bradley answered.

“Cover us,” she ordered Bradley’s group to keep the protective fighters off her back as she took out the bomb loaded attackers headed for the base’s hangers.

By now Amanda’s cadets had caught up to her. The attack on the bombers was a confused mess, but the chaos turned out to be an advantage. None of the Oscar’s could tell where their attackers were or which direction to expect an attack. The cadets had as few clues as Oscar. There were shots going in every direction. Normally Amanda had to yell at them not to keep their fingers down on the trigger. But today, she didn’t have to remind them at all. Enemy fighters passed before the cadets so fast, the students barely had time to press the trigger, before the enemy was out of sight.

So, the fight continued, short bursts filling the spaces between the fighters. Some of the short bursts were punctuated by a colossal explosion of an Oscar bomb.

Amanda managed to get two more, one within seconds of the first. Number two got two at once, the explosion of one, taking the second out in its explosion. Within moments, it was getting more difficult to find the bombers before they hit their targets. Amanda could see smoke pouring out of several of the below ground hangers. They definitely had not gotten them all. So, she continued her hunting. Sparks and metal flew violently into the spacecraft. The emergency systems went off, filling the holes before all the air could escape into the vastness of space.

“Damn it, Gordon,” the flight captain screamed. “You call that cover? The bastard nearly took off my ass.”

“That’s not acceptable,” Bradley replied, destroying Amanda’s attacker as he spoke, “It’s too nice of an ass!”

Amanda’s Mark II now struggled with maneuvers that were a piece of cake only moments before. She fought with the controls. The cadets now had little trouble keeping up with her in their Mark I fighters.

Almost as soon as it began, it was over. “Give me a count!” Amanda screamed. The cadets called out their numbers, one at a time. They all called in except for five, seven, nine and twelve. Fortunately, their hanger was still intact. She directed them inside by the numbers. Number one made a rough landing. He apologized for the landing and for damaging the fighter.

“Never mind,” she explained, “Any landing you can walk away from, is a good landing. I’ll make sure you get a Mark II.”

The rest of the cadets followed one after another. Amanda followed the last of them in. When she hit the landing control, the indicator light stayed red. No landing gear. She’d be landing on the fighter’s ass. She slowed down just above the point where the craft would have dropped from the sky like a brick. She closed her eyes as the bottom of the fighter met the hangar floor with the expected results. Sparks flew across the surface and the metal screamed and cried. Without any landing gear to help guide the craft, it turned sideways and continued to slide across the floor. By this time, Amanda had stopped being a pilot and was now only a helpless passenger.

Before she could reach the release, the canopy flew off on its own. Small pieces of transparent aluminum were flying every which way. Where at one time, it protected Amanda from the sparks, now each spark left a distinctive burn mark on her uniform. Unable to stop, the craft ran directly into the back wall and bounced off. Now Amanda was traveling back across the same portion of the floor she had already crossed. The door loomed closer and closer. The flight captain tried to desperately to unhook herself from the seat before the craft went over the edge, but she bounced around so much it was a pointless effort. At last, only a few feet from the door, the remains of the fighter slid to a stop.

When Amanda woke up, she was being dragged from the wreckage by her cadets. She threw them off, pushing them back. They stood back, standing at attention. “Cadets reporting flight captain.”

“Cadets my ass,” she responded, “You’re pilots now ... don’t let anyone else tell you any different.”

She brushed herself off and marched off down the hall.

Amanda saluted the base sub-colonel and passed him a datapad. "What's this?" He asked, "I've already read your report."

"It's my resignation, sir." Flight Captain Diaz replied.

"Delete it," the sub-colonel responded.

"I lost four cadets," she explained, her face shadowed by shame.

"And you're going to lose more ... a lot more. Time to get used to it." The sub-colonel barely looked up from his reports. "This is your base now."

"Excuse me?" She sounded astonished.

"We scored a new record taking out Oscars. I've been promoted. That means I need a replacement. That's you." The sub-colonel stood up and held out his hand. It was a moment before Amanda came to terms with the gesture and shook the sub-colonel's hand. "You'll do OK," he remarked, "Just make sure you don't let Bradley get away with anything."