

THE SUICIDE RUN

STORIES FROM THE CHAOS SHIFT CYCLE,
BOOK 1

TR CAMERON

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CHAPTER 1

CADET ANDERSON CROSS squinted until the target came into sharp focus. He dropped his crosshairs on center mass. Took a deep breath and held it. The stakes were immense. He could not afford to fail. He launched his missile to meet its destiny.

The dart flew true for the first half of its course. Then it ran into the game's gravitic field and swerved right. It came to rest piercing the double ring of 2 Mark. The small crowd watching him fail yet again cheered in good-natured ridicule. Cross raised his face and arms to the ceiling as if beseeching the spirits for a single moment of fair play. More laughter rolled over him. He let fall his arms and approached his adversary, Kate Flynn, who was holding out a small cup of amber liquid to him.

"I don't think that will help matters," Cross said, gathering up the glass anyway. He mimicked Kate's posture, leaning his lower back against the bar.

"Too bad. Rules are rules. Plus, they're your rules." That she was completely correct did not make matters any better.

He acknowledged her comments by raising the glass. He took his first sip, feeling the burn and the warmth that followed. "Terms of

honorable surrender?" He adopted a lost puppy dog look as he asked the question.

"Not a chance, Cross. What was it you said? 'A pale slip of a girl like you could never defeat a real man at the time-honored game of darts?'"

He winced. That did actually sound like something he would say while trying to provoke Kate. "I'm sure you're mistaken." Surely that slight sibilant slur on the last word was just in his mind. This was only his third, wait, no, fifth penalty drink for a lost round. He shook his head at both of the Kates in his suddenly swimming vision. "Just put me out of my misery, won't you?"

He watched her walk up to the firing line. As always, her abundant red hair and snowy skin stood out in the crowd of cadets, making her easy to track as she flowed through the room. The bar, limited to those cadets in their final year of the Academy, was all polished steel and white plastic. Rumor had it that they cleaned the place by turning it into an autoclave each night, burning away anything and anyone unfortunate or stupid enough to remain after hours. Cross figured this was just one of the many crazy stories that circulated among the students, but then again it had never been convincingly shown to be false, either. In any case, and fortunately for him, it stocked a much better quality and variety of brain-cell-killing liquids than the hangouts available during a cadet's first three years at the Academy.

Kate reached the line and took up her weapon. She made a show of aiming, earning herself a wave of chuckles from the crowd and a theatrical scowl from Cross. She twisted to meet his eyes, gave him a small grin, then turned back and tossed the dart in one fluid motion. Her projectile spiraled strangely, a combination of English on the toss and the influence of the gravitic currents, and curved in to nail the bull's-eye. The same small crowd that had cheered his ineptitude cheered Kate's success. "The winner and still champion," she said, accepting high-fives on her way back to the table.

"One of these days, Kate, I will win a round of this game. You watch."

"No you're not, but definitely keep trying. Our friends are always glad to have the fruits of your lost bets."

Cross waved at the bartender, who knew what was coming from long practice and was waiting for the signal. "Free drinks for the seniors, on Lieutenant Cross" he announced. A disorderly rush towards the bar greeted the news, and Kate and Cross were displaced by the press of eager drunkards. They conquered a table in the corner, sitting close to be heard over the hubbub of their boisterous classmates.



Kate continued needling him as they got comfortable. "You're just going to have to accept that sometimes other people are better than you at some things. Well, let's be honest, most things." Kate patted his arm in consolation.

"Not a chance."

Kate laughed at the false bravado, and Cross had a moment of reflection. She's got a really nice laugh.

It wasn't the first thought in that direction he had had about Kate. They were like two planets locked in a mutual orbit, always in sight of each other, but never quite at the same place at the same time. While he sampled the wide variety of short-term partnerships available at the Academy, Kate was far more selective. When she chose someone, it tended to last for a while, and when it ended, she seemed to feel no pressure to restart the cycle. She just... flowed.

Okay. No more drinks. Next thing you know, I'll be reciting poetry. He realized that she was speaking again.

"... seems clear you will not win at darts." He had to admit that she was correct. She had his number on that one.

"Then it's time to change the game to something that doesn't give you an unfair advantage."

Kate laughed that laugh again. "That's what you said about poker. And about discs. And about that other stupid game you were 'unbeatable' at."

Cross sat up straighter, the idea blossoming. "You're better at bar games. I admit it. So how about something a little different?"

Kate raised an eyebrow at him, but didn't reply. He pressed on.

"The suicide run."

Kate wobbled the tiniest bit as she leaned in to make sure she wouldn't be overheard. "Let's ignore for a moment all the rules we would break using the combat simulators to settle a bar bet." She waved her arm as if pushing them aside. "You know there's no chance of you ever actually outflying me, right? Do you really want to experience that level of humiliation?"

"You've already lost, you just don't know it yet. Name your stakes."

"You're going to bleed for this, Cross."

CHAPTER 2

THE ATTACK ON THE *LUBYANKA*, referred to universally by experienced and disgruntled cadets as the Suicide Run, was one of the most challenging scenarios that officers-to-be faced during their Academy training. It recreated one of the United Atlantic League's most lopsided defeats. The Union forces were outnumbered in every category of the TO&E. The scenario required the cadets to fight a delaying action to protect the escape of their transports and support ships. There was no chance of victory over the Alliance forces, and it served its purpose as a grim reality check for cocky young pilots. It earned its nickname from pilots failing to defeat the scenario after several tries smashing their fighters into the *Lubyanka's* shields to end the simulation. Unfortunately, this didn't bring success either.

Fleeing from a battle was not something any cadet could envision themselves doing when they arrived at the Academy. The attack on the *Lubyanka* taught them otherwise. For some it took multiple tries before they would believe in the inevitability of defeat. Both Cross and Kate had run the simulation more than once.

They met as agreed at midnight, slightly less than an hour after they left the bar. They were both dressed in dark uniforms. Cross

noted how hers clung to her athletic form, showing that she possessed all the right curves in all the right places. Banishing such impure thoughts from his mind, he gestured for her to take the lead. This had nothing to do with watching her from behind. Because that would be wrong.

Kate crept forward, keeping low, staying under the level of windows cut into doorways as they moved through the classroom complex. There was no predicting what rooms might have study groups, experiments, or insomniac instructors preparing for the next day. It was safer just to avoid notice. Cameras swept in predictable patterns, and Kate avoided detection with impeccable timing.

Cross was impressed. He couldn't have done it better himself. However, the simulator training room was just outside the hangar where the ships detailed to the Academy lived, and security would be tighter as they got closer. That could prove a challenge for either of them. Kate stopped, raising a fist. She cocked her head, listening, then moved to the nearest classroom door. Kate pulled it open just enough and pulled him in. She closed the door behind them just as a security patrol walked by in the hallway.

"That was close," Cross whispered.

"Nah. First-years. Noisy enough to guarantee they never have to encounter trouble. Trouble would just wait for them to pass and continue on. Exactly like we're going to do."

He nodded. She let him outside into the hallway again and they resumed their stealthy progress. Three more patrols proved equally adept at avoiding trouble, and they were soon outside the entrance to the high security wing of the academy. She motioned for him to hide behind the vacant security position and moved in a crouch to stop beneath a small window. She raised a small mirror, assessing the situation. Again Cross enjoyed the fit of her uniform as she returned. Again he shoved such impure thoughts away. They didn't go quite as far away this time.

"Here's the deal. The duty roster shows there are two security patrols inside—"

"How did you get a copy of the duty roster?"

"That is totally not important right now, Cross." She shook her head at him. He admired her hair. "As I was saying, two security patrols that should be easy to avoid as long as we are quick. The problem will be any activity around the hangar. We can't predict that."

He gave her a predictably overconfident grin. "I've got a solution for that. You time the security patrols. If we run into trouble, I'll take the lead."

Kate's doubts showed on her face, but she led them into the higher security area anyway. The two were able to avoid the security patrols, which stayed conveniently on their mandated schedules. Soon they were crouched outside the door leading to the flight area.

"I don't see anyone." Kate flicked the mirror closed and stored it back in the small pocket on her upper arm.

"Then let's go." Cross stood and opened the door, striding through as if he belonged there. Kate scrambled to follow.

The security guard holding position around a blind corner held a contrary opinion on the subject of his belonging. "Cross, you know you can't be here again." He sounded as if he had given the same line a hundred times before.

"James! Keeping us safe from Alliance spies seeking to take over the Academy, and as always doing a spectacular job of it." Cross walked forward and clasped hands with the man. "Do we really have to go through the whole thing again?"

"Yes."

Cross snapped to attention. "I have orders to practice in the simulator, signed by Captain Smithee." Cross produced a piece of printed paper and handed it over. The guard made a show of reviewing it. "Your paperwork seems in order, Cadet Cross. If this were a facsimile displayed intending to get into a secure location without orders, you would be subject to special court-martial, but only after a very violent apprehension." He glared at Cross and Kate, who entirely failed to flinch. "Fortunately for you, everything

appears to be in order" The guard returned the form and waved them forward.

Once they were out of earshot, Cross confided "I may have come down here after hours once or twice."

"And apparently not alone" said Kate, who had received only passing attention from the guard, a fact which appeared to irritate her.

Cross had the decency to blush. A little. "That is a possibility."

He pushed on the door to the simulator room, which opened with a slight hiss of escaping atmosphere, and swung it open for her.

Kate looked at him. "Last chance to avoid humiliation, flyboy."

The cocky grin animated his face. "After you, Cadet Flynn." He swung the door wide and bowed, arm outstretched. "Your carriage awaits."

"You're an idiot, Cross."

He laughed and followed her into the room.

CHAPTER 3

THE SIMULATOR ROOM was home to sixteen squat rectangles, black against the black walls and the dark carpet. A soft uneven glow illuminated the space. Kate and Cross headed for the simulator control panel in the corner. Kate got there first and activated the system. "No one else is running a simulation at the moment, so we have our choice of boxes. Preference?"

"Lady's choice."

Kate shook her head and activated the first two simulators. "You're in two, I'm in one."

As they came to life, circuitry glowed on the exterior of the simulators, throwing even more dramatic shadows around the space. Kate emerged from one of those shadows, gathering her hair into a low ponytail. She climbed into the simulator and snagged the control helmet hanging inside. The seat within adjusted to support her, so familiar she hardly noticed it. Kate cursed in a whisper as she pulled her helmet down, rocking it slightly to get proper contact.

Cross, his eyes locked on her before climbing into his own simulator pointed out in a helpful tone "you know, if you just cut all that hair off, the sensors could connect better."

"You sound like Sergeant Thomas. I'm not cutting my hair for simulators. This kind of beauty," she released the properly positioned helmet and gestured to encompass all of her, "needs to be preserved."

"I couldn't agree more." Cross' tone was playful, hiding that he was thinking of a different sort of play at that moment.

"That's what the Sergeant says too. I think she likes me."

The image of Kate and the statuesque Sergeant Mallory Thomas as a couple took his brain off-line for a moment, but he recovered quickly. "You're just lying to distract me."

"Am I? Am I really? That would be truly nefarious. Not something that a sweet, beautiful, 'pale slip of a girl' like myself could possibly do." Sarcasm flowed from her simulator and puddled on the floor.

Cross snorted. "Of course." He climbed into his own simulator, pulling the helmet down over his ears. The interior was a perfect replica of a Falcon fighter. The control chair molded itself to his form as he reclined into the perfect position. He touched the single button that activated all the systems on the ship and rested his forearms on the couch, gripping a control stick in each hand. He was sure that in the other simulator, Kate was doing the same thing, the techniques and routines ingrained into them through countless hours of repetition.

Each of them had flown the suicide run before as an individual; in fact, every cadet flew it at least once. The more bullheaded among them, more than once. Cross, six times so far. He was positive there was a way to defeat more of the Alliance ships while safeguarding his own fleet's escape.

Kate had flown it eight times. Her approach was systematic, each sortie a test of a new theory, teaching her what didn't work as she sought the solution. She didn't share her experiences with anyone else, as the science nerd within her didn't want to present incomplete data. Some pilots liked to brag about their performance, how many ships they destroyed, how many enemies they'd killed. Kate didn't measure success by those same metrics. Participation in the battle

meant that she had already lost, so she focused instead on searching for solutions to better preserve her comrades.

She took a deep, centering breath and toggled the intercom between their linked ships. "Red, all systems green, ready to fly."

Cross replied "Ace, all systems green, ready to fly."

The computerized voice of the simulator responded "Red, launch tube two. Ace, launch tube three. Launch in 15 seconds." Internal displays flickered to life and counted down from 15. Within the simulator, their fighters appeared to descend and rotate into proper launch position.

"Last chance to back out, Red."

"Not a chance. I will enjoy watching you explain to all the other cadets how you lost yet again while you're paying for their drinks - and their meals."

His restraint belts compressed, turning his reply into a grunt as his Falcon shot down the launch tube and into the battle.



Cross broke left and climbed, standard procedure from a tube three launch. He saw Kate mirror him, descending to the right as she cleared the launch tube. Both ships curved on a heading that would take them towards the *Lubyanka*, as a strafing run was the first requirement of the scenario.

He opened ship-to-ship communication. "I'll take lead for the first pass. You're on my wing."

"Affirmative."

They both tracked towards the center as Kate formed up on his five. The *Lubyanka* was defended by a thick fighter screen that couldn't be avoided. It was more a test of survival than a time to rack up kills as the Falcons threaded the gauntlet between the fighters' weapons and the destroyer's guns. Cross' tactic was to keep his speed slow until the last second, then blast through the screen at top speed.

He shared this plan with Kate in clipped tones, focused on the defenders ahead.

The *Lubyanka* was gleaming newsteel, cutting-edge technology of the last generation of Alliance ships. Weapons ports bristled on all axes, primarily energy weapons with a mix of older ballistic weapons for use against other capital ships. He was in tones of gray with winking lights dotting his surface at irregular intervals. The ship was long, befitting its dual status as both warship and exploration vessel, designed for long trips through space. This made it the perfect target for strafing practice.

Cross waggled his ship on approach, getting one last feel for its responsiveness. Each fighter had its own quirks, as did each simulator. He clicked his throttle to 80% and watched Kate match his change. His ship dove low, skimming the surface of the *Lubyanka*, high enough to avoid the occasional jutting piece of superstructure, low enough that any fighters who engaged him risked blasting the ship they were defending. He selected continuous energy weapons, compressed the trigger on his right stick, and carved a shallow channel down the spine of the ship. The newsteel alloy resisted briefly, then succumbed, its layered crystalline structure collapsing in upon itself where it didn't evaporate from the blast. An automatic electrical charge deployed along the damaged channel in response to the strafing run, and the debris clumped together, creating a layer of protection over the next shining layer of new steel. At best, fighters were a nuisance to a capital ship, but they held distraction value and were thus part of standard engagement protocol.

His helmet overlay gave him a 270° view of the battle complemented with additional information of all kinds. A monitor in front showed him the remaining 90%. He watched Kate copy his run at a slight offset, starting with energy weapons before switching over to ballistics. He knew that she was gathering information on how each of the weapons types performed when applied to an already damaged section. Always the scientist. Always thinking. I'd like to see what it takes to make her stop thinking...

He jerked his thoughts back to the present as he finished his run on the *Lubyanka*. He piloted the Falcon onto a new heading, tight turns compressing his restraints and giving him the feel of the ship that he always enjoyed. The next stage of the scenario involved picking off fighters that were harassing the escaping troop transports. Unfortunately, the enemy fighters never made that simple.

"We need to get to the transports. No kill hunting. Just get through."

"I'm not the Kill Hunter in this group, Ace." Kate was already back on his wing, her piloting skills a clear match to his own.

"Affirmative." It wasn't the time to discuss it, but Kate wasn't wrong, and the dig stung a bit. Like many of the pilots, Cross kept track of his "maximum score." His was in the top 5% of all students, putting him in the company of those who intended to fly fighters forever. Outguessing, outshooting, and outflying enemy pilots was just something he did well. At least in simulation where it was easy to forget that each destroyed enemy fighter represented a life ended.

He increased his speed to 90% and twitched to align himself with the transports, and Kate again matched him. "Let's do it."

CHAPTER 4

HE SELECTED intermittent fire and started blasting before he was in range, hoping to distract at least one of the fighters harassing the transport. A set of four peeled off, a change from previous runs where only two fighters shifted to defense. The simulation was adapting to the presence of the two Falcons. Interesting. Using his left stick, he marked primary and secondary targets for himself and for Kate. The data cross-linked to her fighter through the ships' proximity network and updated the imaginary command computer over the squad network. The display in his helmet outlined his primary target in bright yellow and his secondary in a less intense version. When the ship fired upon him, the outline shifted to a shade of red that communicated blood and danger. As if the programmers thought that being shot at wasn't harrowing enough. Thinking time ended as enemy weapons splashed over his shield, overloading his displays with incandescence.

"Break right low on my mark. Mark." The brief time between the warning and the execution command was enough for him to comprehend Kate's instructions, and he dove his ship at an angle. Kate's guns paused for a moment as he traversed her field of fire. She used the

moment of occlusion as he passed between her and the enemy to adjust her angle, surprising her target with blasts to the side, penetrating shields that were underpowered compared to the forward shields she had been striking. The enemy ship exploded.

"On your wing." Kate was true to her word and formed up again on his five. He saw an opportunity to tweak her strategy against the rest of the defenders. He climbed and circled to his left to line up the enemy fighters into as efficient a string of targets as possible.

"Increase separation and angle, drop back a little. I'll be the appetizer, you feed 'em dessert." He feathered his engine multiple times to simulate damage, and the remaining three enemy fighters oriented their weapons and shields on him. Always good tactics to finish the weak ones first. Hope you enjoy the surprise. His properly aligned shields absorbed the enemy's blasts as he drove through them. He watched Kate clear the enemy fighters from the board, her continuous fire punching holes through their unbalanced shields. What had been a legitimate opposing force was now floating debris.

"I get half of those kills. I set you up perfectly."

"In your dreams, Ace. Enemy transport, two high. I'll lead this time."

They were in a good position to intercept the enemy troop ship before it reached their own transports and discharged its cargo of marines. It was not enough for the enemy just destroy their ships, they preferred to board them and claim them for their own fleet, ransoming or trading the prisoners back. The consensus among the cadets was that this was a good philosophy, one they should copy, except for the part where they would have to deal with the marines. There was inevitably tension between the ships' crews and the ground pounders.

The two Falcons streaked towards the transport, evading most of the fighter screen and adjusting their shields to defend against those that they could not avoid. When they reached the transport, defensive blasts blanketed their flight path. Cross and Kate broke off in separate directions to avoid the barrage.

Kate growled in frustration as she realigned her ship with the target. "This is exactly how it always happens. I've never been able to get through these defenses. How about you?"

Cross paused before replying, his finger tightening on the trigger to blast an enemy fighter in their path out of the universe. "I've had the same problem. How about we try coming in from separate angles?"

"Affirmative," Kate replied, "I'll go high."

"And I'll go low."

"Familiar territory for a creepy-crawly like you."

Cross laughed. "Hilarious. Truly. You slay me. Commencing attack run."

CHAPTER 5

KATE WATCHED as Cross looped under the transport, inverting his ship. He wove through the turrets, which were not designed to scrape off a low flying fighter and could not target him with any effectiveness. His weapons blasted armor from the ship and caused one or two small explosions, but the ship's shields held up.

Kate was supposed to be matching Cross' tactics on the opposite side of the ship. Unfortunately, she was out of position as he began his attack run, and her own started almost seven seconds later. The part of her brain not taken up with the mechanics of the strafing pass was already thinking ahead to the next run at the transport, when they would coordinate better. Both parts of her brain were surprised when her energy blasts vaporized metal, cutting through the shields with ease.

She realized the enemy's mistake just as she finished her run. The delay had given the transport time to attune its shields towards Cross, weakening its defenses in other quadrants. The opportunity had not existed during her solo runs. As she processed this new information, her instincts were launching her into action. A twist of the right stick

slewed her fighter on a horizontal plane, leaving her facing the transport as inertia carried her backwards. A combination of vision tracking through her helmet and deft maneuvers of the left stick targeted the housing covering one of the ship's two massive engines, located together on the rear of the ship. A low power laser designator locked a dot where she wanted them to impact, and small emitters on each side of her ship would automatically keep that position marked regardless of the transport's actions or her own flying. She launched two of the four missiles her fighter carried in external tubes under the wings. "Fox Two, Second Fox Two."

Her focus on the transport shattered as enemy beams crashed against her defenses. In her hurry to get her missiles launched, she had lost situational awareness, and her shields were not reinforced in the direction of the incoming fire. Her simulated instrument panel cracked with a loud snap, eliminating the displays that monitored the health of her ship, the overall map of the battle, and other essential information. Kate issued verbal commands to adjust her in-helmet display to compensate, but it left her with a less expansive view of the battle. She flipped her fighter, rotating through 180 degrees with the computer's perfectly timed application of thrusters all over her ship, and ended the enemy that had damaged her. Kate reoriented to the transport just as her first projectile reached its target.

With the extra shield power still facing toward Cross' attack run, her first missile blossomed against the standard shields, which did their job of protecting the engines. Kate barely had time to register her stomach dropping in frustration when the second missile punched through the weakened energy barrier, drilling into one engine. The resulting explosion knocked the other engine off-line, and the transport hung in space, venting atmosphere before internal systems isolated the exposed sections. Cross whooped. Kate did not react. Her brain was entirely engaged in processing an unexpected idea.

Cross rolled to orient himself on the next transport, and kicked up his thrusters to 95%. He had only attempted to take on this transport one time, breaking the rules of the simulation and ignoring the first transport they were supposed to save. His battle display showed that he could make it to the ship before the Alliance forces boarded it. The problem was that the direct path to the transport crossed the *Lubyanka's* firing line. To avoid the capital ship's fire would cost too much time, allowing the transport to be overrun. He had on at least one occasion tried to attack the *Lubyanka* directly. He discovered that his single ship was inadequate to the task, and he had ended that run embracing the simulation's nickname. Hey, wait...

When Kate spoke, her voice was slow and low, the sign that she was in the zone - completely focused on the problem at hand. "Cross, I think we can turn the simulation on its head. What if we -"

"- used the same tactic on the *Lubyanka*," he finished, seeing it play out in his mind. "It's worth a try. You lead?"

"On your five, Ace. You set her up, I'll knock her down."

"Affirmative, Red. Coming around to 270 - 70 high. Speed 90."

Cross' ship curved through three quarters of a circle, inclining up at 70°. Kate mirrored his moves, proximity communication between their two ships assisting as both pilots selected weapons for the attack run. Each scored glancing blows against the fighters as they closed on the *Lubyanka*, but the kill count had now become irrelevant. The enemy fighters were just debris to be cleared. There was no point in swimming with the tiny fish when the giant shark lay ahead and their harpoon guns were ready to fire.

"Protect high, Kate." She responded by sliding her ship into position above his and angling her shields to create a protective bubble in front, above, and behind. The position protected the bottom of her ship, and she could redirect power away from that area, making the rest of her defenses stronger. Cross mirrored her, shifting his shields to absorb the fire from the *Lubyanka* and leaving his top guarded only by Kate's shields. In this formation, Kate's ship flew itself, guided by

commands from Cross' fighter. The proximity connection allowed the two to move as one, delaying actions initiated by Cross just long enough to communicate them to Kate's ship. They were near enough to the *Lubyanka* now that only the ship's close defense guns could be brought to bear, and their shields were at least temporarily able to handle the onslaught.

Both pilots hoped the shields would last through the end of their run, but knew that it was a roll of the dice. To take down the *Lubyanka*, though...

Verbal commands from the pilots set up the tactics for their missile launches. When they achieved extreme range, the housing for the capital ship's distant central engine glowed light yellow in Cross' heads-up display. It increased in intensity as they streaked down the length of the ship. Finally the housing switched to a bright orange, indicating optimal missile range. Cross fired off his missiles in pairs, two streaking from under each wing and a final two ejected from the body of his fighter, hanging in space before igniting and throwing themselves towards their fiery doom. "Go, Red"

At his word, Kate keyed a pre-planned flight sequence that rebalanced her shields and dropped her speed to give Cross' missiles time to travel towards their target. After mere seconds, she launched her remaining missiles in staccato sequence. The missiles formed a line of four as they closed on the target, set to impact just after Cross' ordnance. Just for a moment, he saw it like a frozen moment in time, the tiny missiles seeking the heart of the capital ship, a painting in tones of gleaming metal and fiery exhaust on the deep black of space. Then there was no more time for reflection, and the two pilots flew evasive maneuvers, arcing away from the ship and the fighter screen, maxing throttles as they fled the hopeful destruction of the *Lubyanka*.

They saw the first explosion in their rear display, and both pilots swung their ships around to see the results through the clearer vision of their helmet heads-up display. Cross' first pair of missiles struck together, failing to pierce the shield, and his second pair met a similar

fate, spreading destructive energy across the surface of the shield bubble. The third pair impacted the glowing surface, and a large section of shield at an angle to Cross's impacts suddenly shimmered then vanished, its lessened power causing it to fail from the damage spillover.

In the instant before the capital ship's defense computer reinforced the failed section, Kate's missiles plowed in unhindered, all four of them striking the same spot on the same single engine of the *Lubyanka*, driving deeper and deeper as each took advantage of the earlier missile's destructive power.

They had taken their best shot. Both pilots' eyes stayed locked on the aft of the *Lubyanka*, Cross counting each second after the impacts. Each was a spike driving up his frustration. "Damn it, Kate, this simulation can just go—"

The engine exploded in a fireball that was quickly stifled by vacuum, sending debris in all directions and damaging a score of the fighters protecting the ship. Time stopped for Kate and Cross as they watched and hoped, and then the universe resumed proper speed as more explosions rocked the aft of the ship. Fire blossomed all along the *Lubyanka's* spine, chewing forward from her engine compartment, through the cargo areas and fortunately empty colony-landing sections, finally reaching the munitions hold. The ship's modular design did its job, blowing the main force of the ship's own munitions explosion out into space, the reinforced compartment keeping it from damaging the internal structure of the ship. Unfortunately for the *Lubyanka*, the cumulative damage had weakened his overall structural integrity, and the munitions explosion cracked the spine of the ship, separating the front two thirds from the engines and batteries that gave him life.

Kate and Cross watched in silence as the giant ship broke in two. The pieces drifted, and the winking lights on its skin failed together. Smaller explosions continued in both sections of the ship, increasing in intensity and frequency as they consumed what was left of the

enemy that had defeated them so many times. The silence lasted until the last piece of the capital ship was reduced to floating junk.

"Cross, we just beat the simulation."

His reply was cut off as their simulators went dark, opening to reveal a squad of security guards.

CHAPTER 6

A NIGHT in the security lockup did not do Cross' mood any good. Finally beating the simulation should have been followed by celebration. Adulation. Maybe a parade. Not this spartan cell that he shared with two first-years who couldn't hold their liquor or their tempers, nursing their wounds in opposite corners. By the time that the summons to the Captain's office arrived, he was a ball of frustration-worried for Kate, worried for himself, and just generally angry at the rules-bound chain of command that suffocated ingenuity under the weight of regulations.

The bright white hallways made the reward for his pre-flight excesses that much more painful, and he shied away from them. He knew that it made him look like he was cringing. He was sure his security team escorts were judging him. One more reason to be upset with the idiots in command, he thought. Some small part of him knew the truth, that he had done wrong and earned whatever he was about to get. The rest of him soundly rejected this idea.

They turned a corner and met up with a squad of guards marching Kate towards the same destination. "Morning, Kate." He forced the words out through sandpaper in his mouth.

"Morning, Cross. Sleep well?" Cross could tell that Kate was also irritated by their predicament, but not as offended as he was.

They arrived at the Captain's office and were ushered in without fanfare. They each snapped to attention in front of his desk, offering him a salute and holding it.

Captain Gareth Davies looked up from his paperwork and raised an eyebrow at them. "Oh, do sit down. Your toy soldier impersonation is a poor one this morning, to say the least." He nodded at someone behind them, and a tray with three large mugs of navy coffee appeared in front of them. Kate accepted hers with a small smile of appreciation for the steward and sipped carefully from the cup. Cross accepted his own with a growl of thanks and quaffed deeply. The burn in his mouth and throat jarred him awake.

"I reviewed the recording of your battle in the simulators. Well done. You have solved the puzzle of the *Lubyanka*." He gave them a smile. "It would have been better, of course, if you had not broken every rule of security on your way to the simulator room." His upper-crust Welsh accent softened the impact of his words, making them sound more like casual conversation than the reprimand that they actually were.

Kate and Cross both had the decency to look chagrined at this summary of their actions. The captain gave a small laugh, almost that of a fond uncle. "This is a situation I find myself in at least once a semester, sometimes two or three times. Overcoming the *Lubyanka* is a test, an unwritten rite of passage, a shortcut for the clever, if you will." He stood and paced behind his desk as he warmed to his lecture. "We maintain the fiction that it has never been solved, and you will maintain that fiction as well, or be busted back to the lowest rank we can find for you." He met their eyes, lingering on each to reinforce that point. Seemingly satisfied, he continued speaking. "Why do we do this? To encourage those who are properly driven to keep trying to solve it. In doing so, they learn, they develop their skills, and eventually, if they're good enough, they find a way to achieve victory. Congratulations on finding a way."

To judge by the expressions on their faces, both cadets were confused. "So, you want people to sneak into the simulator room," offered Cross.

The captain's voice hardened. "Actually, no, we prefer that cadets solve the puzzle during normal operating hours. For breaking the security of the space, you will each serve as a deckhand in the hangar bay for a week, as will the guards who failed to spot you." Kate sighed, and Cross groaned. No one had it harder than those who worked in the hangar bay, where every second of every shift was spent repairing ships or cleaning up from the repair of ships. It would not be a good time. It was also a fair penalty, he admitted to himself. "Yes, sir," they both muttered.

"Once you're done with your penance, you should enjoy what's left of your last semester at the Academy. When it ends, you will move on to the next step in your training. You will complete your degrees remotely during your off-hours. Your days will be spent learning to command people and things." He turned to face them, pausing in his relentless motion for a short time. "You see, the *Lubyanka* scenario is really meant to accomplish three things. First, the 'public' purpose, it teaches cadets what it feels like to lose. Fighting a rearguard action against a more powerful foe, and realizing all the different ways that you can lose in that situation, is a superb lesson for every Union soldier." He moved again. "The second part is to give our cadets a common enemy-the unbeatable scenario. This serves to bond them and also gives them a target for their shared frustrations. It's also not an accident that the scenario pits us against our Alliance enemies. Delivers that sense of realism that a fictional 'alien menace' would wholly fail to do."

Captain Davies sat and met their eyes. "Finally though, the most important function of the scenario is to inspire original thinking. This shows us who has that natural tendency towards creativity and unique modes of thinking that are essential in our command ranks."

He reached into his desk and extended two bundles of documents to them. "You have each distinguished yourself through your

actions in the scenario. Cadet Cross, you will head to forward command. Cadet Flynn, you will report to our starboard command. If you show the same level of success there that you have here, you will begin your fleet rotations in a year." He stood again, and they did the same, sensing the end of their meeting. He reached across and shook their hands. "Enjoy your last two weeks of classes, and remember, not a word of this to any of your fellow cadets. The *Lubyanka* is only effective as long as the scenario remains 'unsolved.' You owe it to the cadets that will follow you to ensure that they have the same opportunity to distinguish themselves. Consider it your first burden of command. Congratulations, cadets. You are dismissed." They exchanged salutes, and the steward entered to escort them from the office.

Cross and Kate were back at the bar that night, and she was again destroying him at darts. The barman laughed as Cross again bought drinks for the room, and several of their fellow cadets begged for the results of their simulator competition. They shook their heads, claiming that it was a draw. They both won, and they both lost. They deflected the conversation into stories about their upcoming rotations in the hangar, which at least they would spend together. As they parted at the end of the evening, Kate surprised Cross by giving him a hard kiss. "I bet you're going to look cute covered in grease, flyboy." His mouth opened and closed but failed to produce sound as she walked down the hall and turned the corner.

As he fell asleep that night, Cross imagined the days ahead, and thought that he could probably get some grease on Kate as well. And then, maybe, he would offer to help her get cleaned up. If he was lucky, she might agree. Who knew where it might go from there, with only two weeks before they went their separate ways.

In her own cabin, Kate smiled, thinking very similar thoughts, only she was the one who offered to help him get cleaned up.



The adventures of Anderson Cross and Kate Flynn continue in the Chaos Shift Cycle, debuting August 2017. Be sure to sign up for the mailing list at www.trcameron.com and watch your email for updates on the release schedule!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TR Cameron is an emerging author of military science fiction. The Chaos Shift Cycle is a 5-book series to be published in 2017. It features intense action, snarky humor, and (one hopes) the growth and maturation of one Lieutenant Commander Anderson Cross from his origins in this story.

Lieutenant Commander Kate Flynn will likely grow as well, but clearly she has less distance to travel.

Sign up for the mailing list at www.trcameron.com to get updates on the release schedule and have the opportunity to get all of my future releases for free!

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