

Science Fiction Novel (Chapter Excerpt)

by Carlin Cottam

The boots of my freshly polished armor marched down MotherOne's hallway making that satisfying clopping sound. My fellow pilots saluted me as I strode down the corridor, their faces and salutes reflecting in my

"Oh, you are such a star jockey, Ewan. And with a purple stripe? You look like everything I expected a pilot to look like, and, just to clarify, that's both a good and a bad thing."

The recorded holomessage of my sister Vera chided me and laughed at me at the same time. Vera rarely sent me holomessages anymore, seeing her image felt like such a special occasion. "I'm proud of you. You're a fuel huffer, but I'm proud of you. Love you, brother!" And with her farewell, her holoimage faded off.

My armor glistened in the hallway's lighting, the jet-black color I just added reflecting doorways and people's faces as I passed. Even though my armor was darker in color than the silver floor, the grey walls, and the white ceiling of MotherOne, it added a bit of life to the dull and decoration-less interior of the carrier bird.

A purple racing stripe ran from the left side of my helmet down through my armor finishing at the toe of the left boot. In honor of the day's occasion, I even added a purple stripe in my hair to match and line up perfectly with my armor. For this reason, my helmet rested under my left arm so that everyone could get a good look. I even sent holoimages of it to my sister, serving aboard a Research Carrier, the day I got it done. My sister, Vera, chided me for it on the holomessage she sent the night before.

“Oh, you are such a pilot jockey,” she said in her recorded message. She could never remember to call it “star” jockey, not “pilot” jockey. I would have to make fun of her for it in my response.

She rarely had the time to capture a holographic image of herself for her nightly memos to me, but I didn’t mind. It was just nice to hear from her. Our nightly messages to each other had been a constant in each other’s lives, even if we couldn’t interact face-to-face. I would often replay her messages on my desk’s holographic interface as I got ready during what our Carrier defined as morning. Her holomessages stayed with me throughout the day and I would often think about them even when they weren’t playing. and then again in my head as I made my way to the Mess Hall to start my day. Her latest message was most encouraging.

“I’m working late tonight, again,” it continued, the message still fresh on my mind. “Also, that’s why I didn’t record an image along with my message tonight. I’m doing this at my workstation and technically it’s not allowed. So, don’t tell anyone.” She let out a laugh before the message continued. “The planet I’m stationed on has an orbital day about as long as the Coalition standard day for motherships, so I’m always on the same work schedule as you even though you don’t have a sun to judge it by. It helps, being away from you, knowing that we have the same schedule. It’s weird, but, hey, it works for me.

“Anyway, you’re going to do great little brother! I have an assignment coming up in a few months to visit some of the motherships and demonstrate a few of the projects we meta-bio mechanical engineers have been working on lately. No promises, but I’m really trying to get MotherOne added to the list. I would really like to see you.

“Good luck, Pilot!”

I made the final turn down the metal corridor and began my descent down the last hallway that stood between me and the Flight Deck. Even though I couldn't see it, I knew there was a brand-new, cream-colored Solofighter, Kingfisher class, waiting for me on the Deck. The cream color was the factory-setting color, like a canvas waiting to be painted by its newly assigned pilot, me.

I imagined the kind of designs I would add to my bird when a man popped out from behind one of the corridor's many support columns.

"Exciting day isn't it?" began the man. "Congratulations on your upcoming Pilot Ceremony today."

My heart nearly leaped out of my armor! It only took me a moment to regain myself. I had seen this man many times before, but this was the first time he had ever spoken to me. He trained one of the other pilots-in-training from my year of recruits, a girl I believe. In fact, Alia and I often got pitted against him and his trainee in the Simulators, though he never talked to me directly afterward or before, just to Alia. His fellow Mentor Pilot.

"The name's Barlock, by the way," continued the man when I gave him no response. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He extended a hand towards me. "I don't think Alia's ever formally introduced us."

"Oh, Barlock! I'm aware of you, sir," I said, my own hand meeting his as he gave me an all too-eager handshake. "You're a master at the 'Spider Swing.'"

"Oh," said the man, flattered. "My reputation precedes me."

"Alia encourages me to study the old holovids and look for the best moves. Plus, I like to do it."

“Does she?” he smiled. “I wasn’t aware that she was able to put our feelings aside to respect my skills.” He laughed. “She’s stubborn, but what else would you expect of a woman from Monfalcone?”

I chose to ignore his quip about Monfalcone. “Well, we’ve also sparred together in the Bird Simulators before. You, me, Alia, and your pilot in training. The Dualfighter Tests, we beat you.”

“Really?” he asked, glancing at the two pilots up the hallway about to pass us. “I don’t quite remember that.”

“Yeah,” I said, the two pilots now within earshot. “You pulled your move to try and shoot out our engine, but we flipped at the same time and...” my voice trailed off as he shot me a look and the pilots passed us. “But, either way, it’s nice to speak with you Barlock, sir. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

“About today,” he said, taking a step in front of me to prevent my leave, “your special day. I wanted to inform you that my trainee has also been approved to receive her Solofighter today. You won’t be the only new pilot out there after all.”

“That’s not possible,” I stammered. “I was informed that I would be the only one, Alia even confirmed it. No one else from my trainee group has finished their pilot trials nor has enough hours behind the cockpit,” I said.

“Oh, indeed I know. You’ve been far ahead of your peers,” he said feigning support. “But, you see, the leadership on Vanduria agreed that it is so abnormal to have a lone trainee in a Pilot Ceremony that we might as well advance another trainee who is ‘close enough,’ and I’m inclined to agree. Just so you don’t feel alone in your accomplishments. I mean, this hasn’t happened since your mentor had a lone Pilot Ceremony.”

“And yet, she was allowed to be a part of the Ceremony alone,” I said, defiance ringing in my voice. “I worked hard for this.”

“Yes, but times are changing, and out of respect for you, I volunteered to have my trainee fly out second to honor your achievements as a pilot. It’s the least we could do.”

I was about to say, “The ‘least’ you could do is right,” but my words were stopped by a familiar voice.

“Ewan! You ready?” Alia called out from down the corridor. With a light jog, she caught up to us. “Barlock, is there something we can do for you?”

“Just informing your trainee of our leadership’s decision, so there would be no surprise on his end,” he said.

“He’s not a trainee,” cut in Alia, “he’s a pilot. Respect goes both ways with pilots in training and mentors, Barlock.” She almost spit as she said his name.

“Of course, Pilot Ewan,” he said. “I hope the stars accept you today.”

Barlock fastened his helmet on his head, gave me a respectful bow, and walked up the corridor in the opposite direction from us. The way he held himself made it look like he had a permanent smirk on his face under the helmet. I watched him for a moment, and then joined Alia in our walk to the Flight Deck and away from him.

“Clink,” said Alia, “Did you hear how he emphasized ‘Pilot Ewan’ just barely? Huffin’ dirtbag.”

Exasperated air pushed itself out of my lungs. I was grateful that she was still fuming about this as much as I was.

“So, his pilot in training is getting her bird today too?” I asked. “Why would the Vandurian Council make that decision?”

Alia let out her own sigh. “I’m not sure. Honestly, Barlock pushed them pretty hard to get his pilot accepted for the Ceremony. I don’t get his angle. And why would he feel the need to taunt you like that?” She paused to look back, ensuring he was far enough away. “In all honesty, he is a brilliant pilot, but nothing more than that. He’s just a huffin’ star jockey through and through. Anyway, don’t let it ruin your perfect day,” she said.

An image of the man hiding out and waiting for me to walk down the hall popped into my head, making me shiver.

Alia continued. “I wonder if he’s doing all this just because he’s jealous that a woman from Monfalcone was a better Mentor than he was. Did you hear he’s a big Visionist now? Weird huffers the lot of ‘em.”

We exited the corridor into the Flight Deck. The normally crowded Deck was nearly empty with only a handful of birds still docked, one of which was my brand-new Solofighter. I could just make out my bird in the distance, but even as I got excited something felt off.

Where was all the noise? I asked myself.

With most of the other pilots outside the Carrier waiting to begin the Ceremony, the normal sounds of whirring engines and excited conversations of pilots returning from Outbounds were replaced by still birds and the occasional shouts of the technicians as they barked orders at each other. The lack of sounds felt unnatural. A Flight Deck was supposed to be noisy. The whooshing sounds of thrusters burning and the exploding sound that an engine made as it was activated were inspiring. They got a pilot excited about jumping into their bird and joining the fray.

“Don’t worry,” said Alia watching me, “you’ll never hear a Deck this quiet again. You’ll be jumping into your own Outbound Missions with the rest of them soon enough.”

I smiled in response.

“Come on, let me take you to your new bird,” she said with a smirk on her face.

The new bird—my bird—waited for me in the middle of the Flight Deck, already sitting in a Launch Station waiting to burst through the particle field and into open space.

“Well, this is where we part,” she said. “My bird is just over there. I’ll meet you outside.”

She took a moment to study my face again. “You ready?”

Beyond the testing engineers, no other pilot had flown it before. The new bird’s untouched finish acted as a mirror. As I stared at the bird, my own reflection stared back at me. The more I studied it the more it studied me. Soon we would know all there is to know about each other and come to rely on each other more than we did anyone else. The life of a pilot, and the life I so desperately wanted.

“No,” I said, letting out a laugh.

“Good. That means you won’t become too much of a star jockey.” Alia nodded to herself. “I’m a huffin’ good mentor.”

We laughed together for a moment, only interrupted by the sound of a deck worker’s Positioning Cart, towing another new fighter behind it. The cream-colored finish of the new bird reflected the Deck’s overhead lights as the Cart towed it past us and into position next to mine.

I glared at it. “There’s the fuel huffer’s new bird.”

Alia nodded towards Barlock and his pilot in training now entering the Flight Deck. “Don’t worry about them. You fly out first, I’ll follow, then those two, and you won’t even see them or think about them once we’re out there. Plus, there’s only one Ceremonial Pod.” Alia grinned. “They couldn’t get another one ready in time. So, as far as I’m concerned, this is your Pilot Ceremony, and no one else’s.”

A crooked smile snuck up on my face as I pulled my helmet down over my head. “Let’s do it.”

“You got this. Remember, I’ll be out there with you,” said Alia, mounting the ladder that led to her bird’s cockpit, “but this is all your accomplishment. Don’t forget that.”

I watched as Alia mounted her bird and started the pre-flight rituals. A smile beamed from my face as a new thought came to me.

Alia’s not my Mentor anymore, I thought. Now we can be partners out there, rather than teacher and student.

My new fighter beckoned me forward. Reaching out my left hand, I rubbed the front of my new bird’s beak before climbing up my own ladder. My fingers dragged along the smooth neck of the fighter. No dents or scratches adorned the angular shell of the bird. The normal grooves and finish to the machine acted as the only resistance to my hand.

Time to change that.

I vaulted myself up the ladder and into my new cockpit.

* * *

Just like Alia had taught me, I talked myself through each step as I prepared for flight. The whole routine felt natural to me even though this was my first time alone. Alia’s training made sure of that. Every time I sat down in our Dualfighter she made me do the same thing, say every step out loud. Though annoying, no hesitation hindered my actions as I prepared to take off in my bird.

“Okay,” I flipped a few switches and fired up the rear engines. “Wings locked into their rear position. Engines on. Thrusters purring. Preflight systems check is...” A little, round green light flickered on at the top of the control panel, “Done! All systems are go.” Flipping another

switch, I contacted Flight Control. “Control, this is Pilot 7843. All systems are good and ready. Requesting permission to detach.”

Alia, sitting in her own cockpit, was visible from my own. She caught my eye as she gave me an over-exaggerated salute. I gave her an unseen smile and shook my head just as a voice from Flight Control crackled into my helmet’s speaker.

“Pilot 7843, your path is clear. You may proceed.”

Metal jerked and snapped as the Flight Deck’s clamps released my bird.

“Copy that Flight Control. Successfully detached bird from MotherOne.” My lungs filled with air through the helmet’s filter, and my heart raced. *This is it!*

“Pilot Ewan, pulling away.”

Passing through the forcefield separating the air of MotherOne from the vacuum of space, brought me to a welcoming sight. Out in the open space, all of the other pilots who could spare their time from other duties or missions lined up their birds in one long row, guiding my path to the Commander’s bird where I would receive my official title of pilot.

With glee, the joystick took the bird forward, passing each of the other fighters one by one. Each bird flashed their spotlights on top of their cockpits as I passed. A simple tradition, but an important one. Those lights meant that each pilot accepted me as one of their own and vowed to watch my back on Outbound Missions as I in turn did the same for them.

At the end of the row of pilots, the black command bird, only slightly larger than a regular-sized Solofighter, accompanied by two normal-sized Solofighters, blocked my path to finish my inauguration.

A voice of the middle-aged woman assigned to command all pilots aboard MotherOne, spoke to me over my helmet’s internal intercom.

“Ewan, Pilot 7843,” the voice said, “the Vandurian Council has accepted you as a pilot, and we are ready to grant you your first mission. Do you accept?”

The small viewscreen in the middle right of the bird’s console, just above my right hand on the power lever, flickered to life, displaying the coordinates where my “mission” would take place. All part of the tradition, my assignment was nothing more than to destroy the Ceremonial Pod that floated several kilometers away. A mission I had looked forward to more than anything.

“I accept,” I said with a smile that wouldn’t go away.

The voice continued. “A mission partner has been assigned to you, Pilot 2627, Alia your former mentor. She will accompany you on the mission to assure its success.”

Just as the voice said her name, Alia pulled up next to me in her bird, nodding her head at me once we could see each other.

“Fly true, pilot, and welcome to the ranks,” said the woman’s voice as the black command bird and its two escort fighters pulled away to reveal the Ceremonial Pod behind them.

Alia’s voice now graced my helmet’s speakers. “It’s up to you now, star jockey. I’m not going to blow it up if you miss. I’ll make you ask the other girl to do it.”

Light pressure on the thrusters eased the bird, my own Solofighter, forward. The bird automatically adjusted to match the joystick’s every move and gesture as if we had been made for each other, and—in a way—we were.

This is my bird! I thought with a grin. *This is where I’m supposed to be!*

Alia kept her bird purposefully back, leaving me alone with the Ceremonial Pod now. For a moment I wondered how we started this tradition, but ultimately, I didn’t care. I just wanted to blow one up like all the other pilots before me.

My fighter picked up speed. I flipped a switch making the blasters warble to life, the Pod in my scopes, but I wasn't ready for it to be done yet. Giving a sharp pull on the joystick the bird flipped into a barrel roll just as I pulled the trigger, resting under my left index finger.

The bolts of energy hissed as they exited their chambers in the bird's beak into the vacuum of space as they searched for their target. The large spherical pod shifted as the right bolt disturbed its rest, just as the left one followed suit.

Alia's voice sounded in my ears. "Direct hit!"

A mass of multicolored and multi-shaped fireworks spewed from the fractured pod until a split-second later it exploded sending off a wave of light to all the pilot's participating in the ceremony.

My intercom went wild as every pilot seemed to hail me at once over the public comm channel. Scoffs, jokes, and congratulations overwhelmed my ears, but I didn't disconnect. I wanted to hear it all, even as the cacophony of voices assaulted my ears. I just took it all in as I watched the fireworks die down.

Once the excited chatter ceased, Alia hailed me on a private comm line.

"You really are a star jockey," she said, the smile in her words betraying the beratement. "I learned from the best," I responded. "And, in my defense, wasn't this Ceremony and the Pod created for the purpose of showing off? You put the idea in my head"

"Huffer," she responded. "I should never have shown you the holovids from my ceremony. And when I did it, it was classy as huff."

"And mine wasn't?" I asked, pushing down a laugh.

"It just felt," she searched for the words, "kind of like it's been done before."

Finally, I let out my laughter.

“Come on,” she said, through her own laughter, “Let’s join the line before that clink Barlock and his pilot get here, Pilot Ewan.” She added the cadence in her voice matching the exact way Barlock said “Pilot Ewan” earlier.

Before I could answer the cacophony of voices returned as the pilots attempted to warn me.

My bird’s proximity alarm blared out of the cockpit’s inner speakers. The viewscreen didn’t even have time to show me what was coming before my torso jerked backward as Barlock’s pilot in training zoomed right in between Alia and me, nearly clipping our wings.

“What in the—” I began.

“She just blasted off at full throttle!” Alia yelled over the public comms channel, causing the other pilots to go silent. “Take her out of here, Barlock! She has no right to be behind those controls.”

As if responding to us, Barlock patched into our speakers.

“Sorry,” now it was Barlock’s voice speaking into my helmet. “The new bird’s having technical difficulties. Hang on, I’ll come and get her.”

“No excuses,” Alia continued. “She almost took out a fellow pilot, get her—”

Barlock’s thrusters rattled the glass of my cockpit as he zoomed past.

“I may need some assistance,” said Barlock over the com. “I’m not sure if I can pull her back safely.”

“I’ll help tow her—” I began but was cut off by a new voice cutting into the public channel.

“I can assist you, Barlock,” said the voice. “Coming your way.”

“Thank you, Bigs,” responded Barlock. “I’ll need it.”

“Alia, should we help?” I said, switching back to our private channel.

“That clinker,” she responded. “If he would have just waited. I’m going to file an official complaint with command, that girl had no right flying her own bird today.” She took in a deep breath. “Yeah, let’s see if we can help at all.”

I pulled my bird towards the confusion.

“Stay back!” warned Barlock’s voice over the public com. “Her bird’s about to perform an involuntary jump!”

My bird lurched forward bringing me right next to the commotion. I hailed the girl on a private channel.

“Eject!” I said. “Eject and I can pull—”

The channel went dead.

“Huff!”

“Ewan, pull back,” called out Alia on our private channel. “If she’s really about to jump something major could be wrong with that engine. Let Barlock and his friend deal with this.”

“I can help,” I responded to Alia and then hailed Barlock with a private channel. “Barlock! Tell her to eject. She can then grab one of our tow cables and we’ll pull her back to MotherOne.”

The girl’s fighter lurched forward violently and crashed directly into the left side of my bird.

“What the huff?” I shouted.

I stared at her through my cockpit window. She didn’t return my stare. Her limbs shot out like a wild animal, flipping switches and flipping levers.

Our bird's vertical wings were jammed into each other. Her wing sandwiched itself in between my bird's hull and my left wing. I couldn't get free.

I could feel my Solofighter start to shutter against hers. I searched my bird's meters and displays for any sign of a problem.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” I said to myself. “Wait, I’m not shaking, it’s...”

Looking out the left side of my cockpit, I noticed a yellow light highlighting the girl’s features.

“Oh, no,” I said. “The Jump Engine’s active!”

When you cue up a Jump Engine it quickly reaches full power. If you don’t feed that power into your own thrusters it will look for other places to release its pressure. The energy buildup wasn’t a big deal in the short term, but let it cook and your engine starts vibrating so violently it makes your whole bird shake. After the shaking, it wouldn’t take long for the whole fighter to blow!

Her bird didn’t start a jump involuntarily, I thought, she must have hit the jump lever down in all her panicking.

Attempting and failing another private channel, I called her through the public com. I watched her in her cockpit as I spoke.

“Listen,” I said, attempting a soothing voice. “I know you’re scared but take a deep breath. You’ve got to eject. If you don’t there could be real trouble real soon.” She made no effort to acknowledge that she heard me. “I can’t pull away, so I have to eject too. We’ll do it together. Okay?”

The girl peeled off her helmet. A bulge of curly hair dyed several different colors, fought to get out of the helmet first. My heart stopped as her eyes jerked her head in a swivel to look at me. My heart jumped as her eyes met mine and a shiver jolted through my body.

The girl's eyes were possessed with fear, and that fear shot from her and festered into my own body.

My lungs whimpered as they struggled to pull in air. My heart threw itself against my ribcage and echoed in my ears. Tears filled my eyes to match the ones flowing from hers.

I would have also succumbed to the fear had Alia's voice not reached me even as I drowned in the girl's eyes.

"Ewan," she said, "you have to get out of there. Eject! Eject! Eject!"

My Solofighter shook with a violent force. The Jump Engine was about to go.

"Alia, she's panicking," I said. "She won't eject."

"You have to eject now," Alia responded. "You have to."

The girl's eyes continued to watch me.

"Eject!" I yelled at her. "Eject!"

Smoke started to fill her cockpit. She began screaming, and I swear I could hear her cry through the deafness of space.

"Eject, Ewan! Eject!" screamed Alia. "Eject now!"

"I'm sorry," I called out to the girl in the smoke-filled cockpit. "I'm sorry."

My left hand gripped the ejector handle in between my legs, at the base of the seat, and pulled.

A force ripped my body from my fighter. An orange glow radiated from the girl and the two fighters that I had just left behind. However, only the sound of my own breathing accompanied me as I floated away.

That was... that was the fighter!

At first, the light warmed me. A bright spot in the darkness of the space around me, but the warmth was replaced by a wave of energy. A strange popping feeling came from my left arm as an energy ripped it away. However, I didn't feel the pain. Only numbness.

My body went limp as it continued to tumble through the endless space. Its darkness engulfed me and everything went quiet.