

“Kitten”

A Short Story by Toby Stevenson

Part One: Blue Rain

It has been seven years since the internet has been offline and the satellite communication links were all destroyed. It's been difficult enough to fight back without outside communication but when they cut off the electricity it made it virtually impossible. And they don't tell us what they want, but then they don't really have to.

I was eight years old when the blue rain came but I remember that day and how it was before. Some of the kids in our pack don't remember and they want those of us who do remember to tell them stories. They want to know how it happened and they want a reason to hope. I don't tell them stories because there is no hope.

“Kat, please,” a young boy asks me yanking on my shirt hem, begging.

“No!” I snap and push him off. “Go away; you know I have nothing to tell.”

But that's a lie, I have everything to tell.

Before the rain I went to Pearson Elementary School, I made good grades, I dreamed of growing up to be a veterinarian, I rode my bicycle in the neighborhood where I lived, I had a family (my Mom and Dad I can hardly bear to think about) and a cat named Sandy. Sunday was my favorite day, I would watch cartoons and eat ice cream after church and Mom would let me play internet games on the computer.

I am fifteen years old now and all that is gone, shadow memories I call them. I don't want to remember what lies in the shadows anymore. I don't tell the stories because telling serves no purpose. I think it's cruel.

Seven years ago the blue rains came. This story everyone knows, for those of us who lived through it we all remember it about the same.

The blue rain came with no warning. I remember the acrid chemical smell of the rain stinging the inside soft tissue of my nose. It early morning on a Tuesday and I could hear the loud heavy drops banging on the roof as they dropped down like hail stones, banging on my window waking me up with a start. Sandy who lay at my feet on the bed didn't move or seem to hear the rain. I didn't know it then but she was already dead.

I got up and went to the kitchen, I could see outside the blue rain glow coming down in big drops. The smell was horrific and I didn't understand what could be happening. I looked for Mom or Dad but couldn't see them. From another room I could hear the television set on some news report, people were screaming and there were reporters shouting.

"Where were Mom and Dad?" I wondered.

As I walked to the living room to see if they were watching the television I could hear on, I could see the front door was open. The acrid smell of the blue rain came gusting in through the open door and drops of rain were spattering in on the carpet. Where the drops hit, the carpet was beginning to burn and smolder. I watched as smoke would rise in thin wafts and would swirl in odd patterns as the wind from outside would catch it and then blow it away. More drops would blow in; hit the carpet, burn and smolder.

"Where were Mom and Dad?" I wondered again.

I turned the corner from the entryway that lead to the living room and could see Mom in the floor where she had fallen off the couch in a heap. I must have been in shock because I didn't scream or run. I walked over to where she was and could see her face was turned to the side where she had landed in the floor. She wasn't breathing, her eyes were open and glassy and the skin around her mouth and nose was blue. My mother was dead.

Just then the reporter on the television shouted while gasping for breath as he broadcast his last words live on the air, "The military has confirmed, we are under attack from an unknown alien force...*haurgh, haurgh...don't go out into the rain...haurgh, haurgh... people dying ...haurgh... no hope.*" I watched as the man on TV clutched at his throat dropping his microphone, turning blue around his mouth and nose as my mother must have done, and fell out of view from the TV screen. He was dead too.

I turned off the television and went to look for my dad.

"Don't be mean to him," snaps Johnathan with tone in his voice, pulling me back into this reality. "He's just a kid."

"We're all just kids," I snapped back defensively. I had no reason to always be snappy, no more than any other rain survivor would be, but I always was. I hated life, the aliens, and that I didn't die with my Mom and Dad from the rain.

I looked around the bunk room at the other survivors, they were all just kids and now were looking at me. For some unknown reason we had survived the blue rain attack meant to kill all the humans on earth. And the aliens were not happy we were still alive.

I remember the rain fell for three days and for three days I sat alone in my house with the thunderous drumming of the deadly rain drops pounding relentlessly down outside. I tried not to think of my dead mother in the front living room and that there had been no sign of my father. The only thing that kept me going was the hope he would come home and get me. All I could do was to wait.

On the first day I tried the phone which didn't work and checked the small TV on the kitchen counter which just played static. It looked like all the broadcasts were down. I couldn't stay in my room, I had discovered Sandy was not curled up sleeping on my bed as I had thought but had died right there next to me. I didn't know what to do with a dead cat so I left her there and closed the door. I waited in my

parent's room, sitting under my Mother's dressing table. I don't know how long exactly I sat there, I didn't want to move and my head felt heavy and numb from trying to rationalize the events around me. I couldn't comprehend what was the end of the world from an eight year old's brain and perspective.

On the second day, I slept under the table. When I woke the rain was still coming down. I knew I couldn't go outside as long as the rain continued. The fumes from the rain hadn't killed me but I didn't know if the drops might. I hoped Dad was somewhere safe waiting for the rain to stop too. I got up and went to the kitchen for a drink; I opened the cranberry juice in the fridge and drank from the bottle, spilling some on my shirt. Only the spilled juice felt warm, not cold. That wasn't right.

I went to the bathroom to wash off the juice only to see in the mirror the spill on my shirt wasn't from the juice but was blood dripping from my nose. The inside of my nose was so burned from the fumes it was now bleeding. I grabbed up a washcloth and hand towel and pressed them hard up under my nose. I knew from having a nose bleed before mother had put my head back to help stop the flow of blood. I lay down on my parent's bed.

I slept. When I woke up on the third day the rain was still pouring and my nose was still bleeding. I got a new towel and pushed it into my nose; I went to the kitchen to eat even though I didn't want to. I didn't know how to cook so I ate what I could from the refrigerator and the pantry. I ate grapes and dry cheerios and drank the last of the juice from the bottle.

Then as suddenly as the rain had started, it stopped. I waited for days but my father never came home to get me.

"Kat," again I am pulled back from my memory when I hear a women's voice calling out my name. "Are you coming?" she asked me.

It was Shelby, the woman who had saved me.

I lost count of how many days I waited in the house before Shelby, one of the oldest blue rain survivors and two young men found me. Shelby was 30 years old; the two boys with her were just teenagers. They were sweeping the neighborhoods looking for other survivors, other kids like me.

"Yes," I answered her, "I am coming."

I got up from my bunk and followed her and the others to the great room for the monthly meet up. Shelby is now the oldest in our pack always leads the meet up and in each meeting she asks for volunteers to help fight the aliens. When she makes the call I jab my hand as high in the air as possible, my hand is the first to go up.

Part Two: The Agonists

I've been raising my hand ever since I realized the aliens had killed my family and felt the anger in the pit of my stomach boil. I couldn't just stand by because I was a girl, I wanted to fight. The agonist group

started as small bands of rebels fighting against the alien pods that come down at night to seek out and kill off the last of us. At first all the fights were like suicide missions and on occasion a fighter would come back with Intel. The information was more like harrowing stories of how the alien pods fly and shoot down anything that moves in the darkness.

It wasn't until two brothers, one a surviving young aerospace engineering student and the other a military cadet in Texas, named Thomas and Roy Martin, decided to find a way to fight back. Working in an abandoned car repair shop with backup generators which they could run during the day for electricity, they began to experiment with various ideas to build simple weapons easy for a younger person to manage. Together they eventually designed and began building personal combat boot pods with joy stick controls that would fly the wearer with extreme versatility and precision. This was something the alien pods didn't have, probably because they had no idea they would need to fight us after assuming we would all die in the blue rain.

The boot pods became known as simply "Martins" and the plans to build and maintain them were spread from pack to pack. The Martins weren't really boots; they were more like waist high padded canisters you walked into from a locking door in the back and had the flight and firing panels controlled with joy sticks in the front, all mounted on a jet propelled pack platform underneath. Thomas Martin had cleverly worked to design the platforms to fire existing RPG missiles we could still get from military compounds all across the country. This was effective, but each Martin could only hold two missiles. The trick was to get off two shots and get back home without getting shot down.

So fighting the aliens was still considered a suicide mission.

The agonist group in our pack would only recruit kids fifteen years old or older. It had been three months since I turned fifteen and each meeting my hand would go up and each meeting I would get denied. It didn't matter, I knew the reasons why they didn't want me, and I was small and angry and looked a mess with my stringy black hair and bright green eyes. I always wore clothes that were too big and I didn't have friends. I would probably die on my first run. But I would keep putting my hand up until there were no more boys left to volunteer and they would have to take girls.

Ben, the leader of the agonists looked at me and shook his head. "Put your hand down, Kat," he commented with frustration in his voice and rolling his eyes back.

I hesitated a moment staring him down in defiance and started to speak when much to my surprise Shelby stood up and spoke in my defense.

"Let her train," she spoke out in a quiet but firm manner.

"Why?" asked Ben with a hint of sarcasm in his response. "Just look at her, she's just a girl. And she doesn't look like a Kat she's no more than a scrawny kitten!" He taunted me, looking at me with his head held sideways like that made him look tough.

"She's in pain just like the rest of us," Shelby responded, "let her train, let her try."

Many of the kids in the room, young and older murmured together and nodded their heads in agreement.

"I can die fighting just as good as any boy can!" I suddenly found myself shouting out loud and as I jump to my feet with confidence.

The older kids applauded, which clearly irritated Ben.

Ben crossed his arms and firmly adjusted his stance. "Fine then," he said a bit hatefully, "we'll train her and it will be a complete waste of time and a perfectly good Martin. 'Kitten' here won't even get a shot off, much less come back from her first night training in my opinion."

I could feel my temper boil and my face get hot from hearing Ben call me "Kitten" but I held back and didn't speak out. I don't want to ruin my chance and besides, he doesn't know me yet. I look at Shelby and smile for the first time since I can remember, and she smiles back but with a sad smile for me.

The next four weeks I would be a cadet in training. The first week as a cadet would be spent just learning how to maintain the Martins, to charge them up during the day and load the missiles for the night flights of the fully trained agonists. There were teams of workers who would build the new Martins mostly from salvaged ones. The cadets in training would go out during the day and salvage parts from any downed Martins we could find in the forest. Once a month or so the teams would drive out to the old military compound and load up more RPG missiles and metal scraps from abandoned aircraft.

On the salvage excursions I began to notice patterns, there was more debris to hunt through in wider clearings from the trees than smaller ones. And the angle of fire marks on the trunks of trees looked as if the aliens were firing from high above. Very few Martins were ever found downed in the thickness of the forest trees. This made me wonder, *"Could the alien pods not maneuver in the trees? And if not, were the agonist fighters going out to fight the alien pods for this reason? And if the missiles were only being fired from foot level, you'd had to fly high enough to get a shot off and then wouldn't you basically be a sitting duck in open air?"*

No wonder so many didn't come back.

Ben's younger brother Jacob was in charge of the workers who put the Martins back together. He mostly kept to himself focusing on his work. But he was much nicer than his older brother and would typically talk with any of the young cadets who wanted to know more about the construction of the Martin. I waited until early morning and found Jacob in the workshop sorting through the salvaged parts we had brought back from the day before.

"Hello, Kat," he greeted me; "you are up early aren't you?"

"Yes," I replied, "I wanted to ask you a question."

"Fire away," he offered.

“Yes,” I responded with a smile, “it’s actually about firing. I have a question about how the missiles are fired from the bottom of the Martin.”

“You do?” he asked me, with his curiosity peaked.

“Why can’t the missiles be mounted on the sides at hip level and possibly even pivot?” I asked him.

“We tried that in earlier designs,” he responded with an odd sense of pleasure, like I had asked him a good question. “The problem was the missiles fired were hot and too many kids would get burned before they had a reasonable chance to fight. And if we extended the missile mounts further out, the mobility of the Martin and how it would fly was significantly affected.”

“Hmmm,” I replied while looking off and thinking.

“That’s why the missiles and the rocket propulsion are all mounted underneath.” Jacob concluded as a matter of fact.

“You don’t happen to have any of those old Martins that didn’t work well, do you?” I asked.

Jacob responded with a bit of a twisted smile, perhaps thinking what I was now thinking. “No, but think I still have the plans and the some of the old side mounts around here somewhere.”

“I’m not so big, like the other kids,” I offered with a tinge of excitement in my voice. “Maybe I could fire side mounts without getting burned.”

“Maybe you could,” replied Jacob who was obviously now thinking about the possibility. “But Ben won’t like it.”

“Then don’t tell him,” I quickly answered.

We both smiled. “Come back on Monday early like you did today,” said Jacob.

I nodded my head and left without anyone seeing me.

The next week of training we actually began to learn how to power on the practice Martins, hover about three feet off the ground and get the feel of the flight control joy stick. I picked this up quickly. It was if the feel I had from playing video games as a kid came right back to me. It felt good.

I maneuvered the practice Martin down to the ground and powered it down. I gave Ben a defiant look as I stepped out.

“Pretty good for a kitten,” he smirked. “Landing your Martin down in practice is one thing but flying with five or six alien pods around you is something else altogether.”

I didn’t say anything in response, I knew better. Ben wasn’t going to like me know matter what I did.

Each morning that week I would go out early and meet with Jacob. We would discuss the progress he was making with building from the original Martin design. He tells me he still feels the side mount

missile launcher would be too much of a burn risk and lessen the flight maneuverability. He shows me how he has cleverly designed an aerodynamic side mount launcher that would extend out only when triggered by special sequence coded in the joy stick. Once the missile had been fired the extended arm could be pulled back in and flight mobility would not be compromised. This gave his new Martin design the ability to fire three missiles, two from the bottom as the current model had and now a third one from the side.

“Ingenious,” I enthusiastically respond after seeing Jacob’s new plans. “If the aliens fight us knowing our current firing limitations this will certainly come as a huge surprise.”

“Let’s hope it works,” said Jacob thoughtfully.

By the end of the third week, I was the second best flyer of all the cadets in training. Being small and lightweight, and having a natural knack for controlling the flight joystick of the Martin, I could fly faster and turn quicker than the others. I could come up out of tree cover and quickly duck back down. I could maneuver easily through stands of trees maintaining my balance and speed. The only boy better than me was Johnathan Swift. He was two years older than me and had quit previous training a couple of times and come back. This time it looked like he would make it through.

Ben stopped calling me Kitten because now he didn’t call me anything. He would comment on Johnathan or the other cadets when they made good progress but he never acknowledged me or my flying skills. That’s when he began calling Johnathan just “*Swift*” and probably just to irritate me more.

“Next week will determine who is ready to fight and which of you aren’t cut out for the agonists,” of course Ben said as he glared straight at me. “Next week you will learn how to position and fire your missiles while you fly at night. So be ready on Monday, or don’t come back to training at all.”

I could feel the fearful anticipation of what was to come next week run through the mind of every cadet. No one responded. We all knew the danger of actually flying training runs at night. The aliens would come down at night, and they didn’t care if we were training or not. We were all fair game.

The next week on Monday early before the sun rose and well before the other cadets would be up; I dressed and quietly made my way to the workshop to see Jacob. He had told me if the new version of the old Martin was ready he could have me just try it on per say. Jacob had planned to make this new one smaller to fit my size and wanted to show me how to load the third missile and work the additional controls.

Jacob was waiting, “It’s finished,” he beamed motioning his arms toward a tarp in the corner.

I walked over and he whisked the tarp away in one fell swoop.

I stood speechless. It was the coolest Martin I had ever seen. The outside of the Martin was all a mish mash of scrap metal with patches of different color enamel paint and had wide solder welds that make it look like something Frankenstein might fly. But beyond its exterior of mended wounds and various pieced together parts, it was just my size and he had been made especially for me.

"It's smaller and will hopefully work better for you in the air," said Jacob proudly. He opened the rear door and I stepped in. He latched the door and I could see all the controls looked almost new. He had managed to find the best of what he had in scrap and put it all into my machine.

"It's perfect," I told him.

"What will be perfect is going to be the look on Ben's face when he sees you fly this thing!" Jacob replied, gesturing his glee by pressing his palms together and resting his fingers just under his chin with a big grin.

I smiled and nodded back in agreement. "Now show me how this bad boy works," I said eagerly.

I managed to make it back to the bunk before the call for the cadets in training went out. We were allowed to sleep in since training was to now be at night. I followed the other cadets to the mess hall for diner, the agonists always ate first and the cadets ate second.

I could hardly sit still much less eat.

"Better eat up there, Kitten. You just might be having your last supper!" Ben commented with an irritating laugh as he passed our table. "See you in the hangar, thirty minutes."

"Cocky dumb ass," I heard myself murmur out loud as he walked off.

"What?" asked Johnathan in shock at my caddy remark directed at Ben.

"Well, he is," I remarked sharply in my own defense. He was and I had said it out loud, I didn't care.

Part Three: Flying at Night

On the first day of training there were fourteen cadets who had volunteered that week. After the last week of flight training our numbers had dropped down to eleven. And this evening, the first night of the final week of training, only nine cadets showed up.

We all knew the drill, we would hover at the start of the training course and one by one, fly a round through the course at night. We didn't have missiles loaded, we just had to fly the course and make it back without crashing into a tree or getting shot. Usually the fully armed agonists would fight and fend off any alien pods that were too close to the compound but occasionally a cadet would be seen or shot down by an alien. It was impossible to put the thought completely out of my mind.

In the hangar, nine teenagers put on a black jersey and helmet, powered up their Martins and made their way to the training course under the cover of a dark night sky. "*No moon*," I thought to myself, which would be a good thing.

As I had hoped, all the cadets that flew before me had made it back from the training course. Ben made me go last, I know just hoping I would freak out from all the stress of waiting. I flipped down my helmet

visor which had a switch for night vision and punched it on. I flew out without hesitation, adeptly maneuvering through the trees and various other obstacles which had been added to the course without our knowing. But to my surprise I found the night flight exhilarating and the obstacles easy to spot and avoid. The night air was cool and rushed across my face numbing my mind from thought of my anger or my burning desire to die like my family had. I wasn't afraid, I actually felt free.

I relished the look of disappointment on Ben's face when he could see I had made it back as the others had.

"So the kitten survives the first night flight," he offered sarcastically.

"Yes," I responded defiantly. "Don't you know cats can see in the dark?!!"

The other cadets never spoke back to Ben but I didn't care. He didn't have to like me, I had found a purpose and couldn't wait for an actual live flight.

Ben just shook his head as if to dismiss me and we all hovered back to the hangar.

On the second night of night training one of the cadets crashed his Martin into a tree. He broke his arm and had a concussion but would recover and hopefully train again to fly when his arm healed.

On the third night of night training, the cadet right before me was shot down by an alien pod. The sound of the shot and the subsequent metal crashing was horrific. Ben was flying the only Martin that was armed so he motioned to us to head back, he followed us back cautiously watching for any other aliens that might be in pursuit.

I thought about the boy who had crashed, how he might still be alive and in horrific pain but we wouldn't be able to send a reconnaissance team out until daylight. Even though we all knew how this worked, I thought about how it could have been me that got shot. I had been up next, it was just a matter of dumb luck it hadn't been me. I hope if I get shot down it kills me straight off, I don't want to lie in the woods and just die slow. I think I will fight all out every opportunity I can and if I go down, I will go down with a bang!

On the fourth night of night training, only five cadets showed up. Five cadets made it through the course and those same five finished on the following night. Five new agonists would be ready for their first chance at a live flight in just three days. I was one of them and I was ready.

It's Monday evening and as usual I head for dinner at the mess hall with the others. But today I walk not as a girl but as an agonist on her first live combat flight night. For the first time I was allowed to walk in with the other fighters who always ate first. There were very few sweet items offered at dinner and never enough for those who ate last. Since I have been at the compound I never had an opportunity to choose a dessert. Tonight I get chocolate pudding. That's all I eat, it's all I want. I do lick the spoon, but now can only wait impatiently for time to head out to the hangar. I see Jacob across the room, he nods at me and I nod back. I watch him slip out of the mess hall and I know he is headed for the workshop to ready my new Martin.

The experienced agonists including Ben finally leave the mess hall together and the five new members follow. I can feel the butterflies in the pit of my stomach and my heart was racing, I have never been more ready for anything in my life.

I begin to prepare the Martin I had trained in. I pulled on the black jersey and checked my loaded live RPG missiles, strapped on my helmet and waited for the all go signal. The forest surrounding the compound was crudely sectioned off on a hand drawn map into a grid tacked to the hangar wall. Each agonist was assigned a specific section of the grid to patrol, I had section twelve, and Johnathan had section thirteen so we were next to one another in the hangar. Ben had section eleven, he didn't fly every night when he was training cadets but it looked like he had decided to fly this night. I think he's hoping to see me die.

I follow Ben as all the antagonists hover out of the hangar. It is almost dark and I can't see any lights on in the workshop but I know Jacob is there waiting.

"Oh, I forgot my gloves," I call out as everyone else begins to fly to their assigned sections.

I run back toward the hangar.

I can hear Ben laugh maniacally and call out to me, "That's right Kitten, run away!!"

I don't care, he doesn't know me.

I power down the Martin and run across the open lot between the hangar and the workshop. Jacob is waiting just inside the door. It was too dark for lights, no lights can be on anywhere in the compound that can be seen from the outside at night.

"I've already loaded your three RPG's," he tells me, holding the door open so I can quickly get in. "Good luck, Kat," he says to me.

"I'm ready," I tell him. Jacob steps back and I power on the new Martin.

I run my hands across the console and joysticks and close my eyes. This is exactly where I want to be. I pull up into hover mode, flip down my visor and give a wave to Jacob. I'm off!

Checking the timer on my console, I can see I've been flying now for three hours. I've not seen or heard anything. I fly low and slow to conserve my jetpack power and toy with the thought of setting down. Grateful to be low under the trees, I see flashes of light and hear loud droning sounds above me. Alien pods, five of them, are above me randomly firing down into the forest hoping for the off chance to hit one of us. I hover close to a thick tree trunk and hold my breath. A shot comes close but misses me. I can smell the charred smoke smell wafting in the air from a nearby hit pine tree. I look up and can see the pods are moving from my quadrant toward section thirteen where Johnathan is assigned. To my surprise they aren't flying very fast. I push my controls in to high mode for flying and head full out behind them.

When I catch up I can see Johnathan hovering just above the tree line waiting on the pods to come into range. There are five pods, he only has two missiles, he is obviously prepared to take two shots and be shot down himself.

"Not today," I think to myself. I duck down into the trees without being seen, I quickly maneuver underneath and ahead of the pods. I only have a few seconds, I hold up and hover, thrust out the RPG loaded arm and fire straight up from the trees. I hit one and it explodes into a massive fireball and crashes into the trees. The other four scramble and veer off to the sides, obviously confused by my shot from below. Johnathan follows two and gets a shot off and hits one. He quickly fires his second RPG but it misses. There are three alien pods regrouping and come back to hunt down Johnathan. If I am lucky, I can only at best get two. I pull up and fire at one and hit it. It explodes into an angry ball of orange with a wave of heat so hot I have to duck back down for cover.

There are still two pods chasing Johnathan and I just ducked down from an explosion. What was I thinking? I pulled up hard as quickly as I can. Before I can clear the tree tops I hear two pops and then two loud explosions just slightly seconds apart. When I do pull up from the trees I can see Ben hovering where he has successfully downed the two remaining pods from behind.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he shouts at me angrily.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I shout back.

"Get back to the hangar, now!" he shouts at me.

I am at an angle to just notice a flicker of light to the right of Ben's Martin, he's so mad at me he doesn't see it. Without even thinking I fly full out straight toward Ben so the approaching alien pod can't see me. I fly hard until the last possible second then I pull up over Ben and fire. My last RPG hits the alien dead on and lights up the night sky like fireworks before it crashes into the forest with the others.

Johnathan pulls up from the cover of the trees and shouts at me, "That was awesome!"

"Get back to the hangar, both of you," shouts Ben.

Ben is beside himself with frustration I can hear it in his voice. I relish this thought as we go. He closely follows us back.

At the hangar we power down. I am shaking from the adrenaline rush but I feel myself grinning from ear to ear. I am still standing in my Martin when Ben starts shouting at me. "What the hell were you doing outside of your section," he starts in on me when Johnathan cuts in.

"Hey man, didn't you just see?? Kat just saved my ass and then yours!"

Shocked that Johnathan would speak out, Ben pivots and toward him and remarks, "Saving another agonist isn't the mission Swift. The mission is to protect the compound. The mission is to patrol and shoot down the as many aliens as you can!"

“Well maybe you weren’t counting,” quipped back Johnathan, “Kat just shot down three AND saved our asses. Maybe the mission should be changed!”

Ben turns around back to me, quite red in the face and shouts at me, “Where did you find that Martin and what makes you think you have the right to just do what you want?”

Jacob steps out of the darkness from within the hangar and answers Ben before I can speak. “She didn’t find it,” Jacob tells him, “I built it for her. And her desire to fight and give others a fighting chance gives her the right as far as I am concerned.”

Ben stood and looks at his brother in disbelief and starts to speak in rebuttal when Shelby also steps out of the darkness. She had been waiting there with Jacob the whole time. Shelby looks at me and asks, “Is this true, Kat? Did you shoot down three alien pods in one run with your modified Martin?”

“Yes,” I nod, then I think to add, “but between the three of us we shot down six.”

“Six?” asks Shelby rhetorically and turns to Ben. “Six,” she repeats as if to clarify. “You know, Ben, you and Kat are a lot alike in many ways. You are both angry and stubborn, and you both have so much to contribute to the prosperity of our clan, and even other clans but you let your pride get in the way.”

Shelby turns to Jacob and asks, “Can you build more of these modified Martins?”

“Yes Ma’am!” he responds enthusiastically.

Shelby turns to all of us and says, “Stop this petty fighting and figure this out, all of you! We will discuss this more in the morning.” I watch as she walks quickly through the darkness across the open space back to the compound leaving us in the hangar.

“Let’s reload and get back out there,” says Ben flatly.

Part Four: Purpose

I don’t see any more alien pods or hear any being shot down in other quadrants during the remainder of my patrol. As the morning light grows I know it is now safe to return to the hangar. When I arrive, the other cadets from training and many of the experienced agonists were waiting and cheer. I feel a flush of embarrassment flood my cheeks and I don’t know how to react.

I hover lower and process down my Martin. Once down on the ground the others come forward to check out Jacob’s work and see the smaller revised model. I can see Ben off to the side talking with Jacob. Ben pushes through the group and to speak to everyone.

“Alright, alright,” he calls out to get everyone’s attention. “It’s been an eventful night and we now have an incredible amount of work ahead thanks to Jacob and Kitten here.”

Ben pauses in his little speech for emphasis and continues, "Jacob will be in charge of building one new modified Martin each week. As agonists we will divide into two teams of rotation. Half of us will go out at night and the other half will work during the day and come up with new plans and strategies for fighting the aliens with the new Martins in the mix. Each team will work their day or night assignments for a week and then switch out."

"The plan should be," Jacob interjects, "to fly as many of the new Martins with the lighter flyers mixed in with the existing heavy Martins for firepower. We may even be able to rework the heavier Martins to carry three missiles underneath and devise strategies to utilize both."

A collective cheer goes up and I can feel the sense of hope radiate through the group. I know revising the Martins and determining new fighting strategies will certainly help but I also know this is still a suicide mission at best.

"Hope is a dangerous thing," I think to myself.

"The teams and the list of names will be posted on the hangar wall in one hour," Ben announces. "Those on the flight team will fly again tonight so get your rest. Those of you on the strategy team will meet this afternoon for an initial strategy session."

With that, the group disperses. Ben gives me a look, and heads to his hangar office, I assume to divide up the teams. He will never like me so I don't care. But I have the feeling he is now getting to know me.

I head toward the mess hall for breakfast, my stomach is empty and I can feel it rumble around as I walk.

Johnathan calls out to me as he runs to catch up. "Kat," he calls, "wait up!"

I stop, turn and wait.

"Kat," he says catching up a bit out of breath. "There is something I want to ask you."

I see a look in his eyes I don't like and I interrupt before he can continue. "No," I tell him quietly, "don't say it." He looks at me as if I just crushed him with a fallen Martin. His look confirms I knew what he was about to say and I was right to stop him.

"Johnathan," I explain, "we are agonists, and we are fighters. I am a fighter. All I ever wanted was to go out with a bang fighting the damn aliens. I am actually good at this and I think really liking someone," I hesitate and thoughtfully add, "I like you but you know what I mean. I think really liking someone would be a distraction. It would just get in our way."

I can see he's not happy but nods that he understands.

"But hey," I say in a lighter slightly sarcastic tone, "you can be my wingman anytime!"

"Or you can be mine!" he quips back.

I pat him on the shoulder and he smiles as we walk across the open space for breakfast.

Five weeks pass and in this time Jacob manages to build six new Martins the agonists begin calling the J-Martin. New strategies are considered and implemented and our clan begins shooting down more and more alien pods each week. And the aliens begin sending out more pods to fight us in response. The news of our success begins to spread from clan to clan and we send out the plans to build the smaller J-Martin along with our fighting strategies.

"I am still alive," I think to myself, and am secretly glad that Johnathan is too.

"Kat," I snap to when I hear Shelby call me away from my thoughts. "Are you coming?"

"Yes," I answer her.

I stand and follow her out to the great hall for the monthly meet up with the clan.

"Before I have the call this month for new agonist volunteers I have some good news," Shelby announces. "We have now received word back from ten other clans who are successfully building and flying the J-Martins. These clans have shared reports of increased success in combat with the alien pods using the strategies our teams identified."

A hearty cheer goes up from the crowd. Shelby motions her hands down to quiet down the group and continues, "And the word is continuing to spread to even more clans, we should all be very proud of our hard work and our part in helping to preserve life on this planet as we know it."

Another cheer goes out and Shelby smiles as a low chant begins to rumble through the group. It starts with a few agonists, "Mark her, mark her, mark her." Others begin to join in and the chant grows louder, "Mark her, mark her, mark her." The chant grows to a roar and I feel as if everyone in the room must be chanting. I can hear the chant echo from all around the great room.

"Did they mean to mark me?" I wondered astonished. It had been years since any agonist had been called to wear a mark.

Until now, most agonists were shot down or wounded after just a few missions. With Martin modifications and new strategy our success rate was greatly improved. But I had never actually considered this would result in being offered a mark.

"Kat," shouted Shelby over the lingering crowd cheers, "can you come up here with me?"

The room erupts into a new round of exuberant cheer and applause. I can feel that flush of embarrassment flood my cheeks again. I stand up and walk to the front of the room. As I pass through the crowd I feel hands reach out to pat me on the back.

When I am almost to the front of the room I hear Shelby call out, "Johnathan, would you also come forward?"

A new wave of cheers and applause goes out for Johnathan and I smile.

Once up front with Shelby, I look at Johnathan who also seems a bit in shock; a look I probably share. Ben and Jacob step forward each with a folded black jersey over their arm.

Shelby speaks out to the enthusiastic group, "As you know it has been some time since we last offered an agonist the opportunity to wear a mark. Today we will make the offer to these two brave fighters."

Shelby holds her hands up to delay any additional cheering and continues, "It has long been thought the aliens don't see us as individuals, they only see us as a plague of something to be extinguished before they can take our world from us. By flying at night and wearing all black the identity of each agonist is not apparent to the aliens and no one fighter is sought after or singled out." Continuing her speech she adds, "As with every aspect of our clan's fight against the aliens, wearing a mark and fighting as an individual is voluntary. The choice made by the agonist to wear a mark or not will be respected by the clan."

Shelby turns to Johnathan and me and smiles. She nods to Jacob and Ben who come up and unfold the jerseys, each in turn holding them up high for the entire room to see. I see the jersey Jacob is holding for Johnathan first, on the front is a hand stitched grey and white bird and on the back his name in bold letters, SWIFT. Then I see Ben is holding up my jersey and turns so I can see it. On the front is the face of a fierce grey and white cat with green eyes and on the back is my name in bold letters, KAT.

Without hesitation I turn to Shelby and shout out, "YES!"

Johnathan looks at me and also shouts out, "YES!"

We take our marked jerseys and the crowd erupts into cheers again.

I know what we are doing is suicide, now even more so wearing a marker. But I am good at fighting and it gives me purpose. I think to myself with my mark the aliens will hunt for me, they will know my name and I will certainly go out with a bang... which makes me smile.

I will never be called "*Kitten*" again. I am Kat.