

Allie's Revolution - 11/11/04

"I still don't understand why you're being this way."

"Because I can," Allison said with a roll of her eyes. She knew he was unaccustomed to not having his own way - and that was reasonable. Seeing the world move in your direction should be one of the perks of growing old. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have challenged her friend this way, but... Some things had to be. She calmed down a bit before she added, "The captain is the first to board and the last to disembark the ship. That's how it works - it's about responsibility and accountability."

"Are you saying I'm not responsible enough to be here alone?" George asked with fire in his voice.

Allison tried to soften the blow with a smile. "You know better than that, George."

He stared at her - his mind set. Sixty-four and a half years of integrity versus her twenty-nine of good intentions. In its own little way, it was a challenge, a battle of will that only one could win.

She closed her eyes and gathered herself before she looked up at him. "George, I'm not going to argue with you any more. I'm not going to pull rank on you, or threaten you, or make this any more of a problem than it's already become. My friendship with you means too much to me. But you must understand, I am Captain of this ship, and I have responsibilities that extend past you. So, I'll stay here myself if you won't leave with me. It's how it's got to be."

She stared into his eyes wordlessly, then got up from the table, brushed passed him, and made to leave the mess hall.

She was halfway to the door before she heard him say, "All right. I'll pack my ruddy bag and we'll leave."

Allison's eyes closed, and she fought to collect herself once more. She was happy and scared and worried and relieved all at the same time. She brushed a tear away from her eye before she turned back to face him, and smiled...

George mustered a smile of his own. "I won't miss the bus if I'm there in fifteen minutes, will I, Captain?"

"That'll work," Allison nodded. "I'll go warm things up."

"I'm not wearing any bloody flightsuit - so don't you try to quote any more regulations to me, missy," George snapped.

"Of course not," Allison said. Her smile widened, and she slipped out the door.

Ticonderoga felt completely different as she made her way through the corridors and down to the Tomcat deck. The ship was all but abandoned, lights were dimmed, and the controls were all set to reomte down to Earth on her command. It was her first holiday leave as Captain, but she'd read up on the routines easily enough. All that was left was to verify that all of the crew was planetside, put out the proverbial cat, and lock the door. She'd keep her com with her, so Ticonderoga's computer or command could communicate with her if any problems popped up, and she'd have a ride that could get her back up in less than ten minutes sitting in her back yard, so... It was all good.

Besides - She was going home...

Allison had just stepped out of the pilot's locker room wearing her flightsuit when George came down the stairway onto the main deck. He carried a thin canvas bag in one hand, and had a box wrapped in plain brown paper under his other. A bottle of wine wiggled precariously beneath the box in what looked like a tenuous grip.

Allsion hurried to his side and took the bottle. She held the label up and admired it before George said, "It's only proper to bring something. Do you suppose?"

"They'll love it," Allison said genuinely. "Where in the world did you find this?"

"I know a little place on Alba Station," George said. "I haven't taught you all of my tricks yet, Captain."

"I know," Allison nodded in agreement. "You know, we're going to officially be on leave in like... Five minutes... Can we dispense with this whole 'Captain' business?"

"No," George answered. He climbed the gangway of the closest Tomcat, and hesitated before climbing into the cockpit. "Which seat do I use? Or do I run along behind?"

"You sit up front," Allison said. "I want you to be able to see good."

"Nothing to bloody see," George said. "You'd think we were visitng another planet."

"No, Silly, this is way better. We're going home."

George 'Harumped' and settled into the seat. Allison made sure he was buckled in properly, and then slid into the seat behind him. She buckled her own harnesses, and then pushed a series of buttons that triggered the gangway to roll away from their fighter, and the canapoy to close, lock, and seal.

"Your ears will probably pop, George. I'm going to pressurize the cockpit," Allison said once she had her helmet on. She adjusted the microphone, and flicked the necessary switches for the canopy and to open communications. "Just relax and try to enjoy the ride."

Allison ignored George's lack of response. She was fairly certain she understood what was going on, and why... As far as she was concerned, they weren't Captain and Crewman any more, they were mentor and protege, or... Just friends... She'd be there for George to get through this... It would be okay...

After a few moments of hushed conversation over the radio, the controller's voice became more official as he said, "Tico Tomcat zero-zero-one, Earth control has you cleared for departure and descent on flightplan Mackenzie-one. Don't forget to lock the doors up there."

"We're gonna put the cat out now," Allison said. "Happy holidays, control. Give me a shout if anything goes wrong with my baby."

"We'll mind the store," the controller said. "Merry Christmas. Out..."

"All right George," Allison said, trying to calm herself. She was fully qualified to pilot the Tomcat, but she'd been out one whole trip on her own... It was a bit nerve wracking... "Here we go..."

She pushed one more button, and the launch gantry rolled their fighter into an airlock, which closed soundlessly behind them. The bulkhead in front of them parted to reveal a starfield, and their craft slipped gracefully into it. As soon as they were clear, Allison turned the fighter one-hundred and eighty degrees on the horizontal, so they looked back at the Ticonderoga as their inertia carried them away. She keyed several more codes into her console, and the big ship's running lights faded, her environmental processing ports faded as they cooled, and a lone beacon flashed to life on the underside of the huge hull.

As soon as the beacon started flashing, a computerized voice came over Allison's headphones, "U-P-E Ticonderoga is in hibernation mode. Do not attempt to board, do not approach unless authorized. Violators will be fired upon by automated weapons systems. Repeating... U-P-E Ticonderoga is in hibernation mode. Do not attempt..."

With a flick of a switch, the cockpit was completely quiet.

"Goodnight, pretty lady," Allison whispered after a moment. More loudly, she asked "Ready to go, George?"

No answer came, but she hadn't expected one. With a little nudge, their fighter rotated back away from the Ticonderoga and nosed toward the familiar landmass below. The Western hemisphere stretched out below them, with swirls of white clouds covering most of the United States and Canada. Allison

engaged the computer control, which would handle all of their descent, and their little craft thrust gracefully for home.

George was silent for a long time during the trip down, and Allie wasn't about to speak and ruin it for him. A view out a window - such a simple thing, and yet so important to her that he be allowed to see this. As they dropped closer to the mountains of the Northwest, the starscape gave way to a more conventional view of night - but it was no less striking for its simplicity. A full moon hung just beyond reach, illuminating the snowscape below them. Trees, rock, and snow mixed together to paint a canvas more beautiful than any artwork she'd ever seen.

Allie considered telling George she'd have to switch over to manual control, but she supposed he really wouldn't care. With the flip of a few switches, the display on her helmet's visor lit with computer enhanced imagery, ruining the view for her, but allowing her to make it all the better ride in for her passenger.

She eased way back on the throttles, allowing their craft to glide much more gracefully along down the side of the Teton range and into the pass. The landscape below was dotted with an occasional cabin, all with warmly lit windows and chimneys puffing smoke from blazing fires. For an instant, she envisioned a family in front of the fire, laughing, smiling, waiting patiently to celebrate the birth of Christ.

"Slow the bloody thing down," George said gruffly as they passed over the Teton Valley and into another smaller pass. "I thought we were on vacation."

Allie smiled, and wordlessly cut in compensatory thrusters to keep them aloft as their craft slowed even more.

Pine Creek flowed around ice and snow in its channel below, defying all that mother nature had done to halt its progress. The pine trees were starting to give way to leafless Aspens - still striking, but more austere. Allie had never seen it from up here, but from the surface she always imagined bear trudging through the woods, or elk bugling into the night when she'd passed through here. It was beautiful, but just not as warm as the Valley they'd left.

As if understanding their need for something warm and familiar, the pass soon gave way to another valley, this one more broad and open than the first. Off to the left, the little town of Swan Valley sat bathed in darkness. It had always been a quiet little place, and Allie assumed the children there were waiting for the arrival of Saint Nick - all snuggled up in warm beds...

She nudged their craft to the right, and made a sweeping turn to fall in over the Snake River. The canyon walls were steep, forged from rock and only the occasional tree. She hung low over the water, creeping along with Antelope

Bench on one side of the draw, and mountains she'd never learned the name of on the other.

She realized that all of her life, she'd wanted to follow the river and see what lay between this valley and her parent's home, but never had taken the time. The moon hung in front of them lighting their way, so she slowed further still, raised her visor, and saw the landscape with her own eyes for the first time on their trip.

It took her breath away... She searched her mind for words, found none, and settled for the warm feeling it brought her.

All too soon, it was time to finish their journey. Allie slid the craft up and out of the canyon, and onto the flats of snow that covered the farmland that had grown her. The snow was fresh and light - stirred up by the Tomcat's engines, it made a glittering cloud in front of them before settling back down. They passed over two abandoned farmsteads before a small structure, warmly lit, popped out if its hiding place behind a hill.

The end of the journey came almost too suddenly as she brought the Tomcat down onto a patch of bare ground her father had cleared with the tractor. She could already see her mother and father standing in the light of the open door, waiting for their visitors. She shut down the engines, opened the cockpit and deployed the ladder in a flurry - her heart screaming for a hug from Mom.

"We're home, George," She said happily as she tossed her helmet aside.

She was out of the cockpit, down the ladder, and two steps away from the fighter before good sense caught hold and turned her around to help George. She held the packages he handed down to her, and held her breath as he descended the all-to-steep ladder. Once he was on solid ground, she handed him back his bag, and fell into step beside him. Still the ever-quiet George, he didn't say anything as they walked.

They were about a quarter of the way to the house when a wave of light illuminated them from the Tomcat, and a warning klaxon broke the stillness of the night.

Allison turned to look back at the fighter, and instinctively, she knew... She just knew...

"George, I have to go answer that," she said calmly as she handed him the box and bottle of wine she'd carried. "Head for the house - I'll be there as soon as I can."

George looked stricken, but then he nodded in understanding. She'd get whatever it was done more quickly by herself - and if only tonight, he

understood the importance of that. He nodded again, and said, "You be careful."

Allie's smile was genuine as she handed him her comm unit. "Merry Christmas, George."

"Merry Christmas, Captain," George said in return. "Now... Shoo!"

Allison raced back through the snow to the Tomcat, and George trudged on toward her parents' home. Once he was close enough he introduced himself somewhat awkwardly.

"What's going on, George?" Mrs. Mackenzie asked, concern evident in her voice.

George turned with her gaze to see the Tomcat still lit up, and the cockpit canopy closing and locking. Seconds later, the engines started to spool up, and George knew as well.

"Something must not be quite right," he said gently. He flipped a toggle on the com unit Allison had given him. "I'm sure it's nothing too serious, but perhaps we can find out..."

"Control, Tico Tomcat Zero-Zero-One has engine start," Allison's voice said though the com's tiny speaker.

"Tico Zero-Zero-One, cleared for max angle departure. Technicians have been dispatched and will rendezvous with you on ship in one-five minutes. They'll throw the switches and have you home for egg nogg."

"Confirmed control... I appreciate the help... Tico Tomcat Zero-Zero-One has a go."

Nothing else could be heard over the speaker as the engines wound to full intensity. A cloud of snow blew forward from the fighter, but George and the Mackenzies could see it was no longer resting on the Earth. Once off the ground, the landing lights disappeared, and only red and green running lights blinked through the flurry of snow in the backwash.

The lights arced in a graceful turn over and then away from the house. Huddled near the door, they watched as the lights gained speed, gliding toward the hills to the North. They seemed to tilt upward, and with a dull but firm "Boom", the lights rocketed skyward and quickly disappeared.

George's predicament washed across him in the silence that ensued. A glance toward the Mackenzies didn't help matters, either. Here he was, in the cold, middle of nowhere, standing in front of people that he didn't even know, on Christmas Eve, of all nights.

He felt like a fool - an old fool - for having let the Captain force him into this. The quiet abandonment of being left alone on an empty spacecraft suddenly seemed very appealing. He wanted to damn her for getting him into this, but in reality he damned himself for letting it happen. Funny how he could feel more alone with people around than he could when he was off on his own.

"George, where are my manners?" Mrs. Mackenzie bustled as she wiped at her eyes. "You must be frozen, and hungry. How about some nice warm tea?"

Allison's father warmed as well when George stepped closer. "George, I'm Alan - it's a privelege to meet you. Allie has told us good things about you. Come in... Come in..."

George stepped hesitantly through the threshold, and Alan followed him, closing the door. Mrs. Mackenzie helped George with his parcels, and Alan shook his hand warmly. "Sorry about keeping you out in the cold there, it's just... Well... We were a little surprised to..."

"I understand," George said easily. "Thank you for having me."

"Will Allie be long?" Mrs. Mackenzie asked. "We'd hoped to take in supper and midnight Mass in town."

"It's hard to say," George said. "They wouldn't have called her back if it wasn't serious. She might be a bit - she'll stay until everything is right."

"Of course," Mrs. Mackenzie beamed. "We're so proud, but... Come in... Come in... Is Earl Grey to your taste?"

"Why, yes ma'am," George answered. As he stepped through the main door into the kitchen, the smells, sight, and comfortable coziness of their home was the most immaculate warmth he could remember walking into. He smiled in spite of himself. "Earl Grey is just fine."

George was beginning to feel a bit more comfortable by the time the ride to town came along. He wasn't particularly comfortable, or uncomfortable with the thought of going to church with the Mackenzies, though. It had been a long time - and he wasn't sure he was ready to celebrate this particular occasion at all. Time doesn't heal all wounds, actually. Some burn, and fester, and change who you are in the world. And that suited him fine. He didn't want to forget, start over, or believe that what had happened had happened for a reason.

It seemed it had been just as long since he'd last heard it, but he was fairly certain it was Elvis Presley on the radio singing "Silent Night." It really was beautiful music, and it suited him fine to look out the window, and up, mostly. Toward home...

He wondered, briefly, what had happened. The com unit the Captain had given him was still in his pocket, but it had been completely silent since she'd docked back on Tico. With no ideas otherwise, the Mackenzies had left her a way to follow, and set off into town. Even though he'd have been as happy to be alone, it wasn't proper to be in their home without them there, so he'd ridden along.

It really was a beautiful night.

Mrs. Mackenzie turned in her seat. She watched George for a minute, then asked, "So, how about you, George? Have you ever been married?"

And there it was. A knife through the heart, a ton of bricks, a rocket-ship ride to reality. The one question...

He turned toward her, and her eyes went wide, "I'm sorry - that was none of my concern."

George smiled genuinely to soften the moment. She really did seem to be a good woman - he didn't want her to feel hurt tonight. "It's all right, ma'am. I was married once, but I lost her... A long time ago."

"I'm so sorry," Anna said quietly. "I didn't mean to open an old wound, George."

"It's scarred-up anyhow," George said with a grunt. He was quiet a minute, and went on, "We were high-school sweethearts, just like in the old days, you know? We'd known each other forever, and been in love a day longer. We never, ever wondered if we'd get married, and have a family, not for a minute. Two months after we graduated, we married, and a week later I left for my hitch with U.P.E.. Two years away in the service, to get us on the way for a lifetime. Seemed like a fair trade..."

Anna just listened patiently.

"It wasn't so hard, really. We wrote every day, called when we could, saw each other when I was on leave. Love can carry you through - if you really, really believe in it, and she and I did."

He was quiet for a long time, before he felt Anna reach for his hand in the darkness.

"We were a long ways from home... I don't remember, maybe it was out around the asteroid belt, and she got sick. She got sick fast. Too fast."

"It was Christmas leave, actually, when we came home. I didn't have any family except for her, and her family couldn't forgive me for not being there," George said. He wiped his eyes gruffly and continued, "I still remember Captain Samson coming up behind me at the cemetery..."

George was quiet again, and then he smiled. He smiled with more warmth than even he knew he had. "The Cap put his hand on my shoulder, and told me it was time to come back to the Ticonderoga - that they'd be my family now. So, I went back, and I hadn't left her 'till tonight."

"I'm sorry for your loss, George. I truly am. If I'd known, I wouldn't have," Anna said.

"Don't even think on it, Ma'am," George interrupted. He still smiled warmly. "I don't think anyone knows. But it's all right anyhow. I think I want to be thinking about her tonight."

"She must have been a wonderful person, George," Anna said.

"She was the love of my life," George agreed.

George yawned contentedly. The Christmas Eve Supper Alan and Anna had bought him was still a pleasant memory. He was warm and comfortable, and the church service had been beautiful. He'd felt a bit out of place in his duty uniform and sweater, but no one had seemed to notice. It was hard to pay attention to the pastor all the time, as he found himself looking at all of the people. Everyone was enraptured, except, perhaps, for the little ones who slept snuggled up in their parent's arms.

The Gospel reading was one he hadn't even thought on for some time - the Christmas Story. He knew of the birth of Christ, but somehow, tonight everything felt a little different, or... Perhaps it was... New??? He stood with the congregation, listening intently, and realized there was much for him to think about. Uncertainty in his beliefs had never suited George well, but he didn't mind so much in this case. It felt good - good to feel wonder...

It felt good to believe...

The pastor's homily was intriguing. George enjoyed the more conversational style. Ideas, thoughts, and feelings were presented in such a way as to make him fascinated with the Birth of the Savior.

And then things took kind of an unexpected turn...

"There are many and all parts of this day that must not be forgotten," The Pastor said sincerely. "But one error, one blight upon our very existence, must never be repeated among all others - the turning away of people in need by those in a position to offer warmth and comfort. Imagine, for a moment, the inn-keeper that night..."

"Was his Inn so full that there was not a corner, a hallway, or a room that could be made available for the birth of our Savior? Perhaps Mary and Joseph

couldn't pay, or perhaps they looked a bit shabby, but could a pregnant woman not have been offered a warm bed simply because it would have been the right thing to do? Isn't it the right thing for a man to sleep one night on an earthen floor so the mother of a child - to say nothing of being the mother of the Christ Child - could have been warm, and comfortable, and safe?"

"I think it's a true reminder of the reason for this season whenever someone in need is invited to share this time with family or friends. It's humanity's little way of making up for the Inn-Keeper's particular sin whenever we, as people, bring those in need closer to us during this time. Jesus taught us to treat others as we wish to be treated, and we all remember how much we wouldn't want to be alone on this blessed day. We remember the teachings of Christ and praise him as we help each other, and as we welcome new friends into our hearts, on everyday, but particularly as we celebrate his birth."

"It may be hard for some to accept that help. Perhaps it's easier to believe that they're alone for a reason, that they've been forsaken, or that their loved ones have been taken from them by God for a vindictive or vicious purpose. But to feel this way, and to deny the efforts of others who offer them the blessings of Christ's teachings, is Sinful. It is difficult to be alone - I know this in my own life. But to be alone, and to be without family, must mean that God has called our loved ones to a higher purpose, and that we're left to share the blessings of friendship offered by others. We who are alone praise God by accepting the generous love of friends he has sent to comfort us."

"Just as Jesus Christ brought offered unconditional friendship and love to others, turn now and offer a sign of friendship to others," The pastor said with wide spread arms.

George didn't quite know what to expect at this point. The pastor stepped toward the congregation, and began shaking hands and exchanging hugs with nearby parishoners. He watched as members of the congregation turned and hugged family members, shook hands with strangers, and clapped friends on the back. Anna and Alan Mackenzie embraced in a warm hug next to him, and then Anna turned to George and met him with a hug and a "Merry Christmas" as well.

George had just shook Alan's hand when he felt a rush of cold air on his left side. He turned toward the aisle, and there stood a rosy-cheeked, shivering Captain Allison Mackenzie, grinning from ear-to-ear.

"Sorry I'm late," she said with a smile. "Got held up in traffic."

George looked to her to be at a loss for words, and to be honest, he was. Their argument over his coming flashed into memory, along with the feeling of

desertion he'd felt as he stood in the snow watching her fly off and leave him in the middle of nowhere. And then the rest of it...

He started to smile... Gruffly at first... But it was a smile...

"Don't quite know what to say to you," He admitted.

Allison tilted her head and offered, "How about Merry Christmas?"

"Merry Christmas, then, Allie," He said as his smile widened a bit.

"Merry Christmas to you too, George," she said as she hugged her old friend.

Allison walked next to George, and behind her parents as they filed out of the church with the rest of the crowd. A bit of snow was falling, the moon was out, and stars peeked through the clouds to make an absolutely beautiful evening as they stepped out the door.

"So what happened, anyway?" George asked.

"The downlink to Earth gave way when a transmitter went off-line. Ordinarily, it's pretty simple to switch to another one, but since the ship was abandoned and the downlink had failed, someone had to go make the change to a backup transmitter," Allison explained. George, her parents, and she stood in a little circle off to one side of the doors of the church. "Long way to go to punch a button..."

Allie's mother wiped at her eyes. "I didn't know what to think when you went screaming off like that."

"I'm sorry, Mom," Allie said as she moved and met Anna in another hug.

"Don't be sorry, Little One," Anna said. "I'm so proud of you. I just worry."

"It's good to have people to worry about me," Allie said with a satisfied grin.

"Right George?"

"Yes Ma'am," George agreed easily.

"Now I have two kids to worry about," Anna said as she patted George's shoulder.

"Where are you parked?" Alan asked her. "Old blue run okay for you?"

"Not exactly," Allie smiled. She nodded toward a patch of trees in a field behind the church and winked at George.

George nodded. "Is that by-the-book, Captain?"

"I suppose not," Allison said coyly. "George, I think I owe you an apology for how I acted this afternoon. I shouldn't have thrown my weight around like I did." Her head hung down a bit before she added, "I know what happened to

you - it's in your file. I just... Well, maybe I shouldn't have been so by-the-book then, either."

"I've seen a lot of skippers come and go in 44 years," George said. "And you have what it takes to be the best, Allie. Don't apologize for caring about the people that crew for you. I never once bothered to apologize for looking after my Captain, and I don't think I'll start now. All comes out fair..."

Alan smiled. "Shall we adjourn to a warm fire at home, folks?"

"That sounds nice," Allie said with a yawn. "Coming with me, George?"

"Absolutely not," George said gruffly. He turned to Anna and playfully added, "It's been a long time since I've driven a lady home in a car."

Alan looked utterly bewildered as his wife wrapped her arm around George's and led him away.

"By the book?" Allie shouted after George.

"By your book, Captain," George shouted in return. "By your book!"

Allison smiled at her father and wiggled her eyebrows. "Up for a little ride?"

I've learned so many lessons this holiday season. Been the best I've had since I lost my Dad, and perhaps even before that a bit. My thanks and love to the Williams family - for the lessons I've received about caring for others, and...

Wink For all the lessons yet to come.

Happy New Year, everyone. My wish for you all is to find a little bit of 'Allie', or *Grin* 'Williams' in your soul, stage a little revolution of your own, and enrich someone's life

Peace and Love - Eric

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