

SIMULATED MADNESS

By Judith Waidlich

Early July 2307

Lt. Mick Kellor and Captain Judith Waidlich are sitting in a simulator. Mick is the pilot and Judy is the co-pilot.

Waidlich turns towards Kellor. "Had some friends cook up a little something for you, since you've been criticizing my piloting abilities. Run simulation Waidlich K2."

The viewscreen shows the shuttle in space. A phaser just misses the shuttle; alarms are going off.

"Enemy vessel closing in. I'm heading towards the nearest planet. Shut the damn alarm off," orders Kellor as he takes evasive maneuvers.

The shuttle is weaving back and forth, trying to evade the enemy attacker. The shuttle zooms toward the planet and through the planet's atmosphere. Suddenly there is a hit, and then a crash.

A voice comes over the comm system. "Fatal collision. No survivors."

Waidlich looks at Kellor. "Not so easy, is it?"

Mick, with a determined look on his face, says, "Restart program."

Again the shuttle is in space. A phaser misses the shuttle, the angle different this time. Waidlich kills the proximity alarms and mutes the red alert. Mick is expertly dodging every phaser shot. Again, he heads toward the planet and plows through the atmosphere. He gets low enough to see land formations and water. He evades a few more shots, but gets hit and the shuttle goes down in the water.

Once again the voice comes over the comm system. "Shuttle breaks apart over water. No survivors. Occupants either dead at breakup or drown."

"At least we saw the surface this time," says Waidlich, with a lopsided grin. "But we died, again."

"Okay, I'm getting the hang of this. Restart." Mick's hands are poised over the controls.

The program starts. The enemy ship comes out of nowhere, firing shots. Shields reflect the first shot as Mick takes evasive action. They go to the planet. Mick dives through the atmosphere and breaks through the heavy cloud cover. Again there is a fatal shot and the shuttle dives into the ground.

"Okay, we died by crashing into the ground," says an amused captain. "Had enough?"

"No, I can do this, run it again," says an even more determined Kellor.

The viewscreen once again shows the stars. The ship attacks. Kellor takes evasive action. In the end, the shuttle crashes in thick jungle foliage, and the voice declares, "No survivors."

Waidlich looks at Kellor, who says, "Don't even say it." After a pause, "Okay, it's much easier from the other seat. Let's get something to eat."

"Okay, let's go," replies Judy.

Kellor and Waidlich get some food and find an empty table off in one corner of the mess hall. They begin their meal in silence, Kellor very preoccupied with his thoughts.

"If I wanted to eat in silence, I would have eaten alone," notes Waidlich.

"Just trying to think of what I could do differently," says Kellor.

"I believe there is a part of the program that analyzes your actions. Of course, you could do everything right and still crash," replies Waidlich.

They finish their meals in silence. At the end, Judy says, "I have to touch base with the XO and have a brief chat with the Chief Flight Officer about that simulation."

"Mind if I join you?" asks Mick.

"With the Chief Flight Officer?" asks Judy. Mick nods and Judy replies, "Meet me in the shuttlebay at 1930 hours." Judy rises, takes her tray of dishes to the reclamation slot, and exits the mess hall.

Kellor joins Waidlich for her chat with Chief Flight Officer Lieutenant Commander Amy Wilson in the shuttlebay.

"So far, all the pilots have failed the simulation miserably," reports Wilson.

"Good. They're supposed to," says Waidlich. Kellor's eyebrows go up in surprise, since he thought that this was punishment for something he did or didn't do.

"I need all my pilots prepared for any and all eventualities," continues Waidlich.

"Have you passed it?" asks Kellor.

"Lived it. Don't you remember that Kenosian planet? We walked away from that crash," replies Judy matter-of-factly.

"Thought it was based on that," replies Amy.

"I asked some friends out at Utopia Planitia to prepare it months ago, and had it based on some of my past experiences. We need to keep our pilots fresh. Don't need them getting bored between assignments. Don't you agree?" asks Judy.

"Yes," replies Wilson.

"How does everyone feel about it?" inquires Waidlich.

"Well, there seems to be a competition to see who can beat the sim first," answers Wilson.

"Keep me informed. Hopefully this will solve that boredom problem...for a while," says Waidlich. Judy and Mick exit the shuttlebay and take a turbo-lift to Deck 5.

They exit the turbo-lift and Judy walks quickly to her quarters. Mick, not expecting her hasty departure, goes after her. He catches her as she enters her quarters and follows her in. The doors whoosh shut behind them. Waidlich turns to face her "guest". Mick says formally, "Permission to speak freely?"

Waidlich gives her assent. "Granted."

Mick starts to pace around her quarters, while Judy looks on, slightly amused. Mick pauses, looks Judy in the eyes, and says, "I thought that simulation was just for me. But everyone has to take it?"

Waidlich says, "You don't feel special? All you pilots seemed bored, like you needed a challenge."

"I thought..." Mick starts, and then stops.

"You still on duty?" inquires Judy.

"No," replies Kellor.

Waidlich walks over to an overstuffed large chair and with her hand waves to the piece of furniture. "Have a seat on the sofa."

"What sofa?" asks a puzzled Kellor, staring at the piece of furniture indicated.

"That sofa," replies Waidlich.

"That's not a sofa," Kellor gently insists.

"Okay, on the loveseat," suggests Waidlich.

"That's not a loveseat," says Kellor with a bit of a laugh. "It's an armchair with delusions of grandeur."

"Just have a seat," responds Waidlich. Since Kellor doesn't move, she adds, "Or leave. Your choice. By the way, at ease." And Judy sits down, tucks her left leg under her, and looks at Mick. He comes over and squeezes down next to her onto the chair.

Judy looks at Kellor, reaches over, caresses the side of his face, and then leans in and gives him a kiss. She leans back and says, "This would be easier if I was still XO. I want to keep things private, while we can. You feel better?"

Mick responds by giving a kiss back.

Judy pulls back and says, "Okay, we settle this now!" She gets up from the sofa, pulls Mick up, turns, and heads out into the corridor.

Mick follows her out of the room, into the corridor and into the turbo-lift. They ride the lift down, exit, and continue on toward the shuttlebay and the simulator room. Fortunately, it is empty. Judy enters, and Mick follows her. She takes the pilot seat and activates the simulation program as Mick settles into the co-pilot chair.

The viewscreen lights up, with the usual starfield, and an enemy fighter zooms by, firing weapons. Waidlich weaves about and heads toward the planet. They break from cloud cover over a lagoon with columns of stone rising out of it. Judy weaves around various columns and through some arches, the enemy pilot trying to keep up. The enemy's shot hits them and they start losing altitude. The enemy, though, crashes against one of the stone pylons. Waidlich fights to keep the craft aloft, but makes a hard landing. The voice comes over the intercom. "Crash landing. Occupants severely injured. Will probably live long enough to be rescued." Waidlich turns and smiles at Mick.

"You still crashed," he says petulantly.

"But we survived," she says.

"Shuttle is nearly destroyed," he counters.

"But we survived," she repeats. "Oh, you're just jealous that I did better than you." She gets up and exits the simulator.

After a moment, Mick exits and has to run to catch up with her. He spins her around, takes her in his arms, and kisses her passionately. When they come up for air, she says, "I'm not interested," and turns away.

He is stunned. He spins her around and finds that she is trying to keep from laughing. He kisses her again and again. When they come up for air, Mick says, "That turbo-lift is taking an awfully long time to get here." They part and then the door

whooshes open. They enter the lift and take it back to Waidlich's quarters.

They squeeze together on the overstuffed chair. "Now where were we?" she asks.

"Right about here," Mick replies, and he takes her in his arms and kisses her. When they come up for air again, Mick says, "I feel better, now." Judy manages to murmur, "Good," just before Mick kisses her again.

In the morning, Waidlich gets out of bed and goes to the shower. After getting dressed, she turns and says to Kellor, "You going to lie there all day?"

"Just thinking," he replies.

"Well if it's about that simulator, I have an idea about how to beat it," she says. Mick sits up, and Waidlich continues, "I'll tell you about it when I'm off shift, and we can try it out later." Judy exits her quarters to report to the bridge.

After their duty shifts end, Waidlich and Kellor meet up in the shuttlebay. Kellor tells her, "So far, you've had the best results. And you haven't tried it as many times as the other pilots."

She shakes her head and says, "Follow me and follow my lead." Just before they enter the craft, she leans over and whispers in his ear. They go in, Judy settles in as pilot, and Mick sits in the co-pilot position.

The simulation comes to an end. The voice comes over intercom: "Enemy vessel: Destroyed. Safe landing. Minor injuries."

"Yes!" says an excited Mick. "We did it!"

"Let's celebrate in my quarters," Judy whispers in his ear.

THE END