

FAE FIGHTERS

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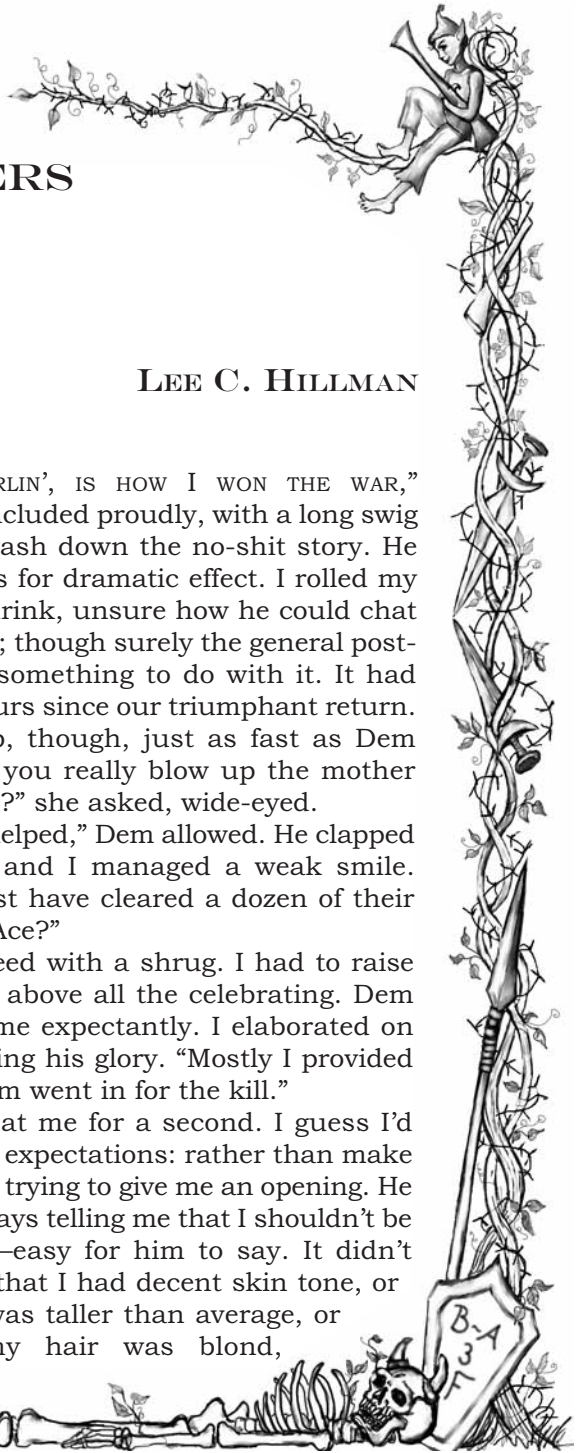
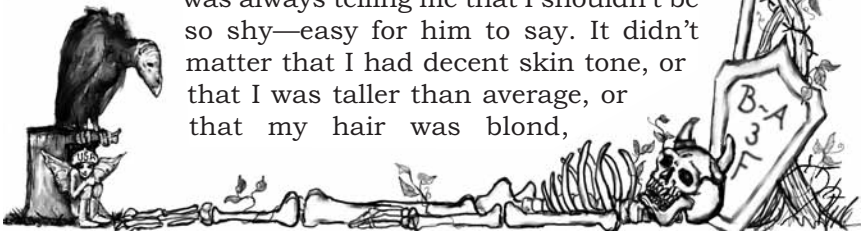
AND THAT, DARLIN', IS HOW I WON THE WAR," Demelian concluded proudly, with a long swig of mead to wash down the no-shit story. He rippled his blue wings for dramatic effect. I rolled my eyes and sipped my drink, unsure how he could chat up the pixies so easily; though surely the general post-battle euphoria had something to do with it. It had been barely twelve hours since our triumphant return.

The pix ate it up, though, just as fast as Dem could shovel it. "Did you really blow up the mother ship? All on your own?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Well, my squad helped," Dem allowed. He clapped me on the shoulder and I managed a weak smile. "Nester, here, he must have cleared a dozen of their fighters alone, right, Ace?"

"Uh, yeah," I agreed with a shrug. I had to raise my voice to be heard above all the celebrating. Dem widened his eyes at me expectantly. I elaborated on my role without stealing his glory. "Mostly I provided covering fire while Dem went in for the kill."

Demelian stared at me for a second. I guess I'd been wrong about his expectations: rather than make him look good, he was trying to give me an opening. He was always telling me that I shouldn't be so shy—easy for him to say. It didn't matter that I had decent skin tone, or that I was taller than average, or that my hair was blond,



which was unusual for males, or even that my pale blue wings had nary a blemish. Shy has nothing to do with looks. Dem was just too outgoing to get the problem.

See, everyone encourages pilots to mate casually, but fae who prefer other fae over females, such as flirtatious pixies or brood-minded nixies, are harder to find. Since my promotion, I'd been too busy proving myself to worry about indulging my predispositions. Sure, I'd been with other fae in ground crews on other bases, but that was *ground crew*. Nobody cares what mechanics do on their off hours. Pilots are . . . different. More prestigious, more visible—and much more valued. Consequently, the pressure to breed can be intense. Suns, I had enough against me as a former tech; I had only recently started to feel accepted in our wing. I wasn't eager to invite a fresh round of hazing by making an issue out of my discomfort with females. Dem's well-meaning but misplaced prodding made it, if anything, worse. He'd been a real ally and I didn't quite know how to disabuse his assumptions without the risk of losing his support.

Losing Dem's support was looking likely at the moment, but for a wholly different reason. He twitched his wings at me in irritation: I wasn't following his plan. Still, not one to waste opportunity, he took up the tale again, describing how the PF squadrons converged on the Dwar mothership and how we'd found ourselves nearly on board while strafing its hull to a crisp.

"If that's so, you boys must be with the 35th," another voice called from behind us. We turned; the new speaker was female, tall, and lithe. Her red wings and the slim pulse-sword she carried proclaimed her unit loud and clear.

"You bet we're from the 3-5," Dem confirmed, introducing us warmly. He pulled the pix into our circle effortlessly, adding a lascivious: "I thought I knew all the Valkyr crews in this sector." (Dem probably did, too; I bet he'd worked his way through about half the pixies on station, and we'd only been billeted at Ophiuchus for six months.)

"Just transferred." The look she gave him made *me* blush—not that that took much effort—and her wings fluttered quickly near the tips. "Relax, fly-fae," she told me, after saying her name was Nilda. "War's over, cutie; time to have some fun."

"I'm having fun," I lied. "I'll even get the next round."

I elbowed my way to the counter. The ensign doling out the mead was entranced by a pretty nix down the other end, ignoring my attempt to catch his eye. I considered bailing, but I'd promised the round and I wanted to deliver. I moved toward the