

Through the Fire and Into the Light

Part 1: Inferno

I've done my duty, and I've done no more.
Henry Fielding

"Ka-boom!"

The earsplitting noise was accompanied by a nauseating feeling of movement. As the cacophony reverberated, it felt as if the walls had imploded then just as suddenly, as if they had exploded. Those who weren't tossed immediately to the hangar deck of *Space Station Nexus* covered their ears in agony from the deafening noise. Mass confusion was the unspoken order of the morning as the thick acrid smoke burned exposed eyes and burned unprotected lungs. Those lucky enough to have protection, still had to fight an overwhelming feeling of queasiness. Be that as it may, many simply ignored their discomfort and plunged straight ahead to the source of the explosion.

"What the hell?" shouted Dwight "Ike" Ivanan as he covered his aching ears.

"I bloody well don't know. That's the last time I'll wish for more excitement, that's for certain," shouted back Doctor Arcadia Argent, the Station's Chief Medical Officer.

Luckily for all concerned, Medical Personnel were there early this morning to assist with performing routine flight checks on all three wings in preparation for a training exercise. Arcadia was pleased to see that everyone immediately kicked into crisis mode and was busy attending to any personnel who required immediate assistance.

"*Ike!*" she shouted to her Chief of Staff. "Let's go, we may be needed somewhere else!"

"Right, Darce," he yelled back as they both trotted off towards what they presumed was the source of the explosion.

No one had to tell them where they were needed -- they simply followed the acrid smoke and noise. While both officers were veterans of combat, Ike had gotten used to it while Arcadia steadfastly refused to. When they arrived, they noted that one of the Nighthawk fighters was on fire but the damage control team seemed to have the situation under control.

"Over here, Darce," Ike called out to his boss.

They ran over to the far side where Arcadia noted several injured maintenance workers had gathered. A superficial examination revealed that none were serious. She had just whipped out her medical tricorder to check on one of them when another maintenance worker staggered over and collapsed in front of her.

"Easy now," Arcadia soothed the woman as she slowly moved the probe over her body. The calmness in Arcadia's voice seemed to help because the maintenance worker finally stopped trembling.

"Tell me what happened?" Arcadia asked as she took out a hypospray.

"Dunno.... We were cleaning the capacitors on that 'hawk and suddenly, something blew. I just dunno..." her voice trailed off as she began quietly sobbing.

"This will help," Arcadia began as she injected a sedative and painkiller. Arcadia looked around and saw an EMT coming towards her. "Beam her to the hospital, stat."

"Aye, ma'am," the EMT replied as he carefully placed the injured worker on a gurney and ran off to the staging area.

Noting that everything seemed under control, Arcadia walked over towards the smoldering wreckage that once was a Nighthawk fighter. She stood near the remains of the right wing when she heard shouting near the other wing. She ran over to see if she could of assistance.

"*Lars is in there!*" shouted Kieran "Blackie" Hawthorne to a maintenance worker who was clearly trying to restrain him. The 13th Squadron Commander was clearly in pain. He winced as he tried to stop the bleeding on his arm. He had tried to climb back into the wrecked Nighthawk but evidentially had fallen back to the deck.

"Are you sure, Commander Hawthorne?" Arcadia asked with a cough because the air was still thick with irritating smoke.

"Yes, ma'am. I helped Petty Officer Dallas Kirkland and I thought that Lars was behind me. When he wasn't, I looked back in the 'hawk and--" Blackie attempted to get up again and felt back when he was overcome by pain.

"Stay put, Blackie, I'll get him," Arcadia interrupted. She looked around for someone to assist her but everyone seemed to be busy doing something else. Not wanting to waste any further time, she plunged into the wreckage. She frantically

poked around and finally located Lars. Blackie was right he was in here but was also badly hurt. Arcadia suddenly stopped and noticed the smell in the air. *It can't be.... No, that's what it is...Ever-clear. I must get out of here and fast!....* Arcadia noted that Lars had also smelled the toxic fumes and put on a respirator before he collapsed. She hastily looked around for another mask. However, she could spare no more time to search for one. Realizing it was becoming harder for her to breathe, Arcadia proceeded to free Lars. Her lungs started to feel as if they were on fire. Breathing was becoming more impossible by the second but with a newly found surge of strength, she grabbed Lars and started out of the wreckage.

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"Is everything under control here?" Captain Terrence Crown Blair, Director of Flight Operations yelled out. He spotted Ike and ran over just as they both heard shouting coming from the other side of the damaged hawk. "What the *hell* was that?"

"I don't know but it's coming from over there," Ike responded. They immediately ran towards the source of the noise.

Once they arrived, Ike exclaimed, "*Damn* it all!" He suddenly stopped and sniffed the air all around him as he fought off a sudden wave of nausea. "If you aren't using any respiratory apparatus, get out now!" he shouted over the din.

Ike turned around to suggest that he and Terrence leave as they had no respirators on but Terrence had already rushed off. Ike was leaving when he almost tripped over Blackie who was attempting to stand up again.

"Blackie, time to get out of here!" Ike began dragging him out of the immediate vicinity of the damaged 'hawk while he whipped out his medical tricorder to take his vital signs.

"Never mind about me!" Blackie stopped and coughed then shouted to Ike. "*She's* in there!"

"*Who* is in there?" Ike coughed as he turned around to look at the damaged Nighthawk.

"*Doctor Argent!*" Blackie began but then coughed. "She went in to get Lars and--"

Blackie suddenly stopped. Ike was about to say something to him when he noticed that Blackie's eyes had become fixed on the damaged craft. Ike turned around to look at what had captivated his attention. They both watched in horror

as Arcadia slowly dragged out an injured Lars Lysander. Suddenly, she fell to one knee; her body shaking violently with each cough.

Ike shouted for a medic to tend Lars then immediately ran over to her and dragged her over to the far wall, away from the smoldering 'hawk. Her light blue surgical jumpsuit was dirty and torn. She was bleeding heavily from her nose and mouth. Ike didn't need to scan her to sense that she had absorbed a toxic dose of Ever-clear. She slowly opened her eyes and motioned for Ike to come closer. Ike noticed how difficult it was for her to breathe. He leaned over just as she managed to whisper to him, "Bourbon..."

Part 2: Foreboding

*You pass through arrogance, you pass through hurt, you pass through
an ever present past and it's best not to wait for luck to save you*
Lou Reed

"Captain Argent!" Sparky shouted as he interrupted Station Commander Kyle Argent in a meeting with his Executive Officer.

"What, Sparky?" he asked, clearly annoyed with the interruption.

"There's been an accident on the hangar deck!"

Both Kyle and Sasha sprang from their chairs, ready to leave.

"How bad?" Kyle asked, grabbing his mobile link as they both headed out the door.

"Real bad, Captain. You should hurry!" Sparky all but urged.

"Let them know we're on our way, Sparky. Route priority calls to our mobile links."

"Will do, Captain Argent!" Sparky replied.

No words were exchanged as Captain Argent and Commander Romanova made their way to the hangar deck. By the time they arrived, most of the thick acrid smoke had dissipated, only the smell of destruction hung in the air. However, instead of the expected cacophony, they were met by an eerie silence.

"I have a bad feeling about this..." Sasha ventured as they cautiously walked through the flight deck.

Both Kyle and Sasha were immediately drawn to the wreckage of the Nighthawk, however, Kyle felt his heart skip a beat as he watched Ike drag a body in a surgical jumpsuit towards the far wall. Suddenly, Ike spotted Kyle and frantically motioned to him.

Kyle ran over to Ike and immediately froze. He saw the vision he feared the most: his wife, her face covered with blood, her bright green eyes dull and lifeless. He knelt down and leaned over just in time for her to look at him and mouth the words: "I'll always love you, Kyle." He reached out to hold her hand as she slipped into unconsciousness.

"There's no time to lose!" Ike told Kyle as he stood to look around for assistance finally noticing how eerily quiet the deck had become. Spotting no EMT, he whipped out his comlink putting all his years as a Marine Corpsman to work.

"Sparky, get me the Trauma center!"

"*Right away, Ike!*" Sparky rapidly replied.

"Trauma, Cushing here."

"Harvey, I'm bringing up an overdose of Ever-clear. Get a tank of PlasmaGel ready and call the transporter room. I need a priority point to point beam out locked on my link directly to the trauma ward."

Ike closed the channel and leaned back to check on Arcadia but was interrupted by the transporter room informing him that they were ready.

"Kyle, do you want to come with me?" Ike quietly asked.

"I'll take care of everything here, Captain," Sasha solemnly offered.

Terrence spotted Kyle and Sasha in the corner and came running over. He stopped and looked down at Arcadia. He winced when he saw her bloodied face and labored breathing. He looked back to Kyle, "I'm so sorry..."

Before Kyle could respond, Sasha interrupted him. "Captain Blair, I'm going to be staying here to assist."

Terrence looked to Kyle and then back to Sasha. "Very well, Commander Romanova. I can use the help." Before they left, Terrence stopped and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Just let me know if there is anything you need."

Kyle looked at Terrence and nodded.

"Transporter room," Ike began, "three to beam out on this signal. And be gentle," he added sadly, "we have a critically ill patient here."

"Aye, sir!" the transporter room acknowledged.

Kyle stood next to Ike as he held Arcadia while the hangar deck disappeared all around them suddenly replaced by the trauma center.

"PlasmaGel -- *stat!*" Ike barked to Nurse Clark Barton.

"We're ready, sir," Clark calmly replied as he and Ike gently placed Arcadia on a gurney. The quickly pushed her to the isolation unit that held the gel bath.

Kyle started to follow them but was stopped by Ike gently placing a hand on his shoulder. "There's nothing you can do, Kyle. Once they put her in the tank, they'll let us know..." Ike suddenly stopped and looked at Kyle.

"What's wrong, Ike?" Kyle asked as his eyes locked on the gurney being pushed into the trauma room.

Ike concentrated while he allowed his eyes to drift off into the distance. "Darce said something about 'Bourbon' but it doesn't ring a bell with me. You?"

"Doesn't mean anything to me, Ike," Kyle replied absently as he followed Ike into his Chief of Staff's Office.

"Sparky, do a search on Bourbon," Ike commanded as he sat behind his desk while Kyle took a chair in front.

"Biographical, geographical, botanical, consumable, musical or ideological?"

"Good question Sparky. Start with the personnel and confine your search to 'fleet personnel of the last twenty years.'"

"Righto. You want me to read 'em to you or do you want to read 'em yourself?" Sparky asked.

"Put them on the screen Sparky."

"Will do!"

Ike scanned over the various Bourbons and his eyes immediately zeroed in on one name: Captain Andre Pierre Bourbon, Wing Commander of the 4711 Carrier Air Wing also known as "Piper's Plainsman."

"I remember him..." Ike replied absently. He looked over to Kyle expecting a question from him but none was forthcoming. Knowing that Kyle would remain wrapped in his personal cocoon, Ike silently continued his search. Finally deciding he had enough of "bourbon," he switched parameters.

"Sparky, bring up all references on the treatment of Ever-clear poisoning."

"Here you are, Ike."

Ike had Sparky take that information and tediously cross-reference the medical literature using various search criteria. He was so engrossed in his research that he missed Nurse Clark Barton come into his office.

"Lieutenant Ivanan," Clark began as he handed Ike a datapadd, "Ensign Fry wanted me to give you the status reports on all the injuries this morning."

"Thank you Clark."

Clark looked at Ike and then looked to Captain Argent. He felt as if he should say something to Captain Argent but Ike waived him off. Clark sighed, "If that's all, sir..."

"Thank you Clark," Ike replied as he continued to scan the datapadd and noticed that they had been very lucky today. Other than Arcadia, the two other more serious injuries were Lars Lysander and Ensign Brett Dallenbach, a 13th Squadron Tactical Officer. Of the two, Lars was the most seriously injured with burns to his hands and arm; Brett suffered from a severely lacerated leg. All the other injuries were fairly minor and required little additional care.

Ike put the datapadd down and continued the search with Sparky until they came upon an article concerning the treatment of Ever-clear overdose on a patient only identified by the initials of APB during the One-Year War.

"*We've got a winner!*" Sparky exclaimed.

"Hot damn!" Ike spoke in his usual understated way, finally shaking Kyle out of his reverie.

"What... Ike?" Kyle asked absently.

"Kyle... this is important..." Ike began. When Kyle just looked at him with a vacant face, Ike stood up to walk around his desk to face him.

"*At-tention!*" the veteran Marine began in his finest Drill Instructor voice, "Buck up, soldier! Go home and check Arcadia's private files -- especially her off-line files -- for *any* reference to 'Bourbon'. I also need access to her private files, so you'll need to issue an override for me. Are the parameters of this mission, clear, Trooper?"

Kyle looked up to Ike and for a moment his mind drifted to the personal hell they had both endured on Tandoshan. He was the consummate Sergeant back then and things hadn't changed much. Few, never mind the equivalent of a mere Ensign, would have dared to talk to Kyle that way. But then very few people were like Ike Ivanan.

"This trooper reads you five by five, Sarge," Kyle replied with a forced grin, "but if I may be so frank -- why?"

"Apparently, Darce was in on establishing a new baseline treatment for Ever-clear poisoning. Her personal notes just might be of help. "

"You've got it, Ike... Sparky!" Kyle tiredly called out as he rubbed his forehead.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Authorize Second Lieutenant Dwight Ivanan full access to Doctor Arcadia Argent's medical and personal computer files."

"Yes, sir!" Sparky replied.

"Kyle..." Ike began quietly, in a voice more reminiscent of a friend rather than a D.I., "she should be in the gel by now. Why don't we see her before you go?"

Kyle looked to Ike, his face again impassive. Ike motioned Kyle to follow him. Both men walked over to the trauma center where Chief Nurse, Ensign Elizabeth Fry, met them outside one of the private trauma rooms.

"Liz?" Ike began. "I don't think you've met Captain Argent, have you?"

"No, I haven't. Sorry it has to be under these circumstances, Captain," Liz began. She waited a second for Kyle to respond and then continued, "Everything's set, Lieutenant Ivanan. Would you like to come in now?"

Ike looked to Kyle, who was obviously again lost in his own thoughts, so Ike answered for them.

"Yes, thank you Liz."

He led Kyle into the dimly lit room that held a faint smell of sweetness. On the far wall lay a total immersion tank filled with a honey colored fluid illuminated by the sensor lights that were mounted on the wall. A nude Arcadia lay suspended in the tank, buoyed by the viscous liquid that bathed her body, inside and outside. Kyle walked over and put his hand on the tank. Ike stood by as he watched Kyle communicating silently with his wife.

"How long does she have to be in there, Ike?" Kyle quietly asked while he kept his eyes fixed on Arcadia.

"Eighteen hours Kyle. The PlasmaGel will bathe her lung tissues, repair them and maintain sufficient oxygen level. This Ever-clear is nasty business. The PlasmaGel is the best treatment we have...."

Kyle suddenly whipped around to face Ike. "*But?*"

"We've known each other a long time, Kyle," Ike began quietly. "I'm not gonna bullshit you. Her chances are fifty-fifty, otherwise, we're looking at more drastic methods."

Kyle turned away from Ike and back to Arcadia as he tried to keep his emotions in check. "Thanks."

Liz came over and handed Ike a box. "Kyle, you might want to keep this," Ike handed it to Kyle. Kyle opened the box to reveal Arcadia's wedding ring.

"We removed it before she was placed in the PlasmaGel bath."

Kyle took the ring out and placed it in his left palm, slowly pulling his fingers around it until the fist he formed became stark white.

"Kyle...." Ike put his hand on his shoulder. "We're going to do the best we can. In the meantime, your standing around won't help her or you." Ike decided that being gentle wasn't going to do Kyle any good. "*Soldier*, you got a job to do!" Ike began sternly. "*Get to it!*"

Kyle looked up at Ike, still tightly holding Arcadia's ring in his fist. He looked back to Arcadia and then to Ike. "Call me if you need me."

Ike only nodded as he watched Kyle leave the room. He walked over to the tank and looked at Arcadia floating in the gel. "We'll pull you through this Darce, I promise," he whispered before he left the room for her office to search her private files in hope of finding any additional information that would maximize her survival.

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"How's she doing, Liz?" began Nurse Barton as he walked into the trauma room.

"As well as can be expected, Clark," she replied as she made notes in her datapadd.

"This Ever-clear is *really* horrid." He stared at the tank holding Arcadia. "This is the first time I've ever seen a case."

"Me too -- it's pretty rare. I know that the maintenance people are always careful around the coolant as there are relatively few medical problems of this type but I don't think these guys know what they are *really* dealing with. This is evil stuff -- it literally dries out the lung tissues. Luckily, the PlasmaGel works in half the cases."

"Half?"

"Half..." Head Nurse Elizabeth Fry replied sadly. "I really wish there was some way we could increase her prospects. I'm not sure--"

"I may have something," Ike interrupted as he walked into the room. He stopped in front of the tank. Arcadia looked so serene floating in the ecru liquid in stark contrast with the fact that she was fighting for her very survival.

"What's that?" Clark asked full of hope.

"Darce was one of the people who worked on one of the first studies that established another baseline for the treatment for Ever-clear overdoses. As toxic as it is," Ike explained, "Ever-clear has been in use for a long time. At least the new Shadowhawks use the less toxic Cibomatto as a coolant. I have here a slightly different treatment option. Considering the circumstances," Ike concluded as he nodded at the tank in which Arcadia was floating, "I think it's the way to go."

"Oh?" Liz asked.

Before Ike could elaborate further, Doctor Jeanne Charcot walked in.

"Did you find it, Ike?" she asked.

"Yep," he replied as he handed her the datapadd.

"*Oui...* Very, very interesting," the internal physician replied with a tinge of a French accent. "It is not very different than what we are doing now, but worth a try."

"I thought so too," Ike replied.

Jeanne quickly drafted up a new set of treatment orders and issued them. "Here, Liz, follow this plan. Increase the oxygen content by ten percent each hour.

Keep an eye on her vital signs and if anything changes, contact me immediately." Jeanne handed Liz the new orders and quickly left to take care of another patient.

"Aye, Doctor," Liz responded as she began to reprogram the sensors.

"I'm going back to my office, Liz," Ike mumbled mostly to himself.

Liz allowed herself a wry smile. "I'll let you know if anything changes, Ike."

"Thank you," Ike absently replied as he walked out of the door to update Kyle on the new treatment plan.

Part 3: Restoration

*Health is my expected heaven.
John Keats*

Despite the fact that it was close to 0200 and he'd been up almost 24 hours, with the able assistance of several gallons of coffee, Ike felt fully alert.

"Sparky."

"Yeah, Ike?" replied the station computer.

"Computer's never sleep, eh Sparky?"

"Nope, us 'puters are always on. Need something, Ike?"

"Are you able to tell me if Captain Argent is still awake?"

"Yeah, he just accessed some station files."

"Patch me through to him." Ike didn't have long to wait until Kyle's haggard face appeared on his link. "Kyle?" *My God, he looks like hell*, Ike thought.

"Something wrong?" Kyle asked still managing to keep his emotions under control, bracing himself for any bad news.

"We're going to be taking Darce out of the gel shortly. Since you're up, why don't you come on down?" *Besides*, he sadly considered, *no one should be alone at a time like this*.

"I'll be right there, Ike." Kyle tiredly replied.

Ike closed the link and his eyes for what seemed to him only a few moments when Nurse Clark Barton suddenly appeared in his office. "Lieutenant Ivanan, Ensign Fry wanted me to tell you that everything's ready and we should be able to do the extraction in a few minutes."

"Tell everyone that Captain Argent is on his way. We'll start once he gets here."

"Aye, sir," Clark replied as he left only to be replaced by the newly arrived Captain Argent.

"That was fast," Ike began. "Have a seat, Kyle. It won't take long but the extraction from the gel isn't pretty. We'll clean her up a bit and get her looking her best for you."

Clark stifled a yawn as he walked into Ike's office. While his duty cycle had ended many hours ago, he along with many of the staff didn't want to leave and Ike didn't discourage them from staying.

"Lieutenant, we're ready..."

Ike stretched as he stood up from his desk. "Kyle," he walked over to face his friend, "it won't take us long now."

Kyle didn't care if she wouldn't look her best all he wanted at this moment to be there when they took his wife out of the gel.

But Ike knew it would be best if he waited until she was out and breathing on her own... *Assuming the gel did its work. Repaired her lungs. If not...*

Kyle watched as Ike left him once again alone with his thoughts and with Arcadia's wedding ring that he'd placed securely in his tunic right next to his heart.

Ike picked up the smock which was laid out for him and quickly secured it before he set foot into the trauma room.

"Are we ready?" he asked both Jeanne Charcot and Clark Barton who were all ready standing next to the treatment tank.

While plucking Arcadia from the tank wasn't difficult, it was very messy. After she was placed on the biobed, Clark and Ike towed her off while Jeanne quickly put the oxygen infusion tube down her throat to help displace any PlasmaGel that didn't immediately diffuse out of her lungs upon exposure to the ambient air.

"Vital signs?" Jeanne asked as she ensured that the tube was in place.

"Holding steady, ma'am," Nurse Barton replied as he kept his eyes on the monitors above the bed.

"Increase Oh-two infusion rate by one-third," Jeanne ordered while keeping her eyes fixed on the monitors.

"Increased by one-third, Aye, ma'am," Clark replied, then added, "Vital signs improving, ma'am. Holding steady, ma'am... coming about to normal, ma'am," he added with a sigh of relief.

Jeanne turned to Ike. "Excellent. Increasing the percentage of the oxygen each hour may have done the trick, Ike."

"We're not out of the woods yet. She still has to breathe on her own," Ike somberly added.

"*Oui* -- we'll know soon enough. Ready to remove the tube, Clark?"

"Aye, ma'am. I have the supplemental oxygen standing by."

"As the old saying goes," Ike began as Jeanne started to remove the tube, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

The room fell silent as Jeanne quickly removed the tube. Arcadia gagged as the tube was slid from her throat. She began violently coughing which immediately segued into the sound of someone choking. Just as suddenly she stopped and took several deep breaths only to resume coughing again.

Clark felt the room breath a collective sigh of relief as he placed the nose cannula through her nostrils so she could receive supplemental oxygen. She'd need it until her lungs were completely healed.

Arcadia finally stopped coughing and opened her eyes taking several moments to allow her eyes to focus while Clark wiped them with swabs. She finally spotted Ike and waved him over. She quietly whispered to him, "I'm glad... to know... that asswipe Bourbon... was good for something."

Ike smiled. "There's someone who'd like to see you Darce."

"I don't... doubt it," she wheezed as she placed her right hand over her left and panicked. "My ring!" she coughed.

"Calm down. Your ring *and* Kyle are outside."

Arcadia managed a smile through her coughing as she watched Ike leave to bring Kyle back to see her. While she fully intended to stay awake to wait for Kyle's arrival, she fell asleep. Suddenly, she became conscious of someone brushing her right cheek. Arcadia painfully opened her eyes to look straight into the eyes of her beloved Kyle. She immediately noticed how tired he looked only to realize that she'd probably been in the tank around 18 hours from the time she dragged herself and Lars.... *Lars!*

"Lars?" she croaked, her voice barely audible.

Kyle felt himself become relaxed. "He'll be fine. How do you feel?"

Arcadia was rather at a loss to answer him. It was a standard question, of course -- "how do you feel?" Most of the time, the answers returned were polite though a few brave souls did tell her exactly how they felt. She believed this was a time to be truthful though she briefly considered: *With my hands, Kyle, how about you?*

"I feel... as well as... you look."

Kyle couldn't help but laugh. He stretched down to tenderly stroke her cheek again while he whispered, "By the way, I have something of yours." He reached into his tunic to withdraw her ring. He picked up her left hand and put it back where it belonged.

"Thank you... Kyle," she whispered as her eyelids felt as if they were made of lead. "I'm so... tired...." she rasped.

He leaned over to give the sleeping Arcadia a kiss, then walked out of the room to be met by Ike.

"She's gotten over the worst part, Kyle. It's just a matter of allowing her own body to heal. Go to bed and get some rest. I'm not a doctor, but consider this an order from one."

Kyle nodded. He pulled out his link as he walked out of the hospital towards his quarters. "Sparky, save the following as a message for the XO when she accesses her link."

"Yes, sir," Sparky replied.

"Commander Romanova, I'm going to be late this morning. Arcadia's on her way to recovery and I'm on my way to bed. Argent out."

Part 4: Recovery

So long as we are loved by others I should say that we are almost indispensable; and no man is useless while he has a friend.

Robert Louis Stevenson

"*Mon Dieu*, Doctor Argent," began Doctor Jeanne Charcot as she finished examining Arcadia. "It appears that all the Ever-clear is gone from your lungs but it will take another few weeks of bed rest to dissipate the PlasmaGel. Of course, there is always the chance of pneumonia or other pulmonary complications, but you know that."

"Indeed," Arcadia responded. *I'm not out of the woods yet, but I've found the trail of breadcrumbs and am on my way out of the forest.*

"We're going to move you from intensive care into one of the regular beds. I expect that in forty-eight hours, you'll be ready to go back to your quarters and complete your recovery there." Jeanne put down the datapadd she was using to make notes and started to walk out. "Just remember to keep up the deep breathing exercises and let me know if you need anything, Arcadia."

"Thank you." *I think... not more of that blasted deep breathing? I'd rather mud wrestle with some Romulans*, she mused as she watched Jeanne leave the room only to be replaced by Ike.

"Checking up... on me?" Arcadia wheezed.

"You could say that. I thought we could go one-on-one later today," Ike teased her.

"How am I doing...really?"

As usually, Arcadia began coughing. While Ike waited for her to stop, he gave her the once over. She appeared very washed out and ashen -- which was difficult for someone with as dark a complexion as she has. Her normally bright green eyes looked dull in comparison but livelier than when he first saw her dragging herself and Lars out of the damaged Nighthawk. Once she stopped making all that noise, Ike answered her.

"For one, stop talking so much. For two, you're doing fine, really. And for three, the sooner you get back to your own space, the happier a certain Station Commander will be."

"And for four," she wheezed, "you'll be happy... to have me out... of here... right?"

"You are not bad for a patient. Kinda pretty in fact, but you make a better doctor than patient."

"Love you too, Ike. But... thank you," she smiled but then was overtaken by yet another spasm of coughing.

"Rest!" he commanded.

"Yes sir!" she replied giving him a mock salute that only resulted another round of coughing.

"If you behave," Ike admonished her, "you won't cough so much." He was about to scold her more when he noticed that she had fallen asleep.

"She's looking good, Clark," Ike told the young nurse before he walked out of the room. He noticed Lars was back in the hospital having his hand checked over. Ike was in the process of walking back to his office when he bumped into Jeanne talking to Head Nurse Liz Fry.

"...*Oui*. But I am concerned about what we shall do with her once she is released. Ike, she can not go home and be by herself. She's too well to take up our precious hospital space but her lungs are still too fragile and will be for some weeks... perhaps months."

"Well...." Ike interrupted with a wicked grin, "she does have a cat."

Jeanne smiled. "Unless her *petite chat* can perform pulmonary resuscitation, I think we need to look for someone with two hands and two feet."

"Agreed. I'm sure that the staff will volunteer but we're short handed as it is. The additional personnel that Darce requested won't be here for a few more months. In the meantime, we've got a problem..."

"Is that a problem we can help you with, Lieutenant?" Lars asked having overheard part of the conversation.

Ike snapped his head around to look to intensely at him resulting in the 425th Wing Commander immediately becoming self-conscious of his eavesdropping.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overhear but I heard Doctor Argent's name and naturally became interested." He paused, then added quietly, "she saved my life, I feel that I owe her."

"I don't think she feels the same way, Commander," Ike responded. "But to answer your question, Darce is going to be released to her quarters in 48 hours. She can't stay alone and we really can't spare the personnel."

Lars considered for a moment. "Lieutenant, I think I may have a solution for you but I need to ask around. I'll get back to you in a few hours. Is that all right with you?"

"Certainly," Ike responded. He looked to Jeanne who nodded in agreement. "I'll be right back then," Lars answered and immediately left the hospital for the hangar deck.

Once he arrived he tracked down Captain Terrence Blair and told him what needed to be done and the solution he had in mind.

"Captain, she saved my life. If it weren't for her, I would be dead. I... no, *we* owe it to her to help."

"If you're sure you can juggle the schedules and not effect operational readiness, I'll sign off on it," the Director of Flight Operations told him.

"Thank you Captain," Lars replied. He immediately put a call out for the other Wing Commanders to meet in his office. It took them no time to arrive and less time for Lars to outline what he had in mind. As he expected, they readily agreed to assist. The Wing Commanders then called their Squadron Commanders and told them the plan. The Squadron Commanders in turn went back to their Squadrons. This all culminated with the other two Wing Commanders telling Lars that they all agreed that this was a project they would volunteer for. In fact, Lars was told, they already had a list started.

"Excellent, RamRod," Lars told LtCdr Razi "RamRod" Colins, one of the Wing Commanders. "Figure out a schedule and give it to the DFO for approval. I'm going back to the hospital and tell them what we have in mind."

Lars literally ran back to the hospital and upon his arrival, immediately asked to see Ike.

"Lieutenant," Lars began, "we have a plan. I spoke to the DFO, and the two other Wing Commanders. I owe Doctor Argent my life and we all feel that you guys put out for us, so it's time for us to give back. I volunteer us to take care of Doctor Argent while she's recuperating at home. We're working on a shift

schedule right now so they'll always be at least two of us, preferably three on each shift. Just tell us the hours you'll require our assistance."

Ike was clearly impressed. He honestly didn't expect this from the pilots but then, he shouldn't have been surprised. Kyle's mark was everywhere and he'd clearly made an impression on the Flight Branch and even more noticeably, so had Darce.

"Does the Captain know?" Ike began, interested in Lars' answer.

"No, sir, we didn't discuss this with the Station Commander. If he needs to be consulted, I imagine that Captain Blair will do the honors," Lars evenly replied.

"Actually, your plan sounds reasonable. We'll need to go over a few procedures for her care. Other than that, we're a go."

"Good, Lieutenant. Just let me know when we start."

"You got it, Commander," Ike responded as Lars left his office. *Well, I'll be damned!* Ike thought as he went into tell Arcadia about the guardian angels she was about to receive.

Part 5: Convalescence

*How rare and wonderful is that flash of a moment when
we realize we have discovered a friend.*

William E. Rothschild

"Can I get you anything else, Doctor?" asked Ensign Rusty "Flyer" Shepherd.

"No, I'm fine, Flyer," Arcadia replied to the 13th Squadron Tactical Officer. She readjusted her nose cannula for her supplemental oxygen while she sat back in bed to continue watching yet another boring holovid. *Though, she mused, given the choice between watching the vid in the hospital or in my home, I'll take my own bed any day.*

"Just let me or the Cardinal know if you need anything, Doctor."

"I shall... Flyer... wait...." Arcadia began. "Look... you lads shouldn't... well... I'm really uncomfortable having you lads call me Doctor here in my quarters. How about Arcadia?"

"Ma'am...." Flyer began uncomfortably. "I'm not sure about that. I'm not sure Captain Blair would approve and I'm not sure that Captain Argent would approve either." *Never mind what Blackie or Viking are gonna say about this,* he winced.

"Good point. I understand. Why not call me Arcadia when Captain Argent isn't around... and as for Terrence... I'll take care of him," she wheezed as she once again started to cough.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked again.

"No, I shall eventually be fine," she told him when she finally stopped coughing.

"Sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll call you or send my intrepid agent out to get you." Arcadia smiled down at the feline who simply yawned in response.

"OK, then we'll be out in the living room if you need us," Flyer told her as he walked out of the room.

"How is Madame Argent doing, Flyer?" Gozal "the Cardinal" De Cesaris began in his distinctive European accent.

"Fine, Cardinal. She wants us to call her by her first name. I dunno if we should but she's insistent."

"I would chance it to say that we would be remiss if we called the Station Commander's wife by her first name in front of his person. I greatly wish to continue flying, Flyer."

"My thoughts too.... Your deal, Cardinal," Flyer told him as he placed his toothpick bet in the middle of the table.

Both officers played gin most of the morning until it was time to break for lunch. The Cardinal went in to see if he could get any food for Arcadia but she was asleep and he didn't want to disturb her.

"Madame Argent is asleep... Flyer, I do not know about you," Cardinal began, "but I do not believe that I can spend all my time here playing cards."

"Yeah," Flyer began as he started to clean up the area for the next shift but was interrupted by their arrival. "Looke here," he began, "an invasion of Gold Knights."

"What of it?" Matrika "Lioness" Pescarolo began while her fellow 73rd Squadron member Mohan "Bearcub" Kidston just benignly smiled at them.

"Lioness, Bearcub," the Cardinal greeted them.

Both Flyer and the Cardinal gave them a rundown of what they needed to do as far as tending to Arcadia's needs. Before they left, Flyer and the Cardinal introduced their replacements to Arcadia.

"....*And* she wants us to call her by her first name," Flyer told Lioness and Bearcub as they walked back into the living area.

"Oh, yeah?" Lioness answered with some uncertainty in her voice, "I dunno about this..."

"That's what we said too," Flyer told over his shoulder as they left the Argent's quarters for the hangar deck.

"Gin?" Lioness suggested as she sat down at the dining table.

"Deal 'em up," Bearcub replied.

Bearcub and Lioness played gin until Captain Argent came home and relieved them. While they loved staying with Arcadia, besides, it was so nice being somewhere that was so peaceful, they were still *very* nervous meeting the Station Commander again, especially in his own home. But once they got to know him, they found that Captain Argent wasn't all that scary despite their initial impressions of him when he took over as Interim DFO a few months back.

"Y'know...." Lioness began, "I don't know about you, but the idea of playing gin for yet another couple of hours doesn't do me much good. How about you?"

"I was thinking the same thing," Bearcub responded. He started to walk back towards the hangar deck when he suddenly stopped. "It's so quiet there, why don't we hold study sessions? Most of us are going up for the next set of tests and the great Ultimate only knows we could use the extra study time. Why don't we suggest that we put our time there to good use rather than just screwing off?"

"Why, Bearcub, are you bucking for Squadron Commander of the Seventy-Third?" Lioness wickedly suggested.

"Naw.... and take Goldeneye's job? In my dreams!" Bearcub snorted as they walked into the Gold Knights' corner of the 425th Wing's Wardroom.

"Hey, *quiet!*" Bearcub shouted over the din. "Since most of us are going to helping out Arcadia.... err.... Doctor Argent, me and Lioness have an idea."

Bearcub and Lioness outlined their plan and were met with general approval from the other Gold Knights. They quickly decided to spread the word to the other Knights and the two other Wings. RamRod was then asked to amend the shifts into study groups and thus a tradition was started.

* * *

"Does Arcadia need anything else, Cowboy?" asked "the Cardinal" De Cesaris.

"She's doin' fine," Cowboy Hussan began in his smooth southern drawl. "She asked why it had gotten quiet all of a sudden. Told her we were studyin'. She didn't quite believe me at first but she got convinced." Cowboy sat down at the Argents' dining table with the rest of the group on medwatch. "All righty now, where was we?" Cowboy picked up his datapadd to go over the strategies with the four of them one more time.

While the pilots were in her living room busy studying up on the Petrosian Offense, Arcadia was becoming bored out of her mind. She was too alert to sleep and too weak for too much else except to be bored by yet another 'vid. She was

also becoming somewhat depressed at being cooped up in her own home. Arcadia envied the pilots and tactical officers who came to sit with her because they sounded as if they were having a great time studying. *There's something about sharing one's misery in the company of others*, she mused. She considered asking them to spend some time with her but realized that they were giving up their free time to be with her and didn't want to intrude. She finally sighed loud enough to wake up Mac, her feline companion as well as garner the station computer's attention.

"*What's wrong, Arcadia?*" Sparky asked.

"I know I'm getting better but I really don't feel up to doing anything and I'm...."

"*I know! I'll try and cheer you up...*" Sparky told her brightly.

The station computer started to do decidedly silly things to make her happy. He drew her all kinds of pictures, ranging from flowers to kitty cats. He invited her to play a game of tic-tac-toe that she enjoyed until she became too tired to hold the stylus anymore.

"Sparky, I'm sorry. I know I'm no fun right now," she sighed as she adjusted the oxygen cannulas that hooked around her nostrils.

"*Aww.... you're loads of fun, Arcadia. What's wrong, why are you crying?*"

"I guess I really miss Kyle right now," she sniffed as she coughed.

"*He's been worried about you, y'know.*"

"I'm not surprised Sparky."

"*He has me check up on you several times a day.*"

"Check up on me?"

"*Yeah, I let him see you here. He was worried that those... um... jagoffs wouldn't be taking good care of you. Sometimes, he just sits and stares at you sleeping. Is this what love is?*"

"Yes... I guess it is, Sparky..." Arcadia allowed her voice to drift off as she began to cry again.

"*Well... I'm really not supposed to do this, but you could use some cheering up again,*" Spark began.

Her viewscreen suddenly went blank and then it faded into what looked to be a room. Arcadia eventually recognized it as the office of the Station Commander.

"Sparky, you realize that this is highly irregular our spying on a Station Commander like this."

"Yeah, I know, just don't tell anyone, OK? The Captain would be really sore at me if he knew."

"Your secret is safe with me, Sparky."

Arcadia smiled as she watched Kyle in his role as the Station Commander reading datapadds and making notes. She watched as he tossed a padd on his desk as he stood up. He suddenly struck a rather undignified pose when he reached down to shift the crotch of his pants then scratched his behind.

Arcadia laughed so hard, she started to choke causing Cowboy and the Cardinal to run into her room. Luckily, she blanked the screen before they arrived.

"What's wrong, Arcadia!" they simultaneously shouted.

The Cardinal went over to her nightstand and handed her a glass of water. "This should help, Madame."

"Think we should notify Lieutenant Ivanan?" Cowboy asked.

Arcadia found it very difficult to stop her laughing and coughing and the combination sounded to her guardians as if she was choking.

"Ah'm calling the Lieutenant." Cowboy decided leaving the Cardinal sitting on the bed holding Arcadia's hand until Ike Ivanan arrived.

"Darce!" Ike asked Arcadia as he took out his medical tricorder, "what the *hell* happened?"

"Ike..." she wheezed almost out of breath from laughing. "I'm really fine. I just found... something extraordinarily... funny and couldn't stop... myself..."

"What the hell could be that damned funny, Darce?" he demanded.

Arcadia was about to answer him when suddenly, she was struck with the vision of Kyle scratching and she began to laugh again. "I'll tell you about it... one day," she wheezed.

Ike rolled his eyes. "Whatever it was, it better be worth the sore chest muscles you're going to have tonight."

"It was, trust me, Ike," she smiled wondering how she was going to face Kyle because she knew as soon as he came in the door, she was likely to start laughing again.

"You are to take it *very* easy the rest of the day," he added skeptically as he headed out the bedroom door. Ike told the worried pilots that she was fine but they should keep an eye on her.

"Sparky, thank you... I appreciate the laugh. I needed it," she chuckled as she coughed again. "But I think we should leave the Captain alone." She paused to consider. "Why don't you talk to me instead. Tell me a story...."

"A *story*?" Sparky asked, clearly confused.

"Yes, a story."

"A *true story*?"

"That sounds interesting. What do you have in mind?"

"I did a cross check and noted that Ike Ivanan knew both you and Captain Argent before you knew each other. I can tell you a story about Lieutenant Ivanan and Captain Argent."

"Is it classified?"

"*Naw... not according to this file, Darce,*" Sparky replied.

"Darce?"

"I heard Ike use that name for you and figured you might not mind if I used it for you... I know you don't like the other names I use."

"I'd like that very much. Only you and Ike can call me by that name," she replied.

"Really! Boy, that makes me feel really special!"

"You're very special to me, Sparky."

"*Wow! So you wanna hear the story now Darce?*"

"I'd love to, Sparky...." Arcadia replied as she laid back to hear the tale. Little did she know but Sparky was *really* excited by her allowing him to use her nickname of Darce. As an extra touch of appreciation, Sparky decided *really* be entertaining for his new friend and embellish the story he was about to tell.

"*Once upon a time there was--*" Sparky began.

"Hold it!" Arcadia interrupted. "You said this was a true story."

"*Yeah, so....?*"

"True stories don't begin 'once upon a time', Sparky."

"*Oh?*"

"Yes."

"*OK, how about this? It was a dark and stormy night.*"

"Sparky!"

"*No, Darce, really, it was a dark and stormy night on Tandoshan when Sergeant Dwight Ivanan called his platoon of Marines together. He and Ensign Argent... I mean, the Captain... outlined a plan to get off this... err... 'fucking rock'.*"

Arcadia snorted not knowing which one of them called Tandoshan by that sobriquet.

"*Sergeant Ivanan gathered his troops all around him. He jumped up on the nearest rock forcefully addressed his troops.... 'We seriously pleased few, we band of Marines and Kyle. For anyone that can get their shit together to join me on this goat rope shall be considered one of my bros. Those candy asses who couldn't be fucking bothered shall really be pissed that they weren't here to share in our glory. And hold their economical willies while they talk who weren't here when we kicked butt today'.*"

Arcadia sat up. "What?"

"*What do you mean, 'what' Darce?*"

"Sparky, I've know Ike for many years, I somehow don't think he said anything of the sort," Arcadia angrily replied.

"Oh... OK, you caught me. I was just trying to be entertaining, Darce," Sparky all but sighed.

"Who really said this?"

"Shakespeare."

"William Shakespeare? I've read a bit of Shakespeare but I don't think this is quite his style, Sparky."

"Well... I took King Henry V, act 4, scene 3 from Shakespeare and then modified the text to reflect a more contemporary usage."

"Oh, that explains it. Sparky, why not just tell me the story and don't embellish it."

"OK, Darce. In fact, I can go one better! They made a holovid out of the whole thing. Since neither the Captain nor Ike wanted sign over any rights, they had to change the names, but you can figure out who is who..."

"I never knew they made a movie about Kyle!" Arcadia exclaimed.

"Well, it did run on the Townsend's Nitro GridNet a while back..." Sparky told her.

"Aren't they the ones who play all those testosterone-laden action movies on the grid?"

"That's them! Well, here it is...let's roll 'em!" Sparky said in his best continental accent as he dimmed the light and launched a holo-projection screen on the bedroom wall in front of her. Suddenly the word "**MAROONED: DEATHTRAP TANDOLAY!**" came towards her in blazing red. After the obligatory credits, the action picked up with the wreckage of what presumably must have once been a fighter. A short and squat man walked down to inspect the wreckage, only to be surprised by a person, who going by his flightsuit, was the erstwhile pilot of the craft.

"Hi. I'm Kent Argyle, Spacefleet Fighter Corps" he began as he thrust his hand out for a handshake.

The opening amused Arcadia to no end. The actor clearly was not hired for his strong resemblance to her husband.

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"Howdy. I'm Irv Isaacs, Spacefleet Marine Corps," the other actor replied.

Arcadia rolled her eyes because the actor looked more like a short, squat clown out of make-up, but presumably was meant to be Ike.

"Well, hello, Irv. It seems I have crash-landed on this planet. Could you direct me to the nearest Spacefleet Outpost?"

"There is none. We were left behind when our dropship pulled out last week."

"Oh. Well, that's rotten luck, I suppose," Kent replied. "Anything else I should know?"

"The Szatrappi are converting the atmosphere to methane!"

Arcadia wondered if anyone had bothered asking for licensing money for the Szatrappi Hegemony. *After all*, she mused to herself, *even the bad guys need an agent*.

"Shocking. Shall we have some tea?" Kent replied while striking a dramatic pose.

Suddenly the screen dimmed and the lights came back on.

"Perhaps we should dispense with the rest? I felt like my memory core was being offended -- and I'm programmed not to take offense at anything," Sparky dejectedly interrupted.

"I think that would be just as well, Sparky," Arcadia replied. "It was indeed perfectly putrid and I don't think I could sit through the rest with a straight face or without incurring another coughing frenzy."

"I know I couldn't," Sparky mumbled *"assuming... if I had a face that is. But anyway, back to the story... A platoon of Marines crashed landed on Tandoshan. Because the Platoon Sergeant was killed, the senior Corpsman Sergeant Ivanan ended up being the leader. They joined up with Ensign Kyle Argent who was also stranded with them on Tandoshan. To make matters more complicated, the Szatrappi were slowly converting the atmosphere from one that was a class 'M' to that of methane, suitable for the Szatrappi but not for the Humans."*

"This sounds more like it, Sparky. How long were they stranded?"

"You like? Anyway, according to the file, it was six months. It seems that Kyle couldn't just sit around with his thumb up his ass..."

"Sparky!"

"Sorry... anyway, Kyle trudged twelve hundred kilometers through some pretty ugly terrain in those 6 months. Within a week of his planet-fall, Kyle met up with Ike who had similar plans. Ike couldn't just sit around either, instead, he kept his platoon shipshape and was always thinking of ways to let the Feddies know that the Szatrappi were around and up to no good. Together they came up with a plan to steal aboard the communications platform tethered off of skyhook. They would send out a signal that they hoped the Feddies would hear, but the Szatrappi might hear it also."

"How long did it take them to capture the communications platform, Sparky?"

"It sez here around forty-eight hours to capture the platform and send the signal out. They also had to wait another forty-eight hours before any response came in."

"What happened?" Arcadia asked, clearly becoming interested in the story.

"Well... the Szatrappi came first but were seriously confused about the situation. Kyle and Ike had managed to jury-rig a transport shuttle to high tail it out of there with the platoon of Marines. The Szatrappi ain't too bright and it took 'em a while to figure out what was up. Not too bright those overgrown rutabagas."

"Rutabaga?"

"Yeah, Darce. Veggies ain't too bright, y'know."

"So I've heard, Sparky. Pray continue," Arcadia requested as she was getting tired but wanted to hear the end of the story.

"Just as they are about to get the crap beat out of 'em by the Szatrappi, the Feddies showed up in the nick of time and saved their bacons."

"I never knew any of this...." Arcadia mused aloud.

"Darce, sez here that Ike won a medal because he devised a mission plan to get off the rock and didn't just hunker down and put his troops into survival mode. The Captain got one as well for 'exemplary leadership under hazardous

conditions and courage above and beyond the call of duty'. At least that's what the report says."

"Ike never talked about this. Come to think of it," Arcadia went on, "Kyle never talked about this either.... Sparky, who put Ike in for the medal?"

"Ensign Argent... err The Captain, Darce."

"One day, I may just ask one of them about this," Arcadia mused.

"Darce, I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what, Sparky?"

"Well.... I mean, I don't think either one of them wants to talk about it."

"You're probably right, Sparky. Thank you for the story but I'm really getting tired. I'm going to take a nap now."

"OK, Darce," Sparky replied. Before he cut off the link and let her sleep, he watched over his new friend for as long as he was able to spare the circuits.

Part 6: Illumination

*To be able to look back upon one's past life
with satisfaction is to live twice.*

Marcus Valerius Martial

"Now where did that bloody padd go off to?" Arcadia mumbled to herself as she began tossing datapadds about the bed. It had been three weeks since the accident. She was feeling much better and was even off the supplemental oxygen but not well enough to go back to work. After days of pleading with Ike, he finally relented and allowed her to work on the medical budget. In Arcadia's haste to locate a padd, she accidentally hit Mac on his furry rump.

"Meow!" he hissed at her.

"Sorry, love. I didn't mean to hit you." Arcadia tried to comfort the grey and white feline who was having none of it and stalked out of the bedroom.

Arcadia was slowly coming to the conclusion that the padd in question just wasn't to be found in her bedroom.

"Bearcub?" Arcadia called out from her bedroom.

It didn't take long for Ensign Mohan "Bearcub" Kidston to rush in.

"What can I do for you, Madame?" replied the 73th Squadron member.

"Sorry to bother you, but could you go into my study and retrieve the datapadd entitled 'surgical budget'? I can't seem to locate it anywhere. And if it's not there, try Kyle's study..." she allowed her voice to drift off as she again shuffled through the pile of padds that had accumulated next to her.

"Sure thing, I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Thank you Bearcub," she responded to his back as he'd already left the bedroom.

"Anything wrong, Bearcub?" asked Ensign Rusty "Flyer" Shepherd as he noted the very worried look on Bearcub's face.

"*Nothing's* wrong! She just needs a padd from her study," his sudden defiance changed to one of caution. "I want one of you mugs to come along with me. I don't feel comfortable poking around her stuff alone."

"I shall accompany you," volunteered Gozal "the Cardinal" De Cesaris.

"Thanks, Card. Let's go," Bearcub urged wanting to get this over with as fast as possible. "Is this her study?" he wondered aloud, not sure which door to open first.

"I believe so, Bearcub. Turn on the illumination, if you might," the Cardinal requested. He stepped in and looked about the room at the collection of plaques, certificates, holographs and other possessions indicative of someone with a long career in Starfleet.

"Wow, will you look at this, Cardinal? She was awarded a Medal of Achievement... oh that's right, she was a starship CO..." Bearcub mumbled.

"Do you not remember Lioness telling us that the Captain was her Wing Commander when she was the Commanding Officer of the *USS Stellar Wind*?" the Cardinal reminded him.

"Oh, yeah, that's right, she was," Bearcub responded, then pondered aloud. "Wonder how many COs marry their WCs?" He continued to stare at the holographs along with the Cardinal.

"Madame Argent was quite the lovely lady when she was younger," considered the Cardinal as he looked at a holograph of a very young Arcadia standing arm-in-arm with a tall, blond man.

"Dunno about you, but I wouldn't kick her out of my bed for eating cookies even now."

"The Captain is one lucky man," considered the Cardinal aloud. He continued to look at the items on the walls of Arcadia's office while Bearcub shuffled datapadds on her desk.

"Damn! It's not here, Cardinal.... Let's try... The Captain's Study."

The Cardinal felt a wave of concern wash over his mortal soul. "Are you sure we must do this, Bearcub?"

"She asked us to, Cardinal!"

"If we must, Bearcub. I certainly hope that Captain Argent does not suddenly decide to come home early. I would not want to be caught in uninvited in his personal space."

"Card, will you just give it a rest! She needs the datapadd and told us to do it. At least, that's our story... assuming he'll give us a chance to tell it..." Bearcub mumbled under his breath. He quickly closed the door to Arcadia's study and cautiously walked over to *The Study of The Captain*.

The two young pilots simply stopped, stared at the closed door, then looked to each other.

"Nothing's gonna bite us! Open the door, Cardinal!"

"Bearcub, I believe Madame Argent asked *you* to retrieve the datapadd, I simply volunteered to accompany you."

Bearcub rolled his eyes but reluctantly became all business as he opened the door to Captain Argent's study and turned on the light. Both pilots stood still. They cautiously looked around and once they were sure that nothing would bite them, allowed their eyes to sweep this office. They immediately noted that Captain Argent didn't have as much in his office as his wife did. Prominently displayed on one wall was the commission granting him his pilot wings. Bearcub immediately pointed to the models of spacecraft on display on the opposite wall. They included the Vindicator, the Vigilante, the Lynx, the Avenger and the Nighthawk.

"Would you look at that? He's flight rated on every one of them!" Bearcub exclaimed.

"Half of them were being put out of commission before you were born, I notice," the Cardinal wickedly pointed out.

"*Give it a rest already! Let's find that padd!*" Bearcub nervously barked at him.

As they looked for the padd, they both noted that there were very few holographs except for a prominent one on display of the Captain and Arcadia in their official wedding portrait. Both pilots were immediately drawn to the picture.

"Will you look at that!" Bearcub exclaimed. Bearcub ran his fingers over the image of the Rigel Cup Sash as he busily analyzed the number of times Kyle had attended the event *and* won.

"I am also truly astounded, Bearcub," the Cardinal responded in awe while his eye was drawn to the old-fashioned coat stand in the corner which was opposite a bath'let on a display stand in the corner. He wandered over and moved the leather bomber jacket on the coat stand that was decorated with squadron

patches from days of yore, moved the duty sabre, and finally came upon the red and white Rigel Cup sash from the holograph.

"If this were in my possession, it would be put in a high place of honor, not tossed on a mere cloak rack to be unappreciated," the Cardinal sighed.

"You and me both!" Bearcub exclaimed as he too reverently touched the sash.

"This is quite interesting, Bearcub," began the Cardinal as he moved over to the oil large painting. "Do you know what plane this is?"

Bearcub reluctantly put the sash down and walked over to where the painting was on display. "Geeze, Card! That's a Lynx prototype. Just like the model over there. What's the plaque say?"

"It states: *To Lieutenant Commander Kyle Argent. In appreciation for services rendered to accelerate and complete the Lynx Project Testing Program. 2324.*"

"Well... we'd best locate this padd before she comes looking for us. Oh... here it is!" Bearcub exclaimed with an obvious sigh of relief. Having secured the source of their question, they rushed out of The Study.

"What the *hell* were you two mugs doing in The Captain's Study?" bellowed Lieutenant Commander Lars "Viking" Lysander.

Both young men nearly jumped out of their skins at the sight and sound of their Deputy Director of Flight Operations hovering over them.

"Getting this for Madame Argent, Viking," Cardinal replied mentally cussing out Bearcub who had just handed him the padd before they had left the study. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't keep his hand from shaking as he handed over the datapadd.

Lars took the datapadd while he continued to scowl as his two junior officers.

"I'll take this to her myself," he finally growled their dismissal.

"Yessir," both Bearcub and the Cardinal murmured as they slunk back to their study group.

I hope by the Great Ultimate, considered Viking as he made his way to the master bedroom, that they weren't giving me any shit about this.

"Lars!" Arcadia brightly greeted him.

"I understand you wanted this?" he asked while handing her the datapadd.

"I did indeed. Thank you," she replied. "I hate doing budgets and the problem is, I no sooner finish one and then I must work on the next."

"I know. I've been assisting Captain Blair with ours. I have to admit that I prefer flying to budgets." Lars added nothing further; he simply 'hovered' around Arcadia's bed.

Arcadia finally noticed Lars just standing there. "Lars, is there something you want to ask or you need? You are being very quiet and you look like you have something on your mind..."

"Actually, I do have a minor problem, Doctor...." when he noticed that she had narrowed her eyes at him, he quickly amended, "Arcadia...."

"What can I help you with? I'm not exactly in the position to do much these days... unless you want me to review a budget," she responded.

"It's my hand. I'm having some problem with it and was wondering if you wouldn't mind informally looking at it?" he asked her sheepishly.

"Not at all." She tossed the datapadds to Kyle's side of their large bed and patted the newly cleared area. "Please sit and let me see look."

She took some time to examine his hand, slowly rubbing and observing which areas poked produced a wince if not a yelp of pain.

"What were you doing?" she finally asked him.

"Just flying."

"Hmm.... Lars, go over to my dresser and you'll see a decanter of oil. Bring it here if you please."

Lars stood up and walked over to the dresser where he noticed there were several decanters on the dresser. "Which one?"

"Oh, that's right. I did mix others. Open them one by one and see which one you prefer."

He did just that and selected the ecru colored decanter.

"Sandalwood. Kyle likes this one also. Must be a pilot thing," she added wickedly as Lars once again sat next to her on the bed. Arcadia propped herself up and opened the decanter. She poured a dab of oil on her hand and vigorously rubbed them together to warm it. When she was done, she placed her hand palms up indicating to Lars that he should give her his hand. She slowly began to massage his hand, delicately rubbing each finger and generally stroking each muscle until his hand was totally relaxed.

"How does that feel?" she finally asked him.

"Wonderful. I've never had anyone do that for me," he purred.

"Kyle always enjoyed the hand job I'd give him after a long day in the cockpit," she told him wickedly.

Lars gave her a look of mock horror and she laughed while silently indicating to him that he should give her his other hand. When she was finished, he flexed both hands and smiled.

"My hands feel as if they've been reborn. Thank you, I appreciate this."

"I'm glad. You realize that all us doctors aren't all beasts. You flight crew certainly don't have any reason to trust us again but I hope you'll change your mind."

"You saved my life, I owe you, Doctor," Lars told her quietly.

"I did my job, Lars -- just as you do your job. And wasn't that the problem, we didn't do our jobs. Kyle had to do it for us."

"I know...."

"Lars, that was the first censure I'd ever gotten in my twenty odd years as a Starfleet Officer."

"Really?"

"Yes and considering the circumstances, I was bloody lucky that's all I got. It was as harsh as it was because I have twenty years in 'fleet. I should have known better. I've even sat in 'The Big Chair' -- that's what any starship bridge crew calls the Captain's Chair. It's the one seat that many aspire to and few have the opportunity to rest their backsides on. And as I was one of the chosen few, I had *no* excuse for what happened."

"For me personally, I learned more in those two weeks when he took over as Interim Flight Director than I ever thought possible."

"I don't doubt it. He's fine teacher and truly cares about you lot."

"I know. I won't let him down again," Lars firmly stated.

"Nor will I," Arcadia added somberly. "He's counting on us both. You know how hard the job is because you served as Acting DFO. His job is one hundred, perhaps one thousand times harder than your job was. However, what's done is done. I just hope you'll really begin to trust us again."

"You've already done that, Doctor," Lars stated as he thought about how she'd saved his life.

"That's just one instance and I'm sure that you would have done the same for me. No, I mean, I hope that we'll be able to build a stronger partnership between the two branches."

"Oh?"

"I have some ideas and I'll present them in due course."

Lars nodded and stood. "You're looking a bit exhausted and I don't think that the Captain would appreciate my tiring you out. May I get you anything before I go?"

"No, Lars. You've already given me a lot more than you shall ever realize" she murmured as she settled back to take a nap until Kyle came home for dinner.

Part 7: Transcendence

*Friendship! mysterious cement of the soul!
Sweetener of life! and solder of society!
Robert Blair*

Arcadia sat back in her bed and considered how far she'd come since she had been hospitalized all those many weeks ago with a toxic overdose of Ever-clear. Now, one month later, her lungs were well on their way to recovery. She didn't cough as much and now she could actually hold a conversation of some length without having to resort to hacking and wheezing. Despite that fact, she knew she had several more weeks of convalescing to go. Even though Ike had relented and allowed her to assist him with the Medical Branch's budget last week, she really was feeling too well to be left alone for so many hours. She decided that instead of bothering the flight staff on medwatch, she'd wander out into the living room and replicate herself a cup of tea.

"Madame?" cried out Desiree "Ravyn" MacRae at the sight of Arcadia Argent slowly making her way over to the galley area.

"I thought I might just get up and stretch my legs a bit. Assuming, of course, this is fine with you lot?" Arcadia replied as she continued to walk over to the replicator for a cup of tea.

"Are you sure we can't get this for you?" Ravyn asked becoming concerned.

"Ravyn, I do believe that I'm well enough to punch a few buttons and conjure up a cup of tea."

"Yes, ma'am... err Madame," 13th Squadron Pilot replied as she sat back down to continue reviewing the vids.

Arcadia was sipping her tea when she noticed that the vids they were watching were that of the recent Rigel Cup, specifically the third event, Destroy the Supply Cache. She stood for several moments listening to their commentary when Gozal "the Cardinal" De Cesaris finally noticed her.

"Madame Argent," he whispered to the junior officer sitting next to him, "seems to be most interested the proceedings. Shall we not invite her to stay?"

He thought for a moment and then tapped another officer on the shoulder. "Think we should invite her to join us?" he murmured under his breath.

They both looked at each other then back to Arcadia standing and sipping her tea. He finally tapped Ravyn on the shoulder and whispered, "Why don't we invite her to stay?"

Ravyn considered for a moment. "Good idea," she whispered. She turned and looked towards Arcadia. "Madame, would you care to join us? We can move the couch over here and bring out your pillows so you can be more comfortable."

Arcadia looked at their smiling faces, "I'd really enjoy that. Thank you." *You don't know how lonely it's been back there.*

When they finally settled her in her new nest, she turned her attention back to the vid. "I remember that particular part of the competition," Arcadia commented as she watched the vid with them. "Bloody nearly gave me heart failure when it looked like Kyle's fighter was dead in the water."

"It was a smooth move, Madame," Ravyn commented as she analyzed how Kyle Argent and his Wingman Rene Allegri literally blew their competition away.

Arcadia marvelled at how enthused the pilots and tactical officers were. They expressed their hopes that their squadron would be picked for the Rigel Cup. Several had put in applications for this year's team and if any of the squadrons made it, they'd know soon.

"Think any of you will make it?" Arcadia finally asked them.

"None of us have seen any real combat," Bronco began.

"Neither had the three junior members of the X-Team," Arcadia pointed out.

"That is true," the Cardinal considered, "however, Madame, we are no where near in the same league as your husband."

"Hell, we ain't even in the same neighborhood," Flyer tossed out and everyone joined him to laugh.

"Be that as it may," Arcadia pressed on when the laughter finally died down, "you won't know until you try. Correct?"

"That is true Madame, but as pilots, we also have to be realistic and I believe our chances are not that favorable. However, as you say," the Cardinal continued in his usual serious manner, "we shall persevere."

"And we'll try too," added Flyer.

Ravyn just rolled her eyes in Flyer's direction. He was a brilliant tactical officer, but seemed totally ignorant of just about everything else.

They spent most of the afternoon talking about Arcadia's adventures at the recent Rigel Cup.

"Tell me Madame," Ravyn began, "is the Regency Hotel as posh as I've heard it to be?"

"More than you can imagine, Ravyn. It's quite the sight. I honestly believe that all of you will be named to a Rigel Cup team at some point in your careers but just in case you aren't, do try to attend the event as a spectator. Perhaps even win a quid or two."

"*Bet!*" Bronco cried out. "We aren't allowed to do that, Madame!"

"Then attend when you're a civilian. I understand it's more fun for the punters than the participants. I wouldn't know since I was there on assignment."

"But you did get married at the hotel," Ravyn commented with a smile.

"We did, indeed. It was quite nice considering the short notice."

"Short notice?" asked Bronco.

"I'll tell you about it one day. Had to do with a bet that the Captain made -- and I wanted to collect. I don't like to lose..." Arcadia replied with a smile.

The more they talked, the more Arcadia regretted not making more of an effort to interact with the flight crews who were assigned to the 924th Wing on the *Stellar Wind*. *They died for us and I never even had the chance to thank them*, Arcadia considered sadly as she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

The more time the medwatch crew spent with Arcadia, the more they realized that she wasn't just another Station Commander's spouse -- despite the fact she was a fellow Starfleet Officer and the Station's Chief Medical Officer as well. Those pilots and tactical officers who had previous experience being on a ship or station had horror stories about the Squadron, Wing, Flight Director or even Station Commander's spouses who simply refused to acknowledge their existence or were just plain ignorant of what they did. Those times that they tried to engage a spouse in a conversation usually ended up as an embarrassment for both sides. However, the more they talked with Arcadia, the more comfortable they became interacting with her and they finally decided that she was one hell of a lady.

"I know this will sound rather odd," Arcadia began as Flyer handed her another cup of tea while the vids were being programmed. "But I truly thank you for inviting me to stay here this afternoon. As you know, I had a Wing on my old ship but I never had.... no, that's not true, I specifically *chose* not to interact with them." Arcadia became melancholy as she looked off into the distance. "And then some of them died protecting my ship. I truly regret not making more of an effort. So I *greatly* appreciate the time I'm spending with you."

"I know that I speak for all of us," Ravyn began, "but we appreciate a 'fleet spouse who truly understand what we are about.'"

"Thank you," Arcadia quietly replied but quickly changed gears. "What are we to see next?"

"I thought," Bronco began as he held the vid on pause, "we'd take a look at previous Rigel Cups."

"Splendid!" Arcadia replied and settled down to watch several hours' worth of vids with her medwatch crew.

The viewing and commentary went smoothly until the enthusiastic analysis suddenly stopped dead in its tracks.

"That's a perfect example of...." started Tactical Officer Flyer. "Gee, I can't remember the name..."

"Figures," retorted Bronco, "all you tacs do is just go along for the ride. Never mind actually paying attention."

"*Hey!*" Flyer replied about to rise to the challenge but then looked to Arcadia and backed down.

"We're sorry, Madame but... gee, I can't remember the name of that maneuver. Any of you?" Bronco asked as he scanned his datapadd.

"Keep your shorts on Bronco..." Flyer replied while frantically punching at his datapadd. "Damn, I can't find it anywhere. Anyone else have any luck?"

"You may discover, Flyer that you will receive better results if you do not pound your padd so mightily," observed the Cardinal.

Flyer put down his padd and stared squarely at him. "Put a sock in it, Card."

The pilots and tac officers were so engrossed in their search for the official name of the particular maneuver they were explaining to Arcadia that they

completely missed the fact that Station Commander Captain Kyle Argent had arrived home early for the evening. After observing the scene for several moments, he decided to put them out of their misery.

"An Argent Slide. It is in fact named for my Grandfather, who first demonstrated the move in his Academy days. Maybe you have heard of him? He was a pretty prominent flyer in his time. Does Byron MacNeill Argent ring a bell?" Kyle calmly interjected.

All activity ceased as the junior pilots and tactical officers slowly put down their datapadds and immediately stood to an at-ease position.

"Err... Captain, we didn't hear you come in...." Flyer responded for the group as he and the others nervously shuffled their feet.

"Many pardons...." the Cardinal added while attempting to keep still, "for being remiss in our duties, sir...and of course we *all* have heard of your most illustrious ancestor..."

They watched as Kyle nodded an acknowledgement indicating to them that they should consider themselves gone. The medwatch crew quickly and quietly began to pack up their belongings not wishing to incur the Station Commander's wrath.

"We'll be going now...." Bronco replied as he hastily gathered up his belongings.

"Have an excellent evening, Madame Argent," the Cardinal replied before he tried to dash out of the door.

"Just a *bloody* minute!" Arcadia yelled to her departing guardians. "You can't leave me hanging like this! This isn't a holodrama with a 'to be continued' tacked on at the end!" she all but demanded.

The Cardinal stopped to look at her, then looked pointedly to Captain Argent who was still standing in the middle of the living room. Arcadia propped herself up on her elbow to look at just *what* was causing the fuss and finally understood the source of the difficulty.

"*Kyle!* Be gone!" she demanded.

"Yes dear," Kyle meekly replied as he turned away.

"We know who wears this claws in this nest," someone murmured loud enough for Arcadia to hear.

She turned towards the direction of the comment but no one face betrayed the speaker.

They were astonished when Kyle actually left the room. Their eyes moved from watching him to each other until Ravyn MacRae broke the unintended silence.

"Captain," Ravyn began, "please stay. We'd appreciate your input as we obviously have a lot more to learn."

"Arcadia?" Kyle asked as he began to walk back into the room.

Arcadia's response was to tuck her feet under her so Kyle had room to sit on the couch next to her. Once Kyle was seated, Cowboy picked up the narrative and Kyle watched with them adding a comment or two until the Medical Branch Chief of Staff came by to drop off some paperwork for Kyle.

"That's Ike. Thank you for allowing me to stay, Arcadia," Kyle replied as he stood to answer the door.

"Anytime, Kyle love and I'm sure that medwatch crew here won't mind either," she replied. They all quickly nodded in unison as they stood up to attention.

"I don't doubt it," he replied after he gave her a kiss. He made his way to the door to let Ike in wherein, they retired to his study.

"So where were we?" Bronco began as he sat down again to continue the narration.

"Thank you for finishing. I appreciate it," Arcadia replied. She went back into the bedroom to rest before dinner while the medwatch team were packing up to leave for the day.

"Who's gonna tell the Captain we're going?" Flyer asked.

"Ain't gonna be me!" someone interjected as the rest of them joined in.

"How about by age?" another piped up.

"The Senior Officer present should be the one!" another suggested.

A few more lame suggestions were tossed out until Ravyn decided to take matters into her own hands. "Oh, honestly! I'll do it and protect the honor of the Black Knights."

"Hey, now wait a minute!" cried one of the Gold Knights.

"You toadlings had your chance..." she tossed off as she walked over to the Captain's study and cautiously knocked on the door.

"What can I do for you?" replied Ike when he answered the door for Kyle. "I don't believe we've met, Ensign..."

"Desiree MacRae, Pilot, Thirteenth Squadron, Lieutenant Ivanan," she automatically rattled off as she offered her hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Ensign."

"What can I do for you Ravyn?" Kyle asked as he walked over to the doorway.

"Captain, we're about to leave for the day," she calmly replied though she felt her knees shaking.

Kyle narrowed his eyes at her. "I hope you didn't tire Arcadia out."

"No sir. We told Madame...."

"Madame?" Ike interjected with a smile on his face.

"Yes, Lieutenant. After much discussion amongst the Doctor, and ourselves, we decided that Madame was a name we could all live with. We just weren't comfortable calling her by her first name. She disliked Doctor for casual settings. Lady Argent sounded too formal to her and well... the Cardinal suggested Madame."

"It suits her well," Ike replied.

"Captain, we made sure she received her rest. We knew you'd be displeased if she didn't."

"Very good. Carry on, Ensign."

"Thank you sir; pleased to meet you, Lieutenant. Good evening, sirs."

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Noting that Kyle had dismissed her with a nod, she left his study to go back into the living room where the medwatch team had assembled.

"As you can see," Ravyn began as she took her pack from the Cardinal, "he didn't bite me."

"Ya just never know, Ravyn," Flyer interjected as they all left the Argent's Nest for the hangar deck.

Part 8: Comprehension

*There is a bit of magic in everything.
Lou Reed*

Arcadia made it a point to spend her afternoons with her medwatch crew with the result that more and more of the junior pilots and tactical officers made the Argent "Nest" their unofficial hangout -- much to the astonishment of one senior flight officer when he happened by the Nest one day.

"Captain Argent?" responded the *very* surprised Lars "Viking" Lysander.

Station Commander Kyle Argent arched an eyebrow at Lars' unspoken question. "I live here, Commander. Can I help you?"

"Err... actually, I came to see Doctor Argent."

Rather than answering him directly, Kyle merely stood aside to allow Lars to enter. "Everyone seems to want to see my wife these days," he muttered to himself as he sauntered back to his study.

Lars walked in and immediately stopped dead in his tracks. He expected to find their quarters empty, instead, he counted no less than six of his people sitting or standing around apparently having a great time. Instantly, Lars really didn't want to be there but before he could think of any excuse to leave, Arcadia called to him.

"Lars! How good to see you again!" Arcadia called out as she propped herself up on the couch.

"Good to see you again, Madame. Actually, I just dropped by to see how you are doing and..." before Lars was able to finish his sentence, his hand began to ache again. "No, actually, I'm here because I was wondering if you might massage my hand again."

"I'd be delighted. Why don't you grab the decanter with the sandalwood and we'll get started."

Lars rushed into the bedroom and then out again in no time flat. Arcadia sat up, tucking her legs underneath so Lars had somewhere to sit. The other pilots and tactical officers became instantly intrigued with what was going on and slowly wandered over.

"Viking here will tell you that I give good hand massages," she began to tell the crowd that formed around them.

"Let me tell you that she performed miracles when my hand was so cramped, I couldn't even hold a stylus," Lars told them over his shoulder.

"Kyle always liked having his hand massaged after a long day of grabbing the joy stick."

Pilots snickered as one commented to the group, "Flight control. Our joy sticks are... err.... something else entirely."

Arcadia arched her eyebrows at the remark. "Obviously you lot have a problem with hand cramps. I don't think I can massage everyone's hands but I can teach you how to do a proper massage. I do a good job, just ask Lars and you can also ask Kyle if you don't quite believe Lars here," she added with a wicked smile.

"No, Madame, the look on his face is enough for me," Gold Knight Ensign Mohan "Bearcub" Kidston answered for them all.

"Giving hand jobs to such young troops may be against the law somewhere, Darce," Ike Ivanan tossed out as he and Kyle walked into the living room from Kyle's study.

Kyle decided to stand and watch as Arcadia continued to massage Lars' hand. "I see I have competition." Before any of the flight personnel could come up with an excuse, Kyle held up his hand to indicate that no response was necessary. He walked over to the replicator to take the cup of tea Ike had made for him.

"I guess..." Arcadia began to Kyle when he came back into living room and sat down, "if you ever do fire me as your CMO, I could become a masseuse."

"Madame Argent's parlour of massage would be very popular indeed," considered the Cardinal aloud as he carefully watched her rubbing Lars' hands.

Both Kyle and Ike snickered at the comment. Arcadia shot daggers in their direction until she realized why they were laughing then started to chuckle herself. She noted that Ravyn had pulled the Cardinal aside and judging from the blush on his face, she no doubt explained to him that massage parlour is still considered a euphemism for a brothel.

"On second thought," Arcadia amended, "perhaps I shall just stick to hand jobs."

That comment also brought a snicker and some decidedly rude, but well synchronized hand gestures from Ike and Kyle who were now sitting on the opposite sofa watching her.

"On third thought," Ike began, "why don't you just stick to being a doctor, Darce?"

"Good thinking, Lieutenant Ivanan." Arcadia turned back to Lars. "How does your hand feel now?"

"Wonderful. Much better than before. Think you could teach us?" Lars asked.

"I'm sure I can. If I can teach that old goat sitting over there, I'm sure I can teach you kits."

"I resent that remark," Kyle tossed back to her.

"Fine, then..." she began as she smiled at Kyle, "old toad. Better my love?"

Kyle gave her a mock salute with his tea mug and blew her a kiss in lieu of a verbal retort.

Arcadia smiled lovingly in return. She considered for a moment as her eyes swept the flight crew sitting or standing about her. "Are you lot free tonight?"

The medwatch crew looked at each other and then consulted their padds.

"Are we free tonight, Pilot?" she asked Kyle and Ike.

"We're done with the budget.... for now..." Kyle sighed.

After a few moments, the medwatch team reported to her that they were indeed all free.

"Very good. Kyle, why don't you ring the Nexolodeon and have them deliver a variety of food for all of us here? If any of you have a food allergy, please tell.... hmmm..." Arcadia's eyes quickly swept the crowd until she settled on one person. "Ravyn and she'll inform the Captain. Since they make their food the old fashioned way, let's get started on getting the food ordered as it will take at least an hour before they can bring it to us. During that time, I shall use the time to teach everyone how to take care of one's hands."

Kyle nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Ravyn, as soon as you're ready, please let me know."

"Aye sir!" she replied. She quickly gathered the pilots around her to find out that they had very few problems with any of the food that the Nexolodeon made. She gave the list to Kyle who eventually ordered enough food to feed two squadrons. While they waited for the food, Arcadia made good on her word and proceeded to show everyone how to do a proper hand massage. She told everyone to come back the next day with a small decanter so she could provide him or her with some of her rubbing oil.

"The oil," she told them, "is a recipe of my grandmother. While it isn't necessary to add a fragrance, the base oil doesn't smell very pleasing."

She continued to instruct them until the food arrived. The medwatch crew set the food up and everyone dug in to eat heartily talking about various and sundry events.

"And to think," Ike began as he drained the last of his beer, "we have Mister Andre Pierre Bourbon to thank for your recovery, Darce."

"Indeed...." Arcadia added.

"Don't know if you know this, but he's now *Captain* Bourbon," Ike interjected in Arcadia's direction.

Arcadia was clearly taken off guard and laughed. "Captain?... Bourbon?..."

"Wing Commander of the 4711 Carrier Air Wing," Ike replied with a wicked grin.

"Wing Commander? I'm clearly astonished. Starfleet Fighter Corps must be scraping bottom," she mused.

"Not really, Darce. The 4711 *is* the Flying Pig Pen Squadron."

"*Noooooo.....*" Arcadia cried out as she buried her head in her lap and laughed so hard she began to choke. Ike rushed over and held her until she finally stopped laughing. "This proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is a Deity," she finally wheezed.

Kyle quickly replicated a cup of tea and handed it to her. Arcadia paused for a moment to drink the tea.

"And to think I owe that... err.... gentleman my life...."

"Shit happens, Darce," Ike pointed out as he walked back to the table.

"There is that, Ike. When I was on the Sarah April as a Junior Surgeon," she began, "then *Lieutenant* Bourbon had taken in a toxic overdose of Ever-clear. It was never quite explained to us how he managed to receive such a high dose of the solvent when we had no other exposures at that time. I was a junior surgeon and on the bottom rung of the food chain therefore was given the task of keeping the records for treatment. Without getting into any boring details that are of interest only to doctors, we altered the standard treatment slightly and established a new baseline."

Arcadia paused to sip her tea.

"When Bourbon finally became conscious, his first words to me in a decidedly French accent were: 'Hey dere... Bay-bee, will my prick work, eh?' My answer while totally unprofessional I thought was quite apt: 'You need only a pulse to be a fully operational prick, Mr. Bourbon'."

Ike patiently waited until the snickers died down before he continued. "The CMO was rather upset with Darce. He cited her for unprofessional conduct. Personally, I would have slugged him."

"It wasn't enough that I was under orders to be ultra polite to this Neanderthal but then he had the audacity one-day..." Arcadia continued in a voice laced with disgust, "to pinch my bottom."

Arcadia noted that several of the young officers snorted while the older men just laughed out loud.

"As you can well imagine, I was extremely displeased concerning this turn of events. I felt that my protests to The Powers That Be concerning Mister Bourbon would go unheeded, therefore, I took matters into my own hands."

"Did y'all slash him?" a pilot asked from the back of the room.

"Of course not, Cowboy. I sought out the assistance of Security," she patiently replied. "After all, I was married to a Security Officer. I told Desmond of my dismay that morning as we went off shift. I reluctantly admit that I probably embellished the story a bit too much because Desmond thought it prudent to take care of the matter *immediately*."

"He did not injure him, did he Madame?" interjected another voice from the back.

"Nothing so crude, Cardinal but he did turn around and march over to the trauma center. I saw him shake his fist at Bourbon and apparently whatever Desmond told him was enough."

"Desmond," Ike decided to clarify, "stormed in with a look of murder on his face. He rushed over to Bourbon who looked like a man who really wanted to be elsewhere. Des loudly told him in no uncertain terms that unless he wanted to make sure his manhood got aquatinted with a very sharp object and in one stroke raise his voice an octave or two, he'd leave Arcadia be."

Kyle waited until the laughter subsided before venturing his opinion of the situation. "Desmond sounds like my kind of husband," Kyle considered aloud as he stood indicating to one and all it was time to leave. "I would have also employed the castrati method myself. Did I ever mention a Klingon Grand Master taught me how to wield and use a Bath'let?"

The effect of the last line was just what he wanted as people *quickly* gathered their possessions and scurried to leave, lest they become the next victim's of their Station Commander and his "Klingon Kock Kutter" as it was known through out the flight deck from that day forward.

Once everyone bade their goodnights and left their quarters, Kyle spun around to face Arcadia.

"*Bed!*" Kyle ordered as he secured the door. He walked over to Arcadia still sitting on the couch to emphasize his point.

"Aye, sir!" she coughed as he picked her up to put her to bed himself. "Just keep that big blade of yours away from me, if you don't mind. My voice isn't likely to change if you cut off any of *my* bits!"

In lieu of dignifying her with a response, Kyle simply pinched her rump and did his best impression of a French accent: "*Oui, oui, mon petite flowerpetal!*"

Arcadia couldn't help but laugh at her husband's inept performance. She thought to prod him some more once he had joined her under the covers of their mutual bed, but within minutes of joining her, Kyle had drifted off to sleep in her arms. Arcadia settled for quietly stroking the hair of her husband as she too drifted off into a peaceful slumber.

Part 9: Insight

*A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more
than much knowledge that is idle.*

Kahlil Gibran

As Arcadia had predicted to Kyle, the Argent Quarters or Nest as she overheard one of the medwatch crew refer to it became *the* place where the Flight Crew tended to gather to keep Arcadia company as she neared the end of her enforced convalescence. She spent her mornings on medical paperwork and her afternoons with the medwatch crew watching fighter holovids that ranged from tactical maneuvers to past Rigel Cup Competitions. They were in the middle of watching a particularly complicated tactical maneuver when Captain Kyle Argent came home for the evening. The medwatch crew immediately looked to Arcadia who in turn looked to Kyle.

"Don't mind me, I just live here," he informed them as he walked over to give Arcadia a kiss and then started to depart for his study when he was interrupted by the annunciator signaling a visitor.

"Terrence, come in," Kyle replied to the Director of Flight Operations.

"Here's the paperwork you wanted, Kyle," Terrence began, then noticed the holovid playing in the corner. "Do you mind..." he asked as he wandered over to watch the vid.

"Not at all," Kyle mumbled as he tossed up his arms in surrender and walked over to sit and watch the vid along with everyone.

Arcadia sat back and listened to the young pilots and tac officers as they analyzed the tactical formation until they hit a point where they were obviously stuck. Both Kyle and Terrence knew the answer but decided to allow them to figure it out. When it was obvious to the youngsters that they didn't know the answer, they looked to Kyle and Terrence. However, before any answer could be offered, a voice spoke up.

"I believe," Arcadia began, "you'll find that number five is out of position."

The pilots and tactical officers turned to stare at her.

"Try rotating the diagram on its 'zee' axis and I believe you shall see what I am referring to."

The junior officer did as she suggested and much to their amazement, she was right.

"I do not understand..." began Cardinal.

Arcadia put her cup of tea down and scowled at the flight crew as they continued to look to her in complete astonishment.

"How did you know this, Madame?" Pilot Desiree "Ravyn" MacRae finally asked the question that was on everyone's mind.

Arcadia took another sip of tea. "Do you lot think that we 'tug jockeys' sit around in our Ready Rooms eating bon-bons all duty shift?" Arcadia's use of the pejorative that the Fighter Corps employed when referring to their Starfleet counterparts startled the young officers.

"My dear Flight Crew... As the Commanding Officer of a ship of the line with a wing of fighters, did you think that all I did was just sit back and allowed them to merely trot about the galaxy? I honestly don't believe this.... Those flight personnel were *my* ultimate responsibility."

Arcadia rose from the couch to replicate herself another cup of tea. She removed the newly brewed cup and took a sip as she allowed her eyes to sweep the young pilots and tactical officers sitting on her floor.

"Just because having them on the ship was quite a surprise, I still had the ultimate responsibility. Along with the usual paperwork that accompanies such 'gifts', I received several reference works on the subject, including one written by..." Arcadia furrowed her brow as she apparently searched her mind for the title and author of the piece in question. "Ah... yes. It was called *Advanced Fightercraft Deployment Strategies* written by...." Arcadia allowed her eyes to sweep the room then settled them on Kyle. "One Kyle Descoyne Argent. Quite an excellent work by the way, I highly recommend you peruse it."

Arcadia noticed the flight crew nervously shifting around while Kyle looked to Arcadia in amazement.

"Remember when the *Wind* went up against the Romulans?" Terrence whispered to Kyle. "Arcadia set up the defense grid. She showed uncommon tactical prowess for a tug jockey there, now didn't she?"

Kyle nodded with a dawning of understanding.

"Gentlemen, my responsibility was to utilize the squadron once it was commissioned to the best of my ability. And as far as I was concerned, it meant

that I needed to be as knowledgeable or perhaps *more* knowledgeable on fighter strategy and tactics than Captain Argent over there. I may not be a flight officer but I do understand how it's all suppose to work."

Arcadia noticed that the flight crew still didn't quite follow her.

"Gentlemen, in one word: teamwork. It's not just a matter of working with your squadrons and your wings, it's also working with that ignorant tug jockey sitting in the Big Chair who may *not* be as ignorant as you may think."

Arcadia sat back down on the couch. "Pray continue Flyer," she asked the 13th Squadron Tactical Officer.

"Personally, Madame," Flyer ventured, "I think you should be the one giving the briefing and not us."

"Thank you for your confidence, but I don't think I'm quite in your neighbourhood," she replied much to the delight of the flight crew who laughed along with her.

Flyer continued the narration but Terrence and Kyle soon left them having decided they needed to get back to work on the budget again.

"Quite a lady," Terrence commented as they walked into Kyle's study.

"I know. I married her, after all..."

Part 10: Realization

*Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain
That has been, and may be again.
William Wordsworth*

"Excited about going back to work?" Kyle asked Arcadia as they prepared for bed.

"Absolutely! While the Medwatch crew has been splendid, I've really missed not being at the hospital."

"Oh?"

"Kyle love, when I start looking forward to doing budgets, it's time to get back to being a Healer."

Kyle chuckled. "I imagine so. Ready for bed?"

"Yes, I am tired and need to get my rest."

"Night, Arcadia."

"Good Night, Kyle love," she replied as she felt herself fall into the deep oblivion known as sleep.

Suddenly, Arcadia was awakened by the bed violently shaking about her. While their bed was huge -- Kyle at 6'8" tall needed all space he could get -- she still felt every one of his tosses and turns.

"Lights at twenty five percent!" she quietly commanded then turned over towards Kyle who was beginning to come around.

"What's wrong, love?" she asked as she gently stroked his head. "You haven't had a bad dream like this in ages."

Kyle took her hand off of his head and kissed it as he raised himself up to a sitting position. Rather than answer, he merely stared at her with a look on his face she'd never seen before.

"Is something wrong, love?" she finally asked him as she was becoming very concerned.

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"It's just... I could have lost you," he whispered while tears ran down his face.

Arcadia felt the tears well up in her own eyes. "I know," she gently told him as she began to gently cradle her husband and rock him back to sleep.

*

Next: *Aftermath*

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