

Manhunt!

Four: You Catch The Man

Thursday Early Morning

"Lead, this is S-A-R-3. Still negative."

Virgil Taylor sighed. They had nit-picked through the battle scene for some 90 minutes now and still no trace of any ejection pods.

For whatever reason neither Scott "Sunfire" Nakamura nor Kendell "Roadrunner" Benson had their transponders on, so there was no way to track them in this mess. Therefore, they would have to visually inspect every piece of debris and hope they'd eventually come across something. If they only could communicate with them -- unless...

Well... Virgil grimly considered, that wasn't even worth thinking about.

"Shit!" the shuttle pilot exclaimed. "Lead, we have bogeys inbound. Repeat, we have company out here!"

Virgil's tactical officer Lieutenant Jacob "Dutch" van der Weege quickly compared their sensor profile to those that Avalanche had brought back from her initial encounter. Intel believed them to be representatives of one of the Orion Piracy Syndicates out to make a fast credit off of whatever the freighters were hauling.

"Our friends are back," Dutch confirmed to Virgil on their ship's interlink.

"Roger that, Dutch," Virgil replied before opening the ship-to-ship link. "Two, form on my wing," he ordered. "Time to verify their intentions."

"Roger that!" Ensign Hussan "Cowboy" Farina responded.

"Three, continue scanning. If things get dicey out here, be prepared to warp the shuttle out."

"You got it!"

Cowboy fell in on Virgil's starboard wing with ease and grace. Virgil was worried about flying with someone other than his usual wingman but Ensign Farina was available and willing... so here they were.

"Unidentified Orion vessels!" Virgil broadcast over the broadband link. "We are Starfleet vessels engaged in a search and rescue operation. Please state the nature of your intentions."

"Starfleet vessels... We are interested only in retrieving our own comrades. Please do not engage."

Virgil mentally congratulated the intel boys back on Station who had predicted that whatever forces they might encounter on the search and rescue mission would be somewhat reticent in picking another fight. But regardless of whatever they had in mind, his orders were quite clear on the matter.

"Orion vessels... this is Federation space under the jurisdiction of Space Station Nexus. You will not be allowed to conduct any operations within our territorial domain. We advise you to turn back now. Failure to do so will result in our direct intervention."

"I am sorry," the newcomers began, "but we can not comply. We do not have--"

Virgil simply closed the comcircuit and sat back to think. If their intentions were to remain, then all they were doing now was stalling to get into position. He toggled over to the ship-to-ship.

"Cowboy? Open fire, one missile only," he calmly ordered.

In the meantime, Virgil had locked on to the lead craft and launched his Sabre light torpedo. Heavier than missiles usually carried by a Shadowhawk, yet lighter than a ship's torpedo, the Sabre was a devastatingly efficient anti-ship missile. A nimble fighter craft like the Shadowhawk would most likely evade it but these two enemy runabout-like craft couldn't match a pure fighter in agility. Though if Avalanche was to be believed, they did come close.

Indeed their enemies' evasive maneuvers were skillful, so Cowboy's shot was first decoyed and then targeted with an anti-missile missile before destroyed well short of its target. The enemy lead ship, however, was not so lucky because Virgil's missile had struck home with devastating accuracy. Sensors reported 60% systems failure across the board. This craft would be lucky if it could limp out under its own power.

"I think that did the trick," Virgil commented to Dutch before he keyed the broadband once more. "Now would you like to reconsider your options?"

Rather than reply, the remaining craft locked a tractor beam onto its fallen comrade and began to retreat.

"Two, disengage..." Virgil muttered over the ship-to-ship.

"Disengaging!" Cowboy acknowledged.

"Way to go, One!" the shuttle pilot jubilantly exclaimed.

"We've got to hurry the hell up," Virgil soberly replied. "They'll be back and this time, they'll most likely bring more than a couple of raiding craft."

"We're still negative out here," the shuttle pilot reported.

Virgil inwardly cursed once more. At best, Scott and Kendell had 2 or 3 hours of air left and it would take them at least six hours to comb through the entire area. If only we could get some sort of clue as to where they were...

"One?" Cowboy Farina in 'Two' piped up over the ship-to-ship.

"Go on," Virgil replied.

"The after action report said that one of the opposing craft was crippled rather than destroyed. Do you'all think that's where those boys were headed for? And if so..."

Virgil's mind began to race. "And if so," he completed the sentence, "Scott would have had to be ejected not too far off. Way to go, Cowboy! Computer, project a trajectory along the last known flight path of the inbound intruders."

Shortly after receiving the proper coordinates, Virgil began moving his people out to the new set of numbers. "Three, start scanning for any type of energy signatures."

"Bingo!"

Virgil consulted his display screen. For now, the new object was identified as unknown-3.

"If anything," the shuttle pilot added, "the folks back home will be happy if we can bring this puppy back home for study."

"That's not our mission and you know it!" Virgil snapped into the ship-to-ship link. "Now, start scanning for any piece of debris that might be the size and weight of an escape pod, if you please!"

Another few seconds passed before the display screen was updated with 8 more objects. "Well.... If he's around here it should be any one of those eight," Virgil mumbled.

Virgil began laying out the courses and notified the shuttle that he and Farina would be taking the first six, leaving the last two for the shuttle to inspect.

The first three objects were nothing more than impressive remnants of what once had been a spacecraft, most likely debris from one of the destroyed ships.

"Hello!" the shuttle pilot suddenly exclaimed. "We've got something here!"

Virgil checked his display again. Item 8 was now listed as a regulation Starfleet fightercraft escape pod, number 354809-425-13. It was Kendell "Roadrunner" Benson.

"Proceed to the recovery phase," Virgil ordered.

"Already way ahead of you, Lieutenant," the shuttle pilot responded.

"Two... it's obvious they've got their transponders off so as to not give away their location. Make sure that whatever you fly past gets a good look at who and what you are. Just in case...."

"Roger that!" Cowboy responded.

Object 4 was just another charred bit of space ship and so Virgil began laying in a course for number 6.

"Woo-dogie!" Cowboy exclaimed. "That's a Federation escape pod if I've ever seen one!"

"Transponder signal?" Virgil asked.

"None yet," he replied. "But he can see me, Lieutenant."

"Any sign of movement?"

"Negative. I can't make anything out," Cowboy confessed.

Virgil frowned. Were they too late? "Start tractoring him in," Virgil responded.

With the derelict in tow, the two fighters headed towards a rendezvous point with the shuttle.

"Three? Scan that pod before you bring it in," Virgil ordered the shuttle pilot. "I'd just as soon not have to deal with some sort of nasty surprise left behind by our pirate friends."

"Roger that."

A few seconds later the shuttle pilot spoke up, "Looks good on this end. One life sign, currently unconscious -- no sign of any explosives or other foreign objects, sir."

"All right then, bring him in! And then, let's grab that busted up raider and tractor it on home."

"Sir?" the shuttle pilot asked in a confused voice.

"I think the brass will be happy that we brought our two stray lambs home but they'll be overjoyed that we brought a new toy for the intel boys back with us. Don't you think?"

The shuttle pilot chuckled. This was the kind of stuff commendations and awards were made for. And who was he to disagree?

* * *

Thursday Mid-Morning

"Am I disturbing you?"

Angel Fontaine put the datapadd she was reading down, stretched, and smiled at the newcomer. "No, not at all."

"I'm Ensign Emerald Strontium, Assistant Chief of Security. I was wondering if you are up to answering a few questions."

Angel cocked her head, giving the nervous visitor a quizzical look. "If the doctors say its fine with them..." she allowed her voice to trail off while she rearranged her pillows and sat up in the bed.

"I received permission though they said that you needed your rest."

"It's not as if I'm really sick," Angel sighed. "And I'm going home Friday."

Emerald remained quiet as she pulled up a chair. She placed it beside the sick bed and sat down. "Has anyone discussed what happened to you on Sunday?"

Angel frowned. "The doctors asked me all kinds of questions. Y'know, did I feel sick... stuff like that."

The Assistant Chief of Security paused to gather her thoughts. "To make a long story short and I'm certainly no medical expert, but your illness..." she paused to glance down at her datapadd, "Sein's syndrome wasn't the cause."

"Oh?" Angel cautiously asked.

Emerald nodded, once again pausing before answering. "You were poisoned."

Angel sat up in her bed with an incredulous look on her face, which, much to Emerald's surprise melted into one of confusion. "Poisoned? Are you sure?" she asked quietly.

"The Chief Medical Officer is sure. She came to us yesterday with her evidence. That's why I'm here."

"Oh..." Angel whispered.

"I realize that this must be a real shock to you, but can you think of anyone who would try to hurt you?"

Angel considered for a moment. "No," she replied, shaking her head. "I don't think so."

Emerald knew that she was probing into private territory but the question had to be asked. "What about any past lovers?"

Angel gave a slight grimace. "I've been... well... really busy, Ensign. I've barely had time to go out. The last boyfriend I had was one of the tactical officers."

Emerald suddenly stopped her note taking and looked to Angel. "And who was that?"

"Do you really need to know?" she asked skeptically.

"In this case," Emerald gently urged, "yes we do."

"Jacob Van der Weege... everyone calls him 'Dutch'."

"Anything you'd like to tell me about him?" the Assistant Chief of Security requested.

Angel narrowed her eyes, not enjoying this line of questioning what so ever. "Like what, Ensign?"

"I know this must be uncomfortable for you, Ms Fontaine, but..." Emerald hesitated. "But we need to check out every possible angle. And if you and Dutch didn't part on the best of terms..." Emerald allowed her voice to trail off hoping that Angel would be quick on the uptake.

"We parted as good friends, I assure you Ensign. Besides, the way that the Fighter Corps keeps track of their people, I'm sure that unless he was off duty, his whereabouts would be accounted for."

Emerald nodded. "True." She paused to scan her datapadd. "While the medical people can't determine the exact agent, they assume it rapidly metabolized therefore, it is likely you were given the drug sometime before your collapse."

"Are they certain?"

Emerald frowned. "They aren't certain but for the moment, let's assume they have a point. Is there anything that strikes you as out of the ordinary during your shift that night?"

"Other than having a real celebrity at the Nex, not really," Angel concluded.

"Jasmine Sainte Clair?" Emerald asked while she made a few additional notes on her padd.

Angel smiled. "I was waiting on the Captain and Doctor Argent. Ms Sainte Clair and Mister Zephyr were their guests. The duty manager had specifically asked me to take care of the table since I always take care of the Argents." Angel paused, noting the confused look on Emerald's face. "When the Argents go out, they don't like to be bothered. Well... you can understand that."

"I can. They're probably the best known couple on the station... at least until recently."

Angel chuckled. "Yeah...." she paused and gathered her thoughts, "anyway, I know how to take care of them and I'm good at getting rid of any... err... pests."

Emerald noticed that Angel had stopped. "Go on, please."

"Well... other than being nervous about serving a celebrity -- that doesn't happen very often around here... Everyone was really nice to me and Ms Sainte Clair even said a few kind words to me." Angel leaned back on her pillow.

"What about the other patrons? Anything unusual you can remember?"

Angel shook her head. "It's usually pretty quiet on Sunday." Angel suddenly paused and a frown fell over her face.

"Something?" Emerald prompted.

"Oh... right before I took their dessert order -- that was right before I collapsed," Angel clarified. "Neville and some woman were having an argument."

Emerald consulted her datapadd. "That was Neville Takagi and Kavindra Courage. They're both flight officers."

"Flight officers? OK... Usually when Neville comes by, he orders food but this time, he just ordered drinks. By the time that woman... the woman..."

"Kavindra Courage," Emerald supplied.

"Right, Kavindra came in and joined him. That's when they had an argument and she ran out the restaurant without even ordering anything. By that time, Neville was pretty wasted and I refused to serve him another drink."

"Could you hear what they said to each other?" No one had heard the conversation so the Assistant Chief of Security had hopes that Angel had.

Angel shook her head. "I'm afraid not, ma'am."

Emerald frowned. "Too bad. I had hoped..."

"But I can tell you," Angel interrupted, "that when I told Neville that I wouldn't serve him anymore liquor, he said something about 'I'd pay for that' or something... I can't remember now. Then he stomped out. I thought that was an odd thing to say but he was pretty out there by then."

Emerald cocked her head sideways and looked quizzically at Angel. "You call him by his first name. Why?"

Angel blushed. "He asked me to."

"Oh?"

"He's come in a few times. Some of the girls say he's sweet on me." She shrugged her shoulders. "He's a nice guy but I'm not sure he's my type."

Ensign Strontium smiled and dutifully made another note on her padd. "Anything you can tell me about the Argent party?" Angel became visibly nervous which didn't go unnoticed by Emerald. "Is there a problem?"

Angel glanced up towards the ceiling and became lost in thought. She suddenly turned back to the Assistant Chief of Security. "Under normal circumstances, when the Argents dine out, I try to not notice them, if you can understand what I mean."

"I think so."

"But this time, I couldn't help but notice how distracted... Oh... I don't know. The Captain seemed... well... nervous."

"In what way?"

Angel gave a slight shudder. "I don't like gossiping but..."

"But...?" Emerald gently prompted.

"The women sat on one side and the men on the other. The women spent the entire night happily talking to each other. Mister Zephyr would interject a comment or two, which would make the ladies laugh. Captain Argent on the other hand, simply sat there, saying very little."

"I thought you said you tried not to notice when the Argents were around," Emerald gently pointed out.

Angel flushed. "Yeah... well... it's not every day we have a celebrity," she whispered.

"I understand and you were saying?" she prompted.

Angel paused not really wanting to think about what she had observed and certainly not wanting to even say this out loud. "On more than one occasion I noticed that Ms Sainte Clair was staring at the Captain. Once he caught her and she suddenly looked away."

Emerald became totally uncomfortable with this line of questioning but it was her duty to ask such questions. "What do you think was going on?"

"I... I..." Angel stammered.

"Ms Fontaine, may I remind you that you were poisoned?"

"I know but what does a hussy trying to steal another woman's husband have to do with any of this?" she cried becoming visibly upset. "And she seemed so nice too..." Angel allowed her voice to trail off as she wiped her eyes.

Realizing that perhaps this line of questioning didn't have anything to do with the reason why she was there, Emerald changed course. "What were you doing immediately before you collapsed?"

Angel was grateful for the opportunity not to think about it anymore and focused hard the question. "I had just taken the dessert order... I was walking towards the kitchen when... well... that was it... the next thing I remember is the hospital."

"Did you feel anything or notice anything strange before you collapsed?"

Angel shook her head. "No."

Emerald frowned and searched her datapadd. "What about the scratch?"

"Scratch?"

"The scratch on your neck. Ms Howard said you complained about it."

"Oh that..." Angel tossed off. "It wasn't anything at all. It's just all of a sudden, it started to itch like crazy. I mean it was just a scratch..."

"When was this?"

"Right after Neville had come in. I had just checked on the Argent table when I spotted him walking in. He sat down at one of my tables. I went over to take his order." Angel paused for a moment. "I just remembered something... Neville slammed the tumbler down so hard that it cracked. I nicked my finger when I was cleaning it up."

Emerald stopped making notes and looked across to the victim. "How bad was the cut?"

"Nothing unusual, Ensign. I get them all the time," Angel sighed.

Emerald had Angel go over the events a few more times until she was satisfied there was nothing more to be gained.

"Thank you Ms Fontaine," Emerald began, standing up to leave.

"I can't believe," Angel suddenly blurted out, "that someone would try and kill me. I don't have any enemies...."

"We know," Emerald stated evenly. She hated herself for having to ask the questions after having run a thorough background check on Angel. But, as the chief always said, there's nothing better than hearing the info straight from the horse's mouth. It's what they say, how they say it, and most importantly, what they leave out that can break a case.

Angel suddenly looked up with a look of horror on her face. "Think they were going after Ms Sainte Clair?"

"That's always a possibility, Ms Fontaine. Thank you again for your time."

The Assistant Chief of Security gave Angel a smile before she left the hospital room.

As she made her way back to her office, Emerald mulled over what Angel had told her and it didn't add up to much. Angel had no enemies, they'd already checked on her former boyfriend, and he had an alibi. In fact, Emerald didn't think that Angel Fontaine had been on Nexus long enough to upset someone enough to poison her. But just the same, they would check on the confrontation between the flight officers though she was certain that nothing would come of it.

Emerald stopped and frowned. They had a victim who seemingly didn't have an enemy in the universe. Though, she grimly considered, a pilot who was sweet on her did threaten her -- albeit made while he was intoxicated and he probably didn't know what he was saying.

On the other hand, she considered as she continued on to her next appointment, she'd heard that there was some bad blood with the fighter folks. She stopped and consulted her datapadd. Apparently, it centered on Kavindra Courage and her treatment of some of her people. Emerald frowned. What this had to do with the poisoning of a waitress at the Nexalodeon was beyond her. Granted, Ms Courage was seen with Ms Fontaine before she collapsed so it couldn't be so easily dismissed. That and the fact that Angel specifically remembered a scratch on her neck and a cut on her finger right before she collapsed. But as Angel had told her, minor scratches and scrapes aren't all that unusual in her line of work.

Emerald shook her head and considered the other possibility. Besides the two flight officers, Angel also interacted with the Station Commander, his wife the CMO and two high-profile guests who were going to be leaving tomorrow. Any of the four, she grimly mused, could have been the actual target.

The Assistant Chief of Security finally closed her datapadd and quickly proceeded to her next appointment.

* * *

Thursday Night

Ike Ivanan rushed down the club's grand staircase and found his table just in time to give the waiter his order for dinner. He quickly sat down and adjusted his bow tie, which he knew was out of alignment because he had dashed out of his quarters to *Serenade in Blue* for Jasmine Sainte Clair's final performance with barely a glance in the mirror.

He was greeted by the same waiter he'd had during the opening on Friday. The waiter remembered what drink he had ordered the other day. Ike gave the waiter an appreciative nod as he made a mental note to give him a generous tip.

Ike looked around while he sipped his drink. He was alone tonight; his companion, Lars, was busy with a flight line emergency and Ravyn had told him she wasn't able to get the night off. Not wanting to spend his time looking for someone else to share his table with, he opted to go solo.

He finally glanced up and spotted Kyle and Arcadia sitting above him in the VIP section. He gave them a small, friendly wave. Arcadia quickly acknowledged it with one of her own; Kyle, on the other hand, was slow on the uptake and finally just nodded.

He eyed the pair carefully. Arcadia looked decidedly uncomfortable, as if she really didn't want to be there. Kyle just looked tired. Not only that, but Ike thought that Kyle had the appearance of a man with something important on his mind. Ike leaned back and turned his eyes away from them towards the orchestra. If Kyle wanted to talk, he knew where Ike was.

Ike was spared any further musings because his dinner had arrived. As usual, his steak was just as he liked it and the accompanying vegetables were fixed to perfection. As Ike savored his meal, all thoughts of Kyle quickly disappeared allowing him to concentrate all his efforts on the Blonde Nightgale's final night on *Space Station Nexus*.

* * *

"You ready?" Bobby asked as he walked into Jasmine's dressing room.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replied, keeping her eyes focused on fixing her makeup.

"I'm ready and everything's been taken care of. Do remember that this is it. Your *last* performance here."

She stopped and whipped around to face a grinning Bobby. "No need to remind me," she growled.

"Oh.... I think there is, my little Nightingale."

"*Stop it!*" she bellowed.

Bobby allowed a small smile cross his face but was interrupted before he could respond.

"Five minutes, Ms Sainte Clair!" the stage manager knocked and spoke at the same time.

"*Thank you!*" Jasmine loudly replied to the closed door before she glared at Bobby. "*Get out!*" she snarled, emphasizing her point by picking up a glass, squeezing it in fury.

"Don't cause Gateway's people anymore problems," Bobby retorted, noting that she was about to throw the glass ornament at him. "I was just leaving."

Bobby gave her one last smirk before he deftly slid out of her dressing room; the ornament narrowly missed landing on his back.

"Something wrong Boss?" Jake asked.

Bobby had bumped into him as he had hastily left Jasmine's dressing room. Jake heard the crash of an object impacting the door and searched Bobby's face for an explanation.

"Just Jasmine being Jasmine, Jake," Bobby tossed off while he calmly smoothed out his tuxedo.

Jake glared at Bobby. "Daddy-O, that was more like our Nightingale was being a Raptor. Sounded like she was giving *you* the bird."

"*She's fine, Jake!*" Bobby informed him through clenched teeth.

Jake eyed him suspiciously then glanced over to his partner, Dag who merely shrugged. "I hope so. Everything has just been just groovy. This has been a good gig and I'd like to be invited back."

Bobby didn't answer Jake directly. "We just got the five minute mark. Make sure you're ready." Bobby didn't allow time for a reply, instead, he spun on his heels and headed back to his dressing room.

Both Jake and Dag watched Bobby leave them cold. "Now how do you like that?"

"I don't," Dag rumbled.

"Man-o-man... I don't like this either..." Jake mulled out loud. "The last rehearsal was bad enough. Well, hell, man! I always expect Jasmine and Bobby to have words but open warfare like this before a gig?"

"Bad news," agreed Dag.

"Ain't that a fact, jack," Jake replied, shaking his head. "Well... let's do what the man said and make sure that *this* half of the trio has its act together."

"Yup."

* * *

"Would you care for some dessert, Doctor? Chef Pierre whipped up a lovely chocolate cream pie just for you."

Arcadia looked up at the waiter and sighed. "Please give him my compliments and sincere appreciation but... I'll just have a cup of tea if you don't mind."

While Kyle had spent the evening wrapped up in his own cocoon of concern, his wife's refusal of a chocolate dessert prepared especially for her forced him back to reality. He suddenly realized that he had allowed his personal problems to force a wall between them. He aimed there and then to set it right.

"You look lovely tonight, M'lady." He reached over to lightly stroke her face and touch the necklace she was wearing.

She fingered the pearls around her neck and smiled at him. "It was the very first present you ever gave me."

He returned her warm smile. "I remember it well... I remember," he began, "wanting to give you something special when we were on the *Stellar Wind*. The

ship's stores didn't have much to offer but I was struck by that one necklace. My mother always loved pearls."

Arcadia reached over to hold his hand. "And I shall always treasured them."

"I know," he replied before the waiter returned with their tea and coffee.

Arcadia picked up her tea and took a sip before she tentatively glanced back at Kyle. "I've been concerned."

Kyle stared straight ahead and stiffened. "I know."

"Anything I can help you with?" she asked for what seemed to her to be the umpteenth time.

Kyle shook his head, purposely avoiding any eye contact. "No, Arcadia." He suddenly looked directly at her. "Believe me when I tell you that there's nothing you can do."

Arcadia sadly bowed her head as she removed her hand from his and went back to drinking her tea in silence.

Noticing her look of grave concern, he decided to tell her about the surprise he had planned for her tonight. "I arranged for something special for you."

She turned around towards him. "What?"

"You'll just have to wait and see, won't you," he teased, giving her his best smile.

Arcadia leaned over and whispered with a grin, "I guess I shall, won't I?"

Before Kyle could respond, their waiter interrupted him.

"Captain Argent, this just arrived. It was marked urgent." The waiter handed over the datapadd before he discreetly moved away.

Arcadia glared at the padd. "Can't you get away from it?"

Kyle felt his jaw lock in place and he shook his head. "Apparently not. If you'll excuse me..." He quickly stood up and moved off to an empty space. The VIP area wasn't as crowded as it was opening night.

Arcadia watched him move away, wondering if this was the beginning of the end...

...While Kyle was wondering the same thing as he cautiously opened the padd and read the contents.

*<Show Time, Boy Scout.
We're counting on you to do the right thing...
You'll be hearing from us again soon enough...>*

He snapped the padd off and glanced back at his wife who was staring absently down towards the dance floor. He walked over and sat back down at their table.

She disengaged herself and turned towards him. "For the sake of continuity, I'll simply ask you if there's anything wrong to which you'll respond 'no'. There, I've done it. So, there's no need for a reply, Kyle. It's been done for you." Arcadia turned away from him and fixed her attention below.

He was spared having to formulate a reply as the orchestra began the show.

* * *

Jasmine emerged from her dressing room having finally calmed herself down after Bobby's little visit just in time to hear the orchestra begin to ramp up to her entrance. She didn't need his constant reminders to keep her mind on business. After all, isn't that what she'd done these past few days? The gig on Galena went better than expected and she anticipated that they'd be asked back again next year. But that's not enough for Bobby. It was never enough for him. He always wanted more.

One day, she grimly concluded, he'll ask for more than he bargained for.

The orchestra was nearing her cue. She carefully walked towards the edge of the dance floor and waited.

"*When I hear that serenade in blue...*" Jasmine began as walked to her customary place near the piano.

* * *

Ike and the rest of the audience greeted her with a standing ovation, which Jasmine acknowledged with a smile and a wave as she continued singing. Ike could tell that she really held the audience in her hand as she finished her first song and immediately launched into the rest of her blue set. That didn't surprise him. While he missed Jasmine's second performance here, he'd gotten her song list from a fellow fan who had attended and noted that she had also started the second performance with her blue set.

Jasmine quickly segued into a Memory set which included "Memory," "Memories of You," and "Memory Roulette." Ike nodded his approval at both her selection and her patter between sets. As with her first performance, he busily took notes for his fellow Nightingale fans, this time without Lars' constant interruptions.

As usual, each set was greeted with obvious enthusiasm and in fact, Ike thought he'd never heard her in better voice. While her first performance here was great, this one was just short of sensational.

Her last set of the first act was her dream selections: "The Impossible Dream," "These Dreams," and concluding with "Morpheus, King of Dreams."

She ended the first act with her trademark "Angel Eyes." Ike thought that this version was far better than Friday's and judging from the audience's reaction, so did they.

* * *

"I thought they'd have you resting, Scott!" Ravyn exclaimed. She rushed over to give the injured pilot a big kiss when he had walked into the pilot's lounge that evening.

"Hey!" Dutch exclaimed, "what about me? I'm the one that went out and got him. All he did was sleep -- the space slacker."

"Yeah but," Ravyn responded, pointing to Scott. "He got a bump on his head," she purred. "And injured in the line of duty too. I heard that girls find this incredibly sexy." She emphasized her point by standing on her tip-toes and giving Scott a kiss on his forehead.

"Thank you," Scott cautiously replied, "I think..."

"You've gotten lucky once already today, don't push your luck, bud," Brett responded with mock jealousy.

"If this is true, then I'm sure to find another woman to take care of me," Scott replied with a smile.

"I hear Avalanche is available," Brett tossed off with a wicked smile, prompting a chuckle from those who had assembled around them.

"Naw..." Virgil responded as he joined the group, "we all know that she fancies Dutch."

Dutch suddenly blushed before he stammered, "Now... now..."

His reaction caused even more laughter from the group.

Virgil playfully clapped his hand on his tactical officer's shoulder. "If the shoe fits..."

Dutch grimaced. "Just shut up!"

Virgil smiled at Dutch's discomfort as he began to receive the congratulatory handshakes and back thumpings that seemed to be obligatory for a person in the position of having saved one of their own. Virgil noted that those flight personnel who had pointedly ignored him or just plain made his life miserable were the first ones to praise him. In fact, it seemed like damned near everyone was here tonight except...

"Say..." Virgil began as the crowd that had formed around him began to disperse, "where *is* Avalanche?"

They all stopped and looked around, not spotting her anywhere in the lounge.

"Good question," Ravyn shrugged. "May be she's talking to Security. I know I'm tired of them poking around. Not like any of us had anything to do with that business at the Nexalodeon."

They all grumbled in agreement. As for Avalanche, no one really was interested in tracking her down at the moment so they returned to nursing their drinks and swapping the latest gossip.

Avalanche could wait.

* * *

Jasmine smugly left the stage knowing that she'd nailed another one. She grinned because she could hear the audience continue clapping. Suddenly, she heard footsteps behind her and glanced back to see Bobby rushing towards her.

"We need to talk," he whispered, pushing her into her dressing room.

"What's on your mind, Bobby? Please don't mind me, I need to change," she told him. She slipped off her tight blue dress and changed into the short red cocktail dress.

"What the hell were you doing?"

"I thought I was singing," she sweetly replied.

"You were doing more than just singing," he retorted through clenched teeth.

"Oh?" she replied, fastening her dress before she sat down at her dressing table. "So tell me what I was doing."

"You *know* what you were doing..." he mocked.

She stopped and stared at him. "Obviously I don't."

"*Stop staring at him.*"

"Jealous?" she asked sweetly.

"Jazz--" he hissed through clenched teeth.

She bolted out of her chair, fists clenched in fury. "*Don't you ever call me by that name, do you hear me!*"

Bobby noticed how enraged she had become and unconsciously took a step back from her. "Not a problem," he whispered.

Quickly calming down while giving him a bright, toothy smile, she turned back to her dressing table. "Besides, you're imagining things, Bobby," she smoothly continued. "I played to the entire audience."

Fury boiling within, he blurted out. "*I've been with you too long to take that crap, dammit!*"

"Oh?" she purred.

"Look..." Bobby began, realizing that he needed to emphasize to her once again to keep her mind on her work, "he specifically requested a song which is in the love block. Just remember why you're here."

Jasmine closed her eyes and let out a small sigh. "I know why I'm here, Bobby. And I'll knock *his* socks off."

Bobby stared at the image in the mirror. "Don't jerk my chain, Jasmine. I'll be watching you."

She turned around to glare at him. "Why don't you get the *hell* out of my dressing room, so I can finish?"

"*Don't be late!*" he yelled, shutting the door after him and bumping into Jake again.

"Sorry Jake," Bobby mumbled before he took off for the stage.

"What the hell is going on around here, Dagman?" Jake asked.

"Dunno," Dag rumbled.

"They *never* argue before a gig and now they're going after each other between acts. This is some crazy-ass shit!" Jake exclaimed as both men stared at Jasmine's dressing room door. They looked to each other before they took off to go back on stage.

Jasmine, on the other hand, was oblivious to the conversation her sidemen had just had. She was still basking in the glow at the thought of doing a song....

Just for him.

* * *

Ike was just able to finish recording his thoughts on his padd when the trio came back for Jake's solo. As expected, Jake was in rare form and the audience appreciated. When he was done, the orchestra began the intro for Jasmine's first song of the second act. He watched her dash out on the stage, pumped up for action, giving the song all she had.

"What a day this has been, what a rare mood I'm in. Why it's almost like being in love."

She continued singing the "Almost Like Being in Love," and again, upon completion, she received a standing ovation from the audience. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," Jasmine breathlessly began once the clapping started to ebb. "I don't normally do requests but when it comes from a special person," she looked up towards where Kyle was sitting, "I'll *never* mind." She nodded to Bobby that she was ready.

"It's very clear, our love is here to stay," she began as she walked over to where Kyle and Arcadia were sitting above her. She noticed the flicker of recognition on Arcadia's face as she turned to Kyle and hugged him for dear life. Kyle, in turn, smiled at Arcadia and gave her a deep kiss. When he was done, he took out his handkerchief and wiped away her tears of joy before giving his wife another kiss.

Jasmine was momentarily stunned. She abruptly turned and walked back to the middle of the stage. While she didn't miss a beat, it was obvious to her long-time fans that the momentum she had started the second act with seemed to be waning. Jasmine accepted the audience's applause while covertly casting a glance in Kyle's direction just in time to see a waiter deliver a bouquet of blue roses to Arcadia. Jasmine looked back to Bobby as anger and confusion rose within her.

Bobby could only sit back and watch this little scenario being played out. As he began to accompany her on her next selection, "My Heart Will Go On," he considered how many times he had warned her to keep her mind on business but obviously when he'd told her that Argent had made a special request, she'd immediately jumped to conclusions. All the wrong ones and now it was his hope that she could pull herself together and complete the task at hand. At this point, he sincerely doubted it.

He watched her bow to the audience when she was finished with her "love" set. He began to play a riff that would segue into the next group of songs. As the interlude played, she walked back to the piano. She grabbed her cup of water, and took a long drink. Jasmine leaned over and whispered to Bobby, "I want to change the sequence."

Bobby wasn't in the position to have a long drawn out argument with her right now. She was prone to swap sets around depending on her mood and how receptive the audience was to her. He inwardly cringed now wishing he hadn't given her that much authority over their performance. All he could do was nod and wait for her to make the change.

"I want to do the forlorn set," she whispered before she walked back over to the center stage.

All Bobby could do was change the riff he was playing. He started to pound out "I'll Never Smile Again," alerting his sidemen that there had been a change of plans.

* * *

Kyle Argent glanced over to his wife who was still absently stroking the blue roses that he had arranged to present to her. He finally turned his attentions back to the performers on the stage. Despite the fact that he had spent the entire evening mulling over his own problems, the abrupt change of tempo and lead-in to the next piece didn't go unnoticed even by him.

If body language was any indication, Kyle noted that Bobby didn't seem very pleased by what was apparently a sudden change of plans. Kyle wasn't able to continue his train of thought because he was interrupted by a soft beep.

"Is that you or me, love?" Arcadia asked, quickly grabbing for her purse.

"You," he replied, having already checked.

"Oh... dear..." Arcadia mumbled, quickly standing up. She unconsciously adjusted her ruby red dress, putting her padd back in her purse.

"Something wrong?" Kyle whispered as he also began to stand up.

"I'm needed at the hospital, priority call," she whispered, pushing him back into his chair. "You stay here, Kyle and enjoy the rest of the show. I'll be back as soon as possible." She leaned over, gave him a kiss, and grabbed the bouquet of blue roses. Arcadia quickly departed not allowing Kyle any time to object to her leaving.

* * *

Jasmine watched Arcadia leave Kyle alone at their table. She gave him a bright smile as she continued to sing, "I've Got You Under My Skin." Her passion increased as she segued into "When I Fall in Love" the last song in this particular collection. She frequently looked up at Kyle expecting an acknowledgment of some kind but remained undeterred when one wasn't forthcoming.

Bobby Zephyr carefully watched Jasmine, frequently giving her a look of grave concern; a look that didn't go unnoticed by his sidemen. Jake continued to plunk at his bassfiddle as Dag strummed his guitar seemingly unconcerned by Jasmine's erratic behavior. But Jake and Dag had been together far too long for Jake not to notice how concerned his friend had become. Usually, Dag enjoyed watching the audience as they played, but ever since Jasmine started getting... unpredictable... Dag had kept his eyes locked on his prey.

Jake was no better. He'd carefully alternated his eyes between Dag laser-locked on Jasmine's every move, Bobby's calm demeanor -- his trademark boyish smile never faltering -- all the while seething a winter of discontent. And then there was the Blonde Nightingale herself. Jake inwardly sighed as he cast his eyes towards the source of their mutual displeasure while she continued her performance for one.

* * *

Ike slumped in his chair, totally confused by what was going on out there on stage. Because he'd been a fan of her for years and he was keeping notes on this performance, Ike felt that he knew Jasmine -- at least her performance technique -- very well. But what was going on totally baffled him. He picked up his datapadd and scanned what he had written so far. It seemed to him that everything had gone cheerfully into the weeds after Jasmine sang "Our Love is Here to Stay."

He leaned back and remembered that Kyle had told him that he'd requested Bobby to have Jasmine sing the song especially for Arcadia. At the time, Ike thought it was a sweet idea, but in retrospect, it obviously had turned out to be a total disaster for Jasmine.

But why? Even if they'd had a past together, Jasmine was the consummate professional and would *never* allow her personal life interfere with her performing. He'd read time and time again that even if Jasmine wasn't at her best or even ailing, she'd always given it her all. She felt that if people paid to see her, she owed it to them to do her level best.

But what he was witnessing -- she was now screeching "What Kind of Fool Am I?" -- just wasn't her style at all.

* * *

Jasmine chose to totally ignore the lukewarm response she was getting to her recent repertoire of songs. The audience was much too sophisticated and polite to display their displeasure outright, but it was apparent even to her that unless she literally changed her tune, they might just have second thoughts.

The Blonde Nightingale finally acknowledged their apparent lack of enthusiasm. Jasmine was a performer who hadn't seen this kind of reaction since she had started out in the dives of Kelbat right after she and Bobby had joined forces.

She briefly glanced over to Bobby as she finished up her current piece. She'd been with him long enough to know that he was less than pleased with what was going on therefore, the sooner they could escape, the better.

Jasmine casually walked over towards the piano to take another sip of water. She grabbed the glass, leaned over to Bobby, and whispered, "Let's blow this joint -- no encore. We'll finish up with 'When You're Gone'."

Bobby bit his lip in frustration but remained mute, forcing out a smile. He merely nodded to Jasmine before she walked back to center stage. He finally caught Jake's eye, drawing his right hand across the front of his neck indicating

that this was the last number. Jake nodded and leaned over to Dag to give him the word.

Dag's only response was roll his eyes and grunt.

Jasmine quietly waited and listened to the ripple of extremely polite applause. She had skipped her usual patter and was waiting for Bobby to get through playing the intro.

*The reason why,
Oh, I can say,
I have to put you down, babe.
And right away.
After what you did
I can't let you go on.
And I'll probably feel a whole lot better
When you're gone.*

* * *

Kyle Argent felt a chill run up and down his spine. He was sure that no one in the audience had missed the fact that she had been singing the last batch of songs at him and this latest tune left no doubt in his mind that she'd totally gone off the bend.

*Baby, for a long time
You had me believe
That your love was all mine
And that's the way it would be.
But I didn't know
That you were putting me on.
And I'll probably feel a whole lot better
When you're gone.*

* * *

Ike Ivanan frantically searched his memory. He finally realized that she hadn't sung this particular tune in ages, and in fact, she had been quoted as saying that she'd never sing it in public again.

So why the hell was she singing it now?

*Now, I've got to say
That it's not like before,
And I'm not gonna play*

*Games with you any more.
After what you did
I can't let you go on.
And I'll probably feel a whole lot better
When you're gone.
Oh, when you're gone.
Oh, when you're gone.
Oh, when you're gone.*

* * *

Jasmine added one extra, "*Oh, when you're gone*," then unexpectedly, gave a quick nod to the audience before quickly departing the stage not even waiting for a reaction.

The stage suddenly went to black and audience just sat there in stunned silence. Finally, someone evidentially realized that the performance was over and brought up the house lights revealing the orchestra sitting there, looking towards the side of the stage where Jasmine and the trio had run off, wondering if they were coming back. The bandleader, Duke Basie, finally decided that it was time get this show back on track. He tapped his baton on the side of an orchestra cubical to get their attention. He quietly told them he wanted them to start playing "Night and Day" on the downbeat.

As the orchestra began to play, Duke shook his head wondering what the hell had just gone on.

* * *

While the rest of the audience either started dancing or made tracks as fast as they could out of the club, Ike remained glued to his seat, finishing up his notes on this evening's performance. He continuously shook his head while secretly hoping that one of her other fans would post to the com channel just so he could assure himself that what he had witnessed wasn't just his imagination.

Ike finally finished his notes. He tossed down his stylus and glanced around the club.

"I understand," the club's majordomo began from behind him, "that you're a fan of Ms Sainte Clair."

Ike turned around and grunted. "I was."

Archer nodded as she sat down in the empty chair. "Can you explain to me what the hell just happened?"

He tossed up his hands in disgust. "I have no fucking idea. She was brilliant for the first show. I understand she was great for the second. Tonight's first act was exceptional, but the second act just downright stunk."

"I noticed. No encore either. Has she ever done that before?"

"Not to my knowledge..." Ike responded.

"Well..." Archer began as she stood up. "I should get back to work." She paused and looked back down at Ike. "Where's your companion? I thought he'd be here with you."

"Flight line emergency," Ike sighed.

"Oh?" the former mission specialist asked.

"Pilot and tac officer didn't come back from a mission yesterday. They're fine but the paperwork's a killer."

"I see..." Archer grimaced. She'd been there and done that and it was a feeling that she'd never get over, even after being out of the cockpit for a number of years.

Ike nodded. "Yeah... Since he's the Deputy DFO, Lars figured he should be around. Everyone's still jittery, especially Avalanche, because it was her wingman."

"I can imagine how upset she'd be..."

"Especially since she'd been running that same rookie into the ground."

"Now I *am* confused..." Archer mumbled.

"About?" Ike asked.

"Something that's been on my mind but what you've just told me just makes me even more puzzled," she began. "During the party on Thursday, I overheard a heated exchange between a man and a woman in the loo. One that implied that someone was in danger."

"Eavesdropping?" he chuckled.

Archer shrugged. "Despite what everyone thinks, it wasn't intentional but it wasn't as if they were trying to keep the conversation all that private. I didn't

want to give the impression that the staff had nothing to do but stand around and listen, so I hid in a stall and when they were finished, I went out to see who it could have been. There were two choices, one of which was Avalanche." She looked over at Ike. "I mean, if she was hazing her rookie, that's one thing. But the conversation I heard was a hell of a lot more sinister than just having a bit of fun. Now you tell me she was upset that her wingman didn't come back?" Archer shook her head in confusion.

"There was that reprimand from the DFO," Ike offered.

She chuckled. "Avalanche got religion. I see...." Before she could continue, a waiter began to furiously wave at her.

"Sorry, Ike. Looks like I'm needed somewhere else."

"Archer," Ike began. "Before you go, I'm curious, who was the other person?"

Archer crinkled her forehead. "In the bathroom?" When Ike nodded, she answered. "Jasmine."

Ike didn't acknowledge Archer's response instead, he sat back in his chair and thought for a moment. He concentrated on the night's events wondering why it seemed that the world had gone bugfuck at the same time.

It was time to get some answers.

He looked up and was surprised to see that Kyle was still sitting at his table. While he knew that Kyle enjoyed his privacy when he was out and about with Arcadia, Ike gave Kyle a small wave, indicating that Kyle should wait there.

Ike bounded up the stairs and found Kyle absently looking down towards the dance floor. Kyle suddenly turned around and indicated that Ike should come over.

"What's on your mind, Ike?"

"This business with Angel Fontaine," he began as he took a seat.

Kyle frowned. "You mean the waitress that collapsed Sunday?"

"That's the one," Ike agreed.

"What about her?"

"Don't give me this 'what about her' crap," Ike growled through clenched teeth. "You know as well as I do what kind of action that was."

Kyle looked away from his friend and locked his jaw so tightly that Ike swore he heard it crunch. "You know we can not..."

Ike stared at the back of Kyle's head in total disbelief. "I think our private little wars deserve to take a back seat to the lives of innocents, don't you?" he hissed.

Kyle refused to turn around and simply shook his head. "You know the rules."

"Kyle," Ike calmly began. "Angel Fontaine was poisoned. *Fuck-the-rules!*" he spat.

"So what would you have me do?" Kyle murmured. "I can't...."

Ike watched Kyle return his attention to the dance floor below. It was obvious to him that Kyle had purposely put him on ignore.

He couldn't understand why a man like Argent whom he knew as forthright and honest would beat around the fucking bush like this. Was Kyle running an operation here? No... Ike finally concluded because if he were, this whole matter would have been handled totally differently. He knew how Kyle operated and that sort of overt demonstration was just not his style.

But what if he was covering up for someone? Or...

Ike finally noticed that Arcadia was nowhere to be seen. "Where's Darce?"

Shaken out of his reverie, Kyle responded in a monotone. "Hospital, I guess. She received an emergency call right after Jasmine sang our song..." he absently replied, not pulling his attention away from below.

Ike sat up straight in the chair and sized Kyle up as everything suddenly started to fall into place. He edged closer and whispered, "You think they may have targeted Arcadia?"

Kyle slowly turned around and simply stared at his friend allowing his eyes to reply in the affirmative for him.

"And if you did anything to intervene...." Ike cautiously asked while he pulled out his datapadd.

Kyle gave Ike a slight nod.

Ike took in a deep breath. "Then we've got a problem. If she gets an emergency call, I get a copy. I just checked. She didn't receive squat tonight."

Kyle remained focused on Ike, sucking in a sharp breath. "False?"

Rather than answer him, Ike turned to his padd. "Sparky, is Doctor Argent at the hospital?"

"No Ike."

"Where is she?"

The computer hesitated.

Ike prompted it. "Sparky?"

"Ike... I don't know..." Sparky replied with confusion in his voice.

Before either could comment, they were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Jasmine began, still wearing her red cocktail dress.

"Ms Saint Claire!" Ike suddenly gushed as he sprang out of his chair. "This is such an honor and--"

Kyle slowly stood up, holding his hand up to cut Ike off. He turned to Jasmine and quietly responded, "Would it matter?"

"Of course it does, Kyle dear," Jasmine purred.

Kyle turned and he put his hand on Ike's shoulder. He simply stated. "I'll see you later."

Ike looked at Kyle; their eyes locked before Ike gave him a slight nod.

"With this my last night here, I thought we could all go for a drink?" she asked, pointedly ignoring Ike's presence.

"I can't," he replied evenly, not taking his eyes off of Jasmine. "I was just about to go about looking for Arcadia. Some sort of medical emergency."

Jasmine turned away from Kyle for a fraction of a second but it was too late. Kyle had noticed the almost imperceptible surge of anger that had flashed across her face while his own features remained aloof. Unlike Jasmine, he was adept at keeping his emotions in check.

"Well... I'm sure she'll be right back," Jasmine calmly offered as she looked back at him. "Why not wait here, have a drink and talk about the old times with me?" She capped off her suggestion with her best smile and edged closer to him.

"May be later, Jazz," he began softly, stroking her cheek before giving her a kiss on her forehead. "We've got much to talk about..." Kyle smiled before he walked down the stairs to the dance floor below.

Jasmine closed her eyes and let out a sigh when she realized that all her efforts tonight had *not* been in vain. "I'll be waiting for you, lover," she whispered.

Realizing that she needed to remain social, especially to *his* friends, she turned to face Ike but found that he had mysteriously disappeared.

She frowned and shrugged her shoulders. Her diehard fans had become oddly unreliable of late but then, she hadn't them with a performance tonight worth bragging about.

* * *

Kyle quickly left the club and rushed to his quarters.

She wasn't there.

He questioned the Station Computer and instantly realized they had tweaked his memory banks and he had no time to perform any kind of low-level circuit diagnostic. Kyle slammed his fist in frustration knowing that they were clever enough to keep him running around in circles all night. They knew his every move, leaving pads where they knew he would be.

He quickly dismissed the Nexalodeon, which was much too public a place. He briefly considered his office but ultimately decided that it would be much too much trouble for anyone to circumvent station security but also his command staff and his private office security. *No*, he grimly mused, *there is only one place left where privacy would be assured*. He took one last look around his quarters and departed.

The Station Commander of the *Space Station Nexus* purposely stopped in front of the familiar cargo bay door and noticed that it was unexpectedly sealed against casual entry because of maintenance work -- at least, that's what the sign stated.

Kyle reached under his tuxedo jacket and grabbed his personal datapadd. "Sparky," he quietly requested the Station Computer, "override all security locks

at this location on my personal command authorization -- no notification to the XO or official logs."

"Command authorization override acknowledged with no notification, Captain Argent. You may now enter."

"Sparky, ensure that I am not disturbed -- override all sensor and monitoring equipment at this location. Route all messages to my office." He paused momentarily before continuing, "And erase this session from your memory banks."

"Sir?"

"Do it, Sparky!" he hissed.

"Aye, Captain Argent," the computer replied.

He grimly nodded his head. He put the datapadd back while he cautiously crossed the threshold. He stopped to untie his bow tie and placed it in his pocket. Perhaps the superstitious maintenance techs were correct, he grimly considered as he allowed his eyes a chance to acclimate to the darkness. Perhaps his hiding out above them had become unlucky for all concerned.

He quickly pushed that thought out of his mind once his eyes had become acclimated to the darkness. He was totally familiar with this area having spent a good deal of his time observing the comings and goings of the fighter craft parked below.

He walked through the narrow perch into the larger cargo hold area and found it eerily bathed in a soft blue light. The illumination was just enough so that Kyle could tell that it was filled with storage boxes of various shapes and sizes, haphazardly stacked in various piles along the walls while the center remained clear.

Kyle Argent cautiously walked around the central area, taking mental inventory of all that surrounded him. He abruptly stopped as he realized that Arcadia was near. And she was injured confirming his initial suspicions as to why he was here.

He took a deep breath and delivered his proclamation with a deadly edge.

"I know you are here and I know my wife is still alive. No sense in hiding, besides, I know that it's me you want." Argent waited a few moments and was about to repeat himself when an answer finally came forth.

"So glad you could make it for our final act, Mister Argent," a voice from the ether rang out, obviously filtered through a modulator.

Kyle cautiously glanced around and couldn't see anyone -- not that he had expected to. He carefully rotated his body in a 360-degree arc attempting to locate the source of the voice but he knew that this effort would be futile.

"Where is my wife?" Kyle demanded once again.

The voice laughed and took some time before an answered arrived. *"You should know that I wouldn't just hand her over without an incentive."*

"You have me, let her go," he calmly stated.

The disembodied voice cackled in obvious delight. *"True enough! You want your wife? Far be it for me to keep her from you."*

Kyle snapped his head upward when he heard a winch motor starting from above and watched a familiar figure slowly being lowered to the deck. Her red evening dress was torn and her shoes were missing. Her wrists were shackled together, slung over a large hook. Her head bobbed around as if she were a puppet on a string. Finally, she lay flat on the deck.

Kyle winced slightly at the sight of his wife but quickly became all business as he forced his eyes away from Arcadia and once again searched all around him. "Let my wife go," he declared again, keeping his voice as even as possible.

"Perhaps we should ask Arcadia how she feels about that, shall we?" The abductor issued a laugh with a distinctively sinister edge to it.

Suddenly, a fine white power appeared around Arcadia's head, settling on her shoulders. It looked like fine snow on her red dress. She coughed and sat up, slowly beginning to regain her senses. She shook her head several times and quickly glanced around her, still obviously groggy. Finally, she looked down at the handcuffs and instinctively pulled against the restraints.

"Don't bother trying to get lose, my dear. I assure you, I'm very good at what I do," her abductor mocked.

Arcadia made one last valiant effort to free herself and stopped. She was not going anywhere.

"However, in the interest of not having you suffer more than necessary, allow me to make you more comfortable."

Several clicks were heard off in the distance and her shackles suddenly opened freeing Arcadia from her bonds. Her skin was raw and it was painful to flex fingers. He finally caught her attention and shook his head.

"My dear Madame Argent, now that you are at liberty, I suggest you don't do anything foolish. Just remain seated and relax." Once she was settled, her tormentor continued. "I am sorry, dear lady that your bondage may have caused you some discomfort. Hopefully, it won't be... permanent." The voice took a dramatic pause. "Now that we're all here," her captor began in a voice that seemingly came from nowhere and everywhere, "let me begin..."

"Why?" Arcadia stammered while she continued to flex her fingers.

Rather than answer her directly, the lights went from a dusky blue to a more intense cobalt. A figure, clad from tip to toe in black walked into view with a phaser rifle leveled at Kyle's abdomen. Kyle didn't flinch as the menacing figure slowly moved around him, keeping the phaser rifle clearly pointed in his direction. He noticed that the captor's body language clearly indicated the joy in having so attentive an audience and was obviously going to milk it for all it was worth.

"Why indeed...." the abductor began in a mocking tone. "It does appear that you've been a player in this little drama and you weren't even aware of it. After all, it was the threatening of your well being and... your 'removal' from safe surroundings that ensured your husband here would move heaven and earth to warrant your safety."

"I.... don't... understand," Arcadia stammered.

"My dear Arcadia," the kidnapper began, in a tone reminiscent of a teacher instructing a pet student, "this isn't about *you*, my dear, it's about...." The abductor dramatically stopped and broadly gestured with a hand towards her husband, "*him!*"

"Kyle?" she gasped, bouncing her eyes between her tormenter and her husband.

"Tell me something my dear lady, did your esteemed husband ever tell you about his *classified* past?"

"No?" she whispered.

"Really? For shame!" The abductor punctuated the comment by putting a hand to the head in feigned misery. "And isn't it fortunate that I'm here to tell you all about it? I assure you, dear Arcadia, I tell a good story." The kidnapper paused for a moment, then turned towards Kyle. "How quaint of you not to tell your

wife all about your sordid past, Mister Argent. This would be a good time to tell her," the abductor urged, gesturing to him that it was time for an answer.

Kyle responded by standing mute, not moving a muscle.

The kidnapper obviously wasn't pleased with that response, menacingly moving ever so much closer to his prey to whisper, "No?" When Kyle made no effort to say or do anything, the abductor evidentially regained some confidence and took this opportunity to plunge into a recital for one.

"Your husband, my dear, darling Arcadia..."

"I'm *not* your 'dear'..." she bravely snarled before she toppled over.

"Tonight you are... *my dear*," her kidnapper spat with a deadly edge.

The figure turned and faced Arcadia but kept a wary eye pointed at Kyle along with the phaser rifle. "Do let me begin, my dear," her captor began with a flourish as she sat herself up again. "Your husband has had a very interesting past. Too bad he hasn't shared it with you; I'm sure you would have been amused. For example..." her captor paused for dramatic emphasis, "did he ever tell you about the time he abducted the child of a Federation Councilor?" Her abductor stood and sadly shook a black-hooded head. "Terrible. Just terrible. All those lives -- wasted by your husband in an effort to grab the little brat."

Kyle watched her give him a questioning glance and he responded by standing there like a monument, seemingly impervious to the words being tossed about.

Watching with great interest and noting these words were having an effect on at least one of the Argents, the kidnapper plunged forward with gusto. "And what about that spy, Kyle? How you made him suffer with the torture and torment you inflicted upon him. Did you enjoy it Kyle? Is that why it took you so long for a simple information extraction? Did you get off on it, Kyle?"

Kyle Argent felt his jaw clench tighter as he silently stood by listening to his past with The Bureau tauntingly being recounted to his wife. He kept running over and over in his mind how and where this information could have come from. He finally concluded that the only way this knowledge could have been uncovered was by someone else somehow associated with The Bureau.

The abductor suddenly turned and pointed a black-clad finger at Arcadia. "You're a Healer, Doctor Argent and I know that you've seen what excessive torture can do to a body. You know how ugly it can be, don't you, Doctor?"

Kyle watched his wife cringe at that last statement before he continued his musings. *But why?* he asked himself again while his erstwhile tormenter prattled on. Unless The Bureau was getting sloppy in their operations, his file should have remained sealed. Besides, operatives always worked in pairs, no one pair knowing another pair; their only contact was with their Leader. The Bureau insisted on compartmentalizing their operatives from each other, lest they blow covers.

Kyle briefly looked over at his wife's abductor continuing to taunt her with grisly details of an assignment that went tragically wrong. It was obvious to him that as soon as he realized that Arcadia was still alive, he realized he was the real target. And if she was still alive, she wasn't the object of any desire, otherwise, she would be dead already. And Kyle could have been killed at any time. There was definitely something more at work here and Kyle was now starting to get an inkling as to what this was all about. *Obviously, someone wants something from me -- what, I'm not quite sure... But I do know who's behind all this...*

Kyle briefly interrupted his musings when he finally noticed the expression on his wife's face.

She had bowed her head while her tormentor picked up the pace of the performance and continued to list to the horrors that Kyle had committed.

Noting the increasing distress in his wife, Kyle decided it was time to take the initiative. "I'm not here to justify what I did, especially to you. I did what I had to do. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Nice try, Boy Scout, but that won't wipe away the misery you had caused. Besides," the tormenter turned his attentions from Kyle to Arcadia, "I'm sure your wife enjoyed *my* presentation more than yours, didn't you, Madame Argent? Mine was so much more detailed, after all..."

A dramatic bow was the only indication that this portion of command performance was apparently over. All that was lacking was the clapping of an appreciative audience -- none of which was likely to be forthcoming.

Kyle allowed the silence to go on for several moments. "If you are now finished," he began in a voice tinged with steel, "kindly let my wife go."

"Oh no, we can't do that. I'm not done," the abductor mockingly replied. "Did you know, my dear Arcadia, that your husband is a Third level disciple of sawa-kira, a form of martial arts so dangerous, that its practice is outlawed at Starfleet Academy? You honestly didn't think his reason for moving of campus was solely to have a good time, did you?" her captor taunted. "You see, the object of this discipline is to be able to hurt and maim your opponent without

the use of one or more of your five senses. Unlike most martial arts, this one is purely offensive. A third level disciple can fight without the use of sight, sound or smell, is that not so Kyle?"

Kyle solemnly and slowly nodded his head in agreement.

"So now you truly know that the man you married," the kidnapper continued, now pacing back and forth like a caged animal, "was a born and bred killer, my dear Arcadia. You just never knew it, did you? A finely tuned weapon, ready and capable of going off at any given moment. So very much the opposite of all that you were brought up to believe in as a Vaegan Healer."

The kidnapper didn't wait for a response, stopping instead to issue a maniacal laugh before tossing an object at Kyle. Arcadia abruptly looked down when she heard metal scrapping against the deck. It was a pair of handcuffs and they were now sitting at Kyle's feet.

"Put them on," the abductor ordered in a manner that suggested that Kyle dared not disobey.

Kyle didn't hesitate; he quickly picked them up and began to fasten them to his wrists.

"Now what was it I forgot?" the mocking continued while Kyle finished putting on the handcuffs. "Oh, yes... Her life for yours. Was that our deal?"

Kyle pointedly ignored the taunting figure before him as he locked the cuffs. "I'm ready," he announced with grim resolve, watching his tormentor edge towards him, keeping the impressive phaser rifle trained on his chest.

"You'll pardon me for not coming any closer, but one would have to be crazy to get too close to trained killing machine under a circumstance such as this, so you'll have to help me out here, Kyle. Hook your shackles on the winch."

Kyle quickly complied. A few seconds later, several clicks were heard and he was hoisted up to hang a foot from the deck. "Arcadia," the tormentor asked her ever so politely, "please go over and place your former restraints on your husband. I assure you, he won't resist."

Arcadia shakily stood up but didn't move, instead becoming transfixed on the figure dangling above her.

"My dear Madame Argent, please oblige me. Put the shackles on his legs," her tormentor politely urged, tinged with a hint of displeasure if she dared disobeyed.

Arcadia tore her eyes from her husband, whipped them around to stare at her captor, and angrily shouted, "No!"

Kyle allowed himself a slight smile while he looked over and noted that the body language of his adversary now indicated someone whose script wasn't being followed exactly as planned. Kyle shook his head and smiled. This was the very opportunity he had been waiting for.

"Very nice, Bobby. Did you think this up by yourself or did Jasmine do it for you?" Kyle noted that at his statement, Bobby's body language had changed from that of the captor to that of someone who was slowly losing control of the situation affording Kyle the opportunity to twist the knife just a bit further. "Oh, silly me. Of course not, you intended to frame her with my murder. Had a little falling out after she failed to deliver the message? Besides, you couldn't resist being on the center stage and showing her how it should be done..."

"*Bravo!*" Bobby Zephyr shouted before ripping his mask off. He managed to do this while keeping a firm grip on the phaser rifle still pointed at Kyle. "Very good, Kyle. And just how did you figure it out?"

Kyle issued an easy chuckle before he answered the question. "You just spent the better part of thirty minutes --"

"Actually, it was thirty-five," Bobby smugly interrupted. "I was keeping track you know."

"Ah.... thirty-five minutes recounting my exploits," Kyle smoothly continued. "One would assume that anyone with my pedigree could think on their feet in a crisis situation. Certainly you didn't think I'd miss such an easy one, did you?"

"You are far from stupid, Kyle, otherwise, The Bureau would have wiped your sorry ass out a long, long time ago. But do answer my question, how did you figure it out?" Bobby asked in a tone that mixed genuine curiosity with that of a man that shouldn't be trifled with right now.

"Wasn't difficult at all," Kyle casually tossed off. "Your *partner* slipped up. After that, it was child's play."

Kyle looked over and noted that his words had had their desired effect. However, Bobby chose to counter the statements with a few of his own.

"Brave words from a man who is now trussed up like a holiday turkey and whose wife is still in grave danger. But be that as it may, *Jasmine*," he spat in a deadly voice, "*is of no concern of yours.*" Bobby had obviously regained his

composure because he was now calm and business-like again. "However, in the meantime, there is this pending matter still to be finished. Madame Argent, if you don't mind, please put the cuffs on your husband. And don't dally." He emphasized his point by coming closer to her, keeping the rifle pointed on Kyle. "I think you understand what I mean," he hissed.

Arcadia hesitated. She cautiously walked over and stood underneath him before she knelt down and fumbled with shackles. She had a terrible time coordinating her hands and fingers but finally managed to place the shackles on his ankles.

"Arcadia..." Kyle quietly whispered, hoping to get her attention once she was done.

She suddenly looked up at him as the tears began to fall down her face.

"Whatever happens, you must get away," he urgently whispered. "No matter what happens, *you must go!*"

She simply stared at him and could only manage to utter an anguished, "I can't just leave you."

"*You must!*" he snarled at her, his voice now devoid of any love or compassion.

She winced at his harsh reply as he was abruptly jerked up towards the ceiling and was now dangling several meters off the deck. Both looked at each other, not realizing that Bobby had started to walk towards her again. She suddenly turned around and faced him.

"*Why?*" Arcadia spat to the menacing figure in black.

"Why what, Madame?" Bobby incredulously asked.

"All... all this?" she demanded.

"Oh... all this?" Bobby pretended to mull this question over, then suddenly swung his arm around the room, eventually settling it on the figure dangling above. "You should ask *him* about his last few weeks my dear lady, I'm sure he has still lots to tell you."

Arcadia's gaze moved from her kidnapper and tormenter to that of her husband hanging helplessly above her.

Kyle looked down at her. "I had started receiving anonymous notes..." He suddenly stopped and looked over to Bobby. "I take it you had a few operatives here?"

Bobby allowed his famous smile to spread over his face. "Oh... don't worry about them, they are no longer a concern."

Kyle inwardly winced not knowing if Bobby disposed of them or they left once their job was over. He looked back over to Arcadia and continued his story.

"I paid the messages very little mind but suddenly, they started to take a sinister twist. When I tried to contact Security, I immediately received a note that told me that if I persisted in making this public, bad things would happen." Kyle paused to think for a moment. "It was obvious to me that someone had been engaged in computer system slicing... You?"

Bobby smiled and bowed with a flourish.

Kyle grimly nodded. "With no way to trace the messages, I was left as an unwilling observer. I decided to perform my own test by contacting Security yet again and I was immediately rewarded with another message informing me that if I persisted, someone close to me would be killed and if I didn't believe it, just watch this weekend. Obviously, Angel being poisoned was the warning that they meant business." He paused for a moment. "I expect that Arcadia's calling in Security herself didn't set well with you either..." Kyle purposely allowed his voice to trail off because he noted that Bobby had become very stiff.

"It was a nuisance," Bobby began in a conceited voice laced with doubt. "But as the end game was near, it was no never mind," he bravely tossed off.

"I see," Kyle murmured. He looked back over to his wife and decided to skip over a few details especially about how they had expertly manipulated his very being. "I had a feeling as to where they were keeping you, Arcadia..." He stopped and glared at Bobby while giving him a tight smile. "Too bad a last note didn't materialize..."

"May I respectfully point out that it already has?" Bobby interrupted with a flourish in his voice, getting back on track and in control again. "And the note would have had the following information: it would have told you where to meet the kidnapper wherein said kidnapper would have exchanged a few morsels of top secret information for your wife's life. But alas, events went tragically wrong," Bobby began, shaking his head in mock grief. "And the gallant *Space Station Nexus* Commanding Officer was killed by his assailant. Pardon me if I get out my hanky and wipe my eyes..."

"Don't let me stop you, Bobby," Kyle began with a sense of his own bravado, "but I suggest a slightly different ending to your story. The Station CO is killed by his assailant who in turn is killed by the assailant's faithful companion, who

just happens upon the scene just a second too late to prevent the tragedy. What do you think, Bobby? Do I have any promise as a storyteller of your caliber?" Kyle ridiculed.

Bobby had become visibly engaged by Kyle's assertion, perhaps because he was closer to the truth than Bobby cared to admit by Kyle's taunting. Much to his surprise, Arcadia decided to up the ante.

"You realize," she began in a voice brimming with danger tinged with nervousness, "that there is a flaw in your plan...."

Bobby turned to her with a look of astonishment that quickly melted into one of understanding, putting him back once again back in command. "A flaw? How stupid of me, but of course!" He dramatically smacked his head with his free hand and edged closer to Arcadia. "Can't have a witness can I? Please, Madame Argent, stay where you are, I promise this won't hurt. On the other hand, I've never actually asked anyone if it did. They normally don't live to tell."

Bobby quickly moved the phaser rifle from Kyle's direction and brought it to bear on Arcadia. Kyle began to fiercely struggle against his restraints with all his might, growling and groaning as he made a valiant attempt to break free and save his wife.

Glancing up to note Kyle's futile endeavor at escape, Bobby decided that it was time to end this little scenario once and for all. "You honestly thought I would let her go. My... how careless of you, Mister Argent."

Bobby gave Arcadia a smile of triumph as he began to take his time to set up for the killing blow. Arcadia simply stood there calmly and simply cast her eyes upward.

Suddenly, a phaser bolt rang out.

Kyle screamed Arcadia's name at the top of his lungs...

...As the figure in black fell to his knees, displaying an expression of total astonishment on his face. Smoke was wafting out from a tiny hole in his forehead and filled the air with the odor of seared flesh. Bobby let out an audible gasp before falling over onto the deck with a dull 'thump'. Several more shots rang out and Kyle crashed to the ground. His leg restraints were shot to pieces as well as his wrist restraints, both leaving angry scorch marks on his skin and the smell of molten metal to mix in with that of burnt tissue.

Arcadia hesitated for a moment before she instinctively rushed over to Kyle and grabbed him, finding him quivering with fear and rage.

"I'm all right, I'm all right. Calm down, Kyle love. It's over," she tried to soothe him.

Kyle slowly stood up while he composed himself in the process. He looked down at his wife and instead of answering her or reciprocating her embrace, he abruptly shoved her aside.

"No, it's not over yet..." he stated in a detached and icy-cool voice, not betraying the personal trauma he'd just been put through, "is it, Jasmine?"

Jasmine Sainte Clair boldly stepped out from her hiding place. She was also dressed in black but had forgone the black head covering leaving her face and her short, blonde hair exposed. "How very perceptive of you, Kyle. Granted it took me a little longer than I expected to free myself and someone else," she paused and glanced at the crumpled body, "did the deed for me, but you were right. You didn't honestly think I was going to let that little prick frame me, did you."

"Of course not, didn't I make that plain?" Kyle retorted. "Besides, as I told Bobby, you made a mistake."

"Oh?" she asked casually while she slowly walked towards him, pointedly ignoring Arcadia's presence.

"When you came up to see me in the VIP section, you slipped." Kyle patiently waited for a reply from Jasmine but none was forthcoming. "I saw the look on your face when you realized Bobby had taken things into his own hands and frozen you out of the situation entirely. Kind of hard when the best laid plans get upset by the random factor, no?"

A grim smile came over her face. "Bad me. I guess I can't keep anything away from you after all. You were like that even when we were in bed."

Kyle felt every muscle in his body harden. "Just when were you going to let your presence be known?" he asked quietly. "Before or after you killed my wife?"

Jasmine hesitated then turned to Arcadia who was sitting on the deck having fallen after Kyle had tossed her aside. "It was nothing personal... really, Arcadia. Of course, I enjoyed our time together. But I only became friends in case I had to use you to get to him." Jasmine paused and gave Arcadia a broad smile. "You must realize that people like Kyle and I belong together. We're made for each other." She paused and shrugged apologetically. "You would have been in the way and--"

Kyle bellowed, "*Enough!*"

Jasmine snapped her body around to face Kyle, obviously startled by the intensity of his emotion. "I obviously underestimated you," she continued cautiously. "I didn't count on *you* having a triggerman here. Where did he or she come from?"

Kyle gave her a caustic smile. "You obviously read my file. You should know that he works here."

Jasmine frowned. "*Obviously* it wasn't very complete."

"Evidentially not," Kyle retorted as another figure clad in black holding a long-range phaser rifle slowly walked towards them.

Arcadia turned to watch the figure come closer and suddenly exclaimed, "Ike?"

Jasmine's face once again betrayed her emotions. Kyle opted to answer her unasked question.

"After you came up to me when the show was over, I signaled to Ike. He tracked me here. Y'know, *really* simple stuff," he paused to allow his eyes to settle on Bobby's dead body. "I think you know the rest."

Jasmine remained locked in place and simply stared at him. "I... I don't understand?"

Kyle smiled. "Seems to me that your superiors were holding out on you," he continued, now with the upper hand. "But all in all, that is not surprising. So what *was* the objective of this little charade, anyway?" he casually asked her.

"The...The Bureau. They want you back. They believed that you should have never been released. Your skill at getting people in and out of sticky situations was 'too valuable an asset to retire at this time'." She looked up and gave him a gentle smile. "And I just happen to be the best deep cover operative they have." She stopped and added quietly, "And together, we would be unbeatable. Besides," she chuckled ruefully, glancing at the dead body at her feet, "I need a new partner anyway."

She waited for an answer but Kyle remained mute. "You're a killer Mister Argent," she continued in a deadly voice, "and you're a damned good one at that. You are a professional and every assignment they gave you, you came through. Plain and simple, you are a warrior, not a pencil pusher. You weren't born to sit around and baby sit a space station, your nature is to search and

destroy, not to have and to hold. You're just like me -- we aren't meant to be on the side lines."

Kyle didn't respond save to stare blankly at her.

Becoming visibly frustrated, she grabbed his arms to emphasize her point. "*We belong together!*" she roared but immediately became quiet. "It is our nature to be together! You loved me once..." she purred, stroking his chest, "you can do it again."

Kyle gave her a stony gaze while he carefully removed her hands from his person. "You are right," he finally agreed. He reluctantly turned his head toward his wife and looked deeply into her bright green eyes, now dulled by drugs and fear. "I'm sorry, Arcadia."

"*Kyle... don't!*" Arcadia cried.

Kyle noted that Jasmine had edged ever so much closer him. With her most winning smile and her eyes blazing in conquest, she reached over to give him a passionate kiss. Kyle reciprocated her kiss; rigidly at first, then passionately when he grabbed her and gave her all he could give while keeping a covert eye on his wife and his erstwhile triggerman, helped Arcadia up off the floor.

Finally, in response to the finish of Kyle and Jasmine's passionate kiss, he heard Arcadia finally muster up a quiet, "Kyle?"

While he had heard his wife's pained cry, he had other matters to deal with as he noted Jasmine's beaming smile of conquest.

"Ky.... Kyle... you're... hurting me?"

Kyle suddenly clamped his hand across her throat. In one smooth motion anchored it under her chin, and lifted her six inches off of the ground. At first, she struggled but to no avail.

"You are right in one regard," he began slowly while he ever so gradually closed his hand around her neck, "I was a professional. A natural-born warrior as you said. And a killer... But that was a long, long time ago. And people do change."

He paused and bored straight into her soul... assuming she had one, that is. "And at one time, I had a certain amount of feelings for you. Was it love?" he shook his head. "No, not to my knowledge. Not then... Not now... and not *ever*," he spat. "You simply were not the one for me. You had served a purpose in my life at that particular time and that was that. I thought we had parted as friends and that was agreeable to me. But since then, I have not lost one second of

sleep over you. No," he finally concluded, shaking his head again, "I did not love you. Finding out that you were an operative for The Bureau all but guaranteed that the only emotion you would ever likely be able to evoke from me was that of scorn."

"I don't... understand!" she croaked. Kyle left her just enough airway to breathe and to do a limited amount of talking. "I don't... understand any... of this!"

"You underestimated me, didn't you? You had access to my file and you used that information to play me like a fiddle. But obviously you didn't learn anything, did you?"

"I read your file... you're a... killer. I've seen... you in... action!" she wheezed.

"Did you know that I turned down jobs?" When she answered with a look of surprise, he continued. "Yes, I turned down jobs because I considered them objectionable. You see / have my morals -- morals that I adhered to under all circumstances. I became an operative in The Bureau because I realized that in order to secure certain goals and certain objectives, sometimes one simply couldn't stay within the confines of the rules and regulations of the Federation. Sometimes directed action must be taken, even if said action was in violation of what the Federation was generally perceived to stand for."

"Oh, how... noble of you," she gasped. "What about... that spy? I saw what... you did... to him. There was very... little left when... you finished!"

"He was a terrorist on the run who had secrets for sale. Unlike you, I had an understanding of what was at stake here. If I hadn't squeezed the spy for info on whom he had sold his secrets to, people... *innocent* people would have died. By the millions, if not billions." When Kyle was finished his explanation, he calmly stared up at his captive.

Rather than answering him, she pulled her leg back and kicked him powerfully in the groin resulting in an audible "thump." Usually, this kind of blow would have rendered most men writhing to the floor. But not Kyle; he just simply stood there as if nothing had happened to him.

"You... bas...tard!" she wheezed.

Kyle calmly ignored the fact that she had grabbed his forearm and was digging her fingernails into him, shredding his tuxedo jacket. "The first part of my sawa-kira lessons was to learn how to block out pain. It's much easier to fight blind if you do not have to worry about the odd bout of pain or two. A *true* professional would have known that." Kyle emphasized his point by slowly squeezing her throat to the point that everyone present could hear her

wheezing. Ignoring her obviously growing discomfort, he continued. "A true professional would have also known to never let feelings get in the way of the objective. My guess is you were sent here to turn me or kill me. You lost sight of that objective and promptly tanked the mission. Bobby knew it and look what happened to him. Just imagine how amused your superiors will be by this turn of events," he calmly pointed out to her.

"I suppose," Kyle started, ignoring the pain he was inflicting and the tears that were falling, "I could put you in the brig, but you'd be out and 'disappeared' before the night is out. No sense in playing that out. Ultimately, the only thing I can do is to reciprocate *your* un-professionalism."

Kyle suddenly released her and she unceremoniously dropped to the deck with a thud.

She issued a loud gasp as she tried to catch her breath. When she tried to talk, she appeared horrified. "*My... voice! My... vo...ice...*" she croaked and cried.

He smiled grimly at her. "Your performing days are over. If you haven't destroyed your career already tonight, one more public appearance and your soon-to-be former employers would happily take that opportunity to tie up *another* loose end. I've given you your life -- at a price, but it is your life nonetheless. It's more than what you would have afforded me. I suspect that Bobby wanted you to kill me but you couldn't and that's why he was going to do the deed himself and leave you holding the proverbial bag."

Jasmine nodded through her tears while clutching her throat.

"And that's why I'm sparing your life."

"I don't... I... don't...under..." she wheezed.

He marched over and towered above her to emphasize his point. "Arcadia *is* my life now. And *you* have one hour to get off my station and clear *Nexus* space. Failure to do so will forfeit your life -- now and forever."

He stood there, rigid and monolithic, with scorn and hate burning in his eyes, as he watched Jasmine painfully scurry away. He turned towards his wife who was now standing in Ike's arms, being comforted by him. She was still obviously distressed by the tonight's events. Kyle started walking towards them but Ike waived him off.

Kyle abruptly stopped and stared at the couple. Ike signaled to Kyle that he was going to take care of Arcadia and that Kyle should take tie up any loose ends

here. Kyle signaled his understanding as he watched Ike drop the phaser rifle to the deck and slowly walk Arcadia out of the door.

* * *

Thursday Late Night

"Darce," Ike began in a quiet voice as he gently led her away, "we should avoid the hospital. I can take care of you in my quarters."

Still in shock, she absently nodded her head. "What about Lars?" she asked.

Ike knew that he had to get Arcadia away and in a safe place as soon as possible. He'd taken care of victims in her state before and he knew that sometimes they may never recovered from an ordeal like this. It would have been better to do a point-to-point beam-out from the cargo area. But as good as Kyle was, it would have been very difficult to conceal. Thankfully, it was now the delta shift and most of the crew was off duty so there were very few out and about at this time of night.

Ike looked over to Arcadia and realized she'd asked him a question. "He'll be on duty all night -- flight line problem," Ike finally replied.

She nodded and remained mute as he skillfully led her through the ship. Finally, they arrived to his quarters. Ike led Arcadia to his couch and sat her down before he went to get his medical kit.

Ike noted her surprise when he had placed the kit next to her. "You seem ready for everything. Last time I saw a kit like that," she added quietly, "...it was during the war, during--"

"We have to be prepared for everything, Arcadia, especially those of us in black ops," he interrupted as he rummaged through his Marine SpecOps Med Kit, specifically fashioned for the Omega Team, gathering up equipment he thought he'd need before finally grabbing a pre-loaded hypospray. "This will clear the cobwebs."

He didn't wait for a reply. He tossed the spent hypospray aside quickly grabbing a medical tricorder to scan her. He frowned and he retook the readings.

"No need to mince words, Ike, I know I suffered nerve damage in my wrists. And I can only conclude," she continued solemnly, "that my erstwhile captors purposely damaged them before I was trussed up like a Christmas goose." She stopped and closely examined her hands and wrists. "Actually, I was quite surprised," she began while she painfully flexed her fingers, "that my talons didn't pop out. I'm assuming the drug they used suppressed them." She finally

looked up at Ike hovering over her. "How ironic, Ike... he took away Jasmine's career -- *both* careers," Arcadia chuckled ruefully and continued to painfully flex her fingers, "and they may have taken away mine as well. How bloody ironic..."

"The damage isn't as bad as you think," he assured her. He searched through the opened kit and took out another hypospray. "This will take the edge off of the pain and start repairing the damage."

"My physical pain...." she acknowledged before she looked up at him. "What about my mental pain? Have anything for that, 'Doctor' Ivanan?" she asked quietly.

"Darce..." he whispered.

"I felt his fury and his hatred tonight. It was deep, primal, and all consuming. Every bone of his body fed this malice. It was a rage that knew no boundaries. It was the purest form of bloodlust I'd ever felt."

Ike remained mute as he pulled out a dermal regenerator and began to repair the tissue damage before he stabilized her wrists.

"You shouldn't judge him too harshly," he finally replied.

"Easy for you to say, you signed on, didn't you?" she spat at him.

He stopped and stood in front of her, placing his hands on her shoulders forcing her to look up at him. "Darce, you are going to listen to me, ok?" He instantly regretted his outburst when he noticed that she was crying. He sighed and handed her a tissue to wipe her eyes.

"It was my fault he got recruited into The Bureau to begin with," Ike continued. "If you want to lay blame at someone's feet, then let it be mine. But regardless of what you may think of him now, Kyle Descoyne Argent *is* a good man. Don't let that claptrap you heard tonight convince you otherwise."

Arcadia was astonished. "You?" she gasped. "But how..."

"You've heard about our little excursion on Tandoshan?"

"Of course, but..."

"Didn't take long for The Bureau to find me after I got back. Apparently, I had all the qualities and training they were looking for. I was a trained field medic, went to sniper school, and did eight months of literal grassroots survival school... and quite frankly, I didn't care who I had to plug to make the universe

a better place. I was so... idealistic..." Ike paused for a moment to push away a painful memory. "One day I was asked who I thought was the best asset amongst our extraction specialists. I made the offhand remark that the best one I knew off was riding a desk -- hey, sorry, guys. Undeterred, they had asked me who this pilot was. I told them about Kyle and what he had done on Tandoshan. And two days later, there he was, standing in front of me, large as life."

"He didn't have to do it!" she cried.

Ike's eyes bore into her with fury. "Well, that's damn easy for you to say!" He realized how angry he'd become and forced himself to calm down. "Truth is," Ike continued in a softer voice, "after being stuck in a war he couldn't win, having lost Reesa, and was about to be drummed out of the Fighter Corps, he was an easy mark. So, who are you to judge him for it? How did you feel when Desmond died? Weren't there a few Rommies you personally wanted to plug after they killed your husband?"

Stung by his tone of voice, she looked up at him with a distinct air of scorn then abruptly turned her head away. Arcadia stared off into the distance and she wiped her eyes. "I'm not the one who should be talking, should I? And I did want to kill them all." She looked up at Ike and clenched her jaws tight. "I got my chance when they invaded my *Stellar Wind*."

"It felt good, didn't it?"

Arcadia cringed. "I'd like to say that I don't remember," she began. "But still..." She allowed her voice to trail off and kept her eyes away from Ike's. "Kyle," she began in a voice tinged with hatred, "specifically chose to do what he did."

"We all make choices, Darce. Just like you made yours *that* one day."

Arcadia whipped her head around and stared at Ike who had moved the kit off of the couch and was now sitting next to her. "*I had no choice*," she shouted to the man who served as her corpsman many years ago during the One-Year War.

"Spare me, Doctor Devlin," Ike began, using the name and title she went under during those trying times, "you could have refused. As it was, *you* were the one that broke your covenant as a Vaegan Healer."

"*You don't have to remind me, I know what I did!*" she hissed.

"Darce," Ike began in a gentler voice. Having made his point, he went back to being her friend by using the name she was more accustomed to him using. He gently stroked her left cheek. "You did what you had to do. You saved lives... *our* people's lives."

"I still used my so-called healing abilities to inflict pain," Arcadia whispered and bowed her head in shame.

"Just as Kyle used his abilities where they were most needed. Yes, he was made into a trained killer. And yes, he has killed, maimed and did what most would call despicable. But he was and is a man who has a conscience who didn't go around using his special skills just for the hell of it."

Arcadia remained mute while Ike thought this was a good time that she heard the whole truth, not someone's wicked interpretation of such.

"You heard Bobby rant about the kidnapping, correct?" Ike asked

"Yes."

Ike took a sharp breath. "The reason why he was in on the abduction in question -- who was no child, but young woman of sixteen years -- was because she had been brainwashed by one of those extremist groups. These zealots had decided to have the daughter pressure her father into starting an unnecessary war with the Klingons." Ike paused to ensure that he hadn't lost his audience.

"We never need any more wars than necessary, Ike."

"Exactly, Darce and that's why it was important that this young lady was extracted as quickly as possible. Yes, some of the cultist died. And some of them were innocent. But it had to be done otherwise, *millions* would have died on both sides," he paused and looked to her. "There's something else you should know."

"What?"

"I was the one who was initially given the assignment. Kyle was my backup. I still don't know what went wrong," Ike continued as he stood up to stretch his legs, "but I got shot up and Kyle had to come get me *and* the young lady out safely."

Arcadia looked up at Ike who had finally come back to sit down next to her and grabbed her hand to hold it. "The next time you give him a massage and you notice the scars on his back, you should consider that they are present because Kyle wouldn't leave a friend behind."

Arcadia stared at him, remaining quiet, obviously lost in thought before she leaned over to kiss the hand that still held tightly on to hers.

"He has a gift, as you have a gift, Darce, and believe it or not, he used it well just as you use yours well," Ike whispered.

"I know," she whispered, "and I should have had more faith in him, shouldn't I. And I didn't destroy my ship based on my faith in him. Then I thought I'd already learned that lesson at the Rigel Cup." She stopped and looked at him. "Do you know there was a gambler at the Rigel Cup that never lost faith in him? Hank bet on Kyle during his first win and never looked back. He always had faith in him. Mine seems to come and go...."

"Don't ever lose faith in Kyle," he whispered. "He will never let you down. I can promise you that." He disengaged his hand from hers and leaned over to give her a small kiss on her forehead.

She shook her head as the tears began to fall again. "I don't know what came over me. I allowed my imagination run wild. It never occurred to me that he trying to *protect* me." Arcadia shook her head again. "I thought he was about to run off with Jasmine."

Ike couldn't help but give her a sad chuckle. "If Jasmine had gotten her way, he would have." He suddenly became very sober. "Or she would have killed him."

"I know -- it was all part of her plan." She paused and shook her head. "This is all so confusing..."

Ike leaned back and sighed. "The Bureau wanted him back into the fold. Jasmine apparently thought she could just waltz in, Kyle would fall in love with her all over again, and follow her back like a lost puppy. And if that didn't work, she was supposed to kill him."

"I don't understand why we kept alive or why you didn't just shoot Bobby when you had the chance."

"Time was on our side, Darce. Since Bobby and Jasmine hadn't killed you or Kyle when he entered the room, we were ok. As long as Bobby kept talking, we were content to let him. It wasn't until you were in direct danger did I pop one off."

"You'd think I'd remember that lecture on hostage dynamics, wouldn't you," she snorted. "But why all the theatrics?"

"Damned good question..." Ike idly rubbed his chin. "I guess Jasmine convinced Bobby that she'd kill Kyle tonight if he arranged to kidnap you for bait. Judging from her singing performance tonight, Bobby knew that she'd tanked the mission. So, I suspect that Bobby trussed her up and decided to show her how it should be done. And got carried away in process."

"He did seem to enjoy being in the spotlight," Arcadia mused. "Though it seemed to me that he was just a bit twitchy tonight."

"Twitchy is an understatement. I figure he probably got tired of being second fiddle to the Blonde Bitch," Ike continued to speculate. "And it looks like he got so twisted up in playing his own game, he didn't secure her as much as he should have. Or, she may have gotten loose earlier and just sat back and watched the show, waiting for a time to make her dramatic entrance to win Kyle over." *Never mind the fact, Ike grimly considered, that if Bobby had tried to kill Kyle, Jasmine would have killed Bobby stone dead. And if Bobby had killed Arcadia, so much the better for Jasmine -- she would have killed Bobby and claimed Kyle for herself. But now there's the question about how Kyle will deal with having his soul bared out for all to see especially the woman he loves.*

"We'll never really know, will we..." she mused. "We're actually two of a kind... only he understood what he had done and I'm still wondering why." She paused for a moment and stared at Ike. "What happens now?"

"Kyle will take care of all the necessities. You've had an accident in your quarters. I'll file the accident report myself."

She looked down at her trussed up wrists and shrugged. "I'd really like to read your explanation myself." She paused for a moment. "The body... the rifles... and... *Jasmine...*" she had a distinctively distasteful look on her face when she uttered that creature's name.

Ike smiled. "Not a problem for you to worry about. Kyle will take care of it."

"I don't doubt it," she replied with a rueful smile that quickly melted into a torrent of tears.

Ike moved closer and pulled her nearer to him. "Hush, it's all over. Don't cry, Darce," he whispered.

Arcadia rested her head on his shoulder and allowed herself to weep as hard as she could.

Ike wrapped his arms around her and he held her close to him. He simply allowed her to cry. He really wasn't sure what to do but as he felt her warm body next to his, he realized that she shouldn't be left alone. "Do you want to stay here tonight, Darce?" he whispered.

She pulled away and looked up to him, placing a bandaged hand on his face, stroking it lightly. "You're a good friend, Ike." She abruptly turned away from him, staring off into the distance. "I'm not sure."

* * *

Thursday Late Night

"Da bird dun flown the coop!" Jake Brendan loudly proclaimed to the nearly empty *Serenade in Blue*.

As expected, Dag Musenda kept his eyes focused on his meticulous packing of his guitars. Jake knew that when it came to Dag's instruments, nothing in this universe ever kept him from his appointed task.

"What?"

Rather than answer him, Jake sauntered over and handed Dag the datapadd. Dag took the padd, scanned it, and tossed it over his shoulder towards the piano.

"Cow," he rumbled with his deep, gravely voice.

"Right on, brotherman!" Jake agreed, stroking his goatee in thought. "The way she tanked tonight's performance -- the woman was downright bugged! But this...." he turned and pointed to the datapadd sitting on the floor, "the bitch didn't even have the courtesy to apologize or at least tell us to our face that we were history. Man-*oh*-man, it's enough to--"

"Why the long faces, lads?" Boffin Gateway asked. He had noticed the intense discussion in the corner of the stage and wandered over. The rest of the orchestra was long gone and only the cleanup crew and the staff remained to wrap up any loose ends.

"Dag and I are now at liberty, Mister G," Jake grimaced.

"Oh, how so?"

"Our esteemed Nightingale has flown da coop," Jake spat. "Hasta la fucking later."

"After that sorry performance, I'm not too surprised." Boffin was grateful that Jasmine decided to tank the *last* performance and not the inaugural one.

"Mister G, me and Dagman here have been with Bobby and Jasmine for years and she's never bugged out like that. Never!"

"And speaking of Bobby... What does he have to say?" Boffin asked.

"That runt?" Dag grumbled.

Jake snorted at his partner. "Probably fired him too." Jake paused and looked around. "All his stuff," he pointed out, "is still here. He'll be back with his tail between his legs soon enough."

"Yup," Dag agreed. "Besides, ain't like they'd been chummy lately, Mister G."

Jake nodded at Dag's full sentence, something he's not noted for. "Ain't that a fact, Daddy-O. Man...oh...man let me tell you Mister G, I've never heard them argue before or during a show but tonight it was so thick you could cut it with a knife. And man... when she started making goo-goo eyes at the Captain tonight, well... Bobby was bugging. He pounded the piano like nobodies business. I'm surprised the damned thing is still standing." Jake stopped and shook his head in disbelief.

"Never had a chance," Dag rumbled.

Boffin looked away from Jake to Dag. "What do you mean?"

"Ain't that a fact! You seen how they looked at each other, Mister G," Jake answered for his partner, "the Cap'n had eyes for only one woman, and it weren't the concrete canary."

"Concrete canary?" Boffin chuckled.

"Yeah..." Jake began, rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling. "That's what Bobby called her behind her back when he *really* had it in for her. Which, lemme tell you, was a lot lately."

"Gentlemen, sorry to intrude," Archer smoothly interrupted. "Mister G, I just received a note from Mister Zephyr. It seems that he's taken a short notice gig and needs all his material packed up and shipped out on the next liner."

Dag turned and snorted in Jake's direction. "See?"

"I just knew it, Daddy-O!" Jake shook his head. "Yup, she tossed his sorry butt out and he ain't even gonna show his face here to collect his shit. No matter... it's not like I ain't got the time to help you out, Archer," Jake grumbled as he began to collect the music.

"Out of work?" Archer asked, finally noting their distressed.

"Canned," Dag rumbled.

Jake watched Archer stare at her boss and shoot him a non-verbal, but pointed suggestion. Boffin nodded and looked around the room. "*Duke!*" he yelled to his orchestra leader who quickly rushed over, carefully avoiding bumping into the cleaning crew and skillfully dodging the tables and chairs that were now scattered about the dance floor.

"Yes, Mister G?" Duke Basie wheezed somewhat out of breath.

"Duke, you were saying that with all the concerts you lads have lined up, you were looking for extra members?"

"That's right," Duke replied, looking at Jake and Dag who were both all ears. "You boys free?"

Jake looked at Dag and gave him a toothy grin. "Free as a bird!"

"Jobs yours if you want it, boys..." Duke offered.

"Beats the Nu'borscht Seven circuit," Dag rumbled.

"That's a fact, jack," Jake readily agreed as he shook hands with Duke to seal the deal.

* * *

Thursday Late Night

Arcadia carefully walked into the place she felt Kyle would be. Ike had lent her one of his old jumpsuits and slippers. He had pointed out that her walking about the ship in a torn and soiled evening dress with no shoes would likely attract more attention than an ill-fitting jump. She stood at the door and waited, not knowing if she should intrude into his private realm. After all, he'd never invited her here and in some regards, she felt out of place. Especially since this was the place of this evening's mutual torture.

But then, she considered, nothing felt quite in place after tonight.

Kyle was obviously startled by Arcadia's sudden appearance and stared at her for several seconds. "Are you OK," he finally whispered.

Arcadia shook her head. She carefully walked over and stood beside him. "No."

Before he could say anything further, she amended her response. "My wrists," she emphasized her point by holding up her bandaged arms, "suffered some minor damage and that will keep me from surgery for a few weeks." She laughed ruefully. "Turn about is unfair play, eh? She took away my ability to heal and you took away her ability to sing. I'd say that the odds are now even."

Kyle said nothing but took in a sharp breath.

"I remember," Arcadia continued, pointedly ignoring his silence, "the day when Amanda and Cordell came to dinner. Amanda and I talked about you and just before they left, you asked me what was wrong. And I told you 'nothing'."

She turned to stare at him. "And that was a lie. Because she had told me that she could talk about what wasn't classified... yet... *Yet*, she had added and from that day forward, that word stuck in my soul. All I could think about was what from your past could haunt us." She turned away from Kyle and joined him in staring over the hangar deck. "And it obviously came back in spades," she angrily spat at him before she broken down in tears.

He was about to say something when she waved him off. "But who am I to talk?" she murmured, keeping her eyes cast out over the empty hangar deck. She abruptly turned back to him. "How much do you know about Vaegan Healers?"

"Not much, I confess, why?" he asked, keeping his distance.

"During the War Of Succession," Arcadia began, "one of the bloodiest wars that Vaega had ever witnessed and hopefully will never see again. Each House had its own clans: Warriors, Builders, Teachers... and Healers. We were known by our house *then* our clan."

Arcadia turned to face Kyle. "During the war, the ruler of one of the Houses -- who happened to be of the Warrior clan -- decided he could use the Healers for his own good."

Kyle shook his head. "I don't understand."

"He suggested and my clan leaders readily agreed that the Healers could not only *heal* but they also could be very effective weapons of personal destruction."

Kyle felt a sense of horror wash over him. "Torturers."

Arcadia nodded her head. "Indeed and from what I understood, extremely good at what they did. Once the Clans were re-established as the ruling bodies, the Healers decided to enforce a bond -- a *sacred* covenant between us and our

patients. This remains a source of the friction between the Healers and the Warriors. We Healers still hate what those Warriors forced us to do..."

Kyle nodded. "First, do no harm."

His wife gave him a sad laugh. "Leave it to a Terran to use the right words. Indeed, we would never, ever use our Healing powers in such a way again.... But not me..." she whispered and cried again. "I broke my covenant as Ike rightly pointed out to me tonight."

Kyle edged closer to his wife and gently used his hand to wipe away her tears. "Knowing you, I'm sure you did what you thought was necessary."

Arcadia reciprocated by placing a wrapped hand around his waist. "I dearly hope so. It was after Desmond died. I was asked to minister drugs to assist security in obtaining information from a spy. I hated it," she whispered.

"I understand."

"Good," she smiled. "Because I do understand. Not all of it, of course, but I know the man you are now and I know that you'd never willingly do anything you weren't totally committed to. That's just your nature."

It felt good to be in his arms again and he wrapped himself around her, holding her tightly.

"There are so many things," he reluctantly began, "that you still don't know about me."

"I know," she whispered.

"It's almost like it was yesterday," he began as he let her go. "When I was around ten years old, my family moved to Shonen VII.

"The major weapons laboratory for the Federation?" Arcadia asked.

"That's the one," he responded. "Amongst the local inhabitants were a group of Peace-through-passive-resistance Monks. Very holy men and the planetary residents revered them and treated them accordingly." Kyle paused a moment. "While we were having dinner one day, one of them came to our house."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Custom, I suppose. It's quite an honor for a Monk to visit. My mother gave him the expected bread and wine. The Monk was nice enough but

partway through the meal, he stared at me. I still remember the look on his face."

Kyle shuddered as he could see the face again as if it had just happened. "The Monk suddenly declared to my father that I was a warchild"

"Warchild?"

Kyle looked away from his wife. "Their version of the anti-Christ."

Arcadia was stunned. "What a horrible thing to say to a child, much less his parents."

"That's not all he said," Kyle continued. "He wasn't done, not by a long shot. He told me that he saw me as the seed of darkness. You see, according to them a warchild is a necessary evil. Some do what they do for the good of the world -- or universe as it were. Some do not. Those are the ones that carry the seed of darkness. It wouldn't have been so bad if this tidbit of information had stayed within our family but it was spread about the neighborhood. Not only was I the new kid on the block, but by being pronounced as the warchild, I was shunned and ostracized wherever I went."

"Your mother must have been devastated. No mother wants to see her child go through that kind of pain."

"She was. She wanted to move but my father would hear nothing of it. He told me to buck up and that this experience would build character." Kyle shook his head. "So we didn't move and my old man was right. I didn't let anyone push me around and in fact, anyone who tried was rewarded for their efforts." He sighed. "I didn't have a lot of friends."

"I can well imagine, Kyle."

"But I also lost my family. I became so single-minded that I became ostracized even from them. They didn't want to be around me. Eventually I realized whom I had to blame for my predicament. So at thirteen, I grabbed my gear, left a note telling my folks not to search for me -- though knowing my dad, he wasn't going to do so anyway -- and went hunting for that Monk, looking for payback."

"You didn't?"

"I did. I was very angry. I traveled for weeks, deep into the mountain country of Shonen VII. Information was hard to come by at first, especially when you carry the mark of Cain as it were, but after I explained to one of the farmers that

unless I was given the information I wanted, his house would burn, they were more forthcoming."

"But you were only a child," Arcadia noted, "didn't he fight..."

"He did. That is he tried, anyway." Kyle's features hardened as if he had been stung in the wrong place by that particular memory. "Eventually, I tracked the Monk down. He had gone up Mo'bag'han, only the single most treacherous peak on the planet. It took me days to do it, but climb it I did -- propelled by that simmering hatred that had brought me this far and was not going to be denied now. When I reached the top, the Monk was just sitting there as if he had been waiting for me. I took out my knife and rushed over, raging at him, asking him why he did this to me and how his pronouncement had brought him to where he was. I kept asking him why over and over again." Kyle shook his head as he closed his eyes in remembrance. "The Monk didn't even flinch. He just let me rage on."

Kyle opened his eyes and began to pace. "The Monk finally looked up and spoke to me. He said that the truth need not be explained to those who know it. There was but one thing left to do -- kill him and make my destiny manifest."

"That's true enough," Arcadia murmured.

"The rage that had gotten me up there was a potent fuel indeed as most would have died of cold or starvation climbing up that peak. Did that not make me something special?" Kyle stopped walking and looked at his wife. "I realized that the Monk was right but he still wasn't finished... not by a long shot."

Kyle began to pace again. "He told me I had two choices. I could take the easy way out and simply kill him and be done with it. Or I could take the harder road -- a path of hardship and pain. One in which I was told I'd suffer much, but was mine for the taking."

"Knowing you as I do, that's the one you took."

He stopped and smiled at his wife. "Not immediately. I took out the blade and was about to kill the Monk when I stopped and cried. I'd been so alone.... so desperately alone and it had finally taken its toll. I could not bring myself to do it. Perhaps because of all the people I'd met so far, he was the only one who somehow understood me. How could I kill someone like that? Or perhaps because I simply was not a killer... Yet."

Arcadia wanted so much to grab him and hold on for dear life but she also knew that this was not the time.

"I can still remember the Monk telling me '*the path to becoming a champion of light isn't for everyone --it's only for the best and the truest. Loneliness is their nature because it's hard to be like them and still find peers.*' His pronouncement made it easy to give in and be touched by the dark. In time, I would bring a great deal of carnage to the universe. There was nothing that I could do to change that because it was foretold." Kyle paused. "The real question is whether it would be for honorable and decent goals or for ones of mere hate and self-profit. If I could answer that question, I would have taken the first step."

He looked back at his wife. "I didn't feel I had a choice and as a reward, the Monk did nothing for two months but test my resolve."

"Your resolve?"

"My resolve. For the next two months, the Monk beat the snot out of me." Kyle noted the horrified look on her face. "But as a result, I became tougher, harder, faster, and smarter."

Arcadia mulled this over. "So that's where your superior reflexes are from?"

"I had to painfully learn it all from scratch," he smiled before he became serious again. "After all was said and done, the Monk escorted me down the mountain and proclaimed to everyone that I had been blessed." Kyle paused to smile at the memory. "People who had shunned me wanted to be my friend. I was really enjoying the first moments of acceptance I'd ever known when the Monk gave me a few pieces of wisdom before he departed. He told me that my path would contain much pain and much sorrow. This would be the price that I'd pay for my perceived darkness. But in the end, if I embraced my destiny, it would be a universe that was mine for the taking."

"More importantly," Arcadia began as she walked over to where he was standing, "it was what made you who you are."

"And it almost my undoing," he whispered.

"You had no chance against them, Kyle. I've seen security psych profiles and they can be nasty. I can only imagine what The Bureau's are like."

Kyle held his head in shame. Arcadia slowly moved her hand towards his face and he took it.

"Such profiles are compiled with the express purpose of weeding out undesirables, locating strengths and..." she paused before she continued,

"identifying weaknesses. From that they were able to force you into isolation and distort your world view."

She glanced over at Kyle who simply nodded.

"The fact that I can be so lucid and analytical about this where just a few hours earlier I was falling apart unfortunately underscores what I've just told you."

"I know," he responded quietly, pulling her close to him and hugging her for dear life.

"Pilot," Arcadia gently suggested, "perhaps it is time we both went to bed. It's been a *long* evening."

Kyle reluctantly disengaged, stood back, and finally noticed what Arcadia was wearing. "Nice shoes, Milady."

She looked down at the fuzzy pink bunny slippers she had on. "It's the height of fashion, you realize. At least that's what Ike had said when he suggested I should wear them. And they do go well with the jump suit."

"The jump suit has seen better days too."

"Beggars can't be choosers," she laughed, finally relaxing before her face fell into profound sadness. "My necklace is lost though. Perhaps Jasmine took it as a souvenir." She stopped and looked up to him. "I know I'm being silly but I'm really attached to it. I'm sorry I lost it."

"I'll make it up to you, I promise," he whispered.

"I know..."

Kyle nodded as he gently led his wife out of the deck, holding her close as they made their way home to their quarters.

* * *

Friday Mid-Morning

LtCdr Kavindra "Avalanche" Courage jauntily walked into the lounge and stood at the door. She allowed her eyes to sweep the room in search of her man. Finally locating him, she smiled broadly as she walked over to join his table.

These past few days had become a turning point for her. In that time, she had given serious consideration to what she'd done and where she wanted to go in her career and came to the conclusion that she *had* to change. She had been so

dedicated to her job that she had become, in her own estimation, less than human. As Hawk had pointed out to her, she couldn't even take a joke.

Now that she was being presented with a rare opportunity for a second chance, she decided that she would not only show some of her detractors that she'd turned over a new leaf but get revenge at the same time.

"May I?" she congenially asked the pilots and tactical officers seated around a table in the corner.

While the others at the table simply shrugged or remained silent, Lieutenant Jacob "Dutch" van der Weege appeared to have an opinion on the subject.

"Commander..." Virgil Taylor began and pulled a chair out from under the table so that Avalanche could sit down.

Avalanche watched Virgil glare at Dutch, resulting in a grunt before he took a long sip of beer.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Taylor." She glanced around the table before she smiled. "I know I've been many things these past few weeks. Queen of Mean comes to mind and of course," she began with a twinkle in her eye towards Dutch, "let us not forget the latest sobriquet of 'stupid fucking bitch'."

Ravyn MacRae nearly choked on her drink while the others at the table merely snickered. Dutch, on the other hand, obviously didn't appreciate being the butt of the joke.

Avalanche joined in the laughter before she became more sober and turned to Virgil. "I can't thank you enough for what you did. You saved my wingman and at the same time, taught me a valuable lesson. One can never be too young or old to learn. I don't plan to forget this one."

Virgil nodded his acknowledgement while raising his glass towards his tactical officer. Dutch was growing more and more uncomfortable each moment Avalanche remained seated with them. Despite her willingness to bury the hatchet, it was obviously to Avalanche that Dutch didn't want any part of it.

"However," she began cautiously, "I'm concerned."

"Concerned about what, Commander," Ravyn asked.

Avalanche didn't respond right away, instead, she picked up the datapadd she had with her and frowned. "During the senior officers' meeting with Captain Blair this morning, I took the opportunity to talk to Blackie."

Noticing that the table had become very attentive, she opted to put their minds at ease by turning to face Dutch. "Dutch," she began slowly. "I'm concerned about you specifically."

"Oh?" he replied, keeping his eyes laser-locked on her every word. "How so, Commander?"

"That twitch of yours," she smoothly continued. "I just happened to mention it to Blackie and he said he was surprised to hear about it."

"My... twitch?" he stammered.

"Yes, the one that was quite pronounced two weeks ago. I was concerned and as a Wing Commander you do realize that it was my duty to bring this up with your Squadron Commander."

Dutch gave Avalanche a very confused look. "I don't understand."

"It's simple, Lieutenant. Commander Hawthorne suggested that perhaps you should have a neurological work up with the flight surgeon. He was worried that if the Chief Medical Officer had found out about this and it wasn't reported, she'd be down on us like a ton of bricks. He wasn't interested in a repeat performance."

"But... but," he stammered. "I've passed all my flight physicals with flying colors!" he protested.

Avalanche reached over and gently took his hand to pat it, not unlike a mother would try and comfort a favorite child. "I understand, Dutch. But Blackie insisted."

Dutch cautiously withdrew his hand so he could use it to toss back the rest of his drink. He gave the liquid such a loud swallow, it could be heard around the table.

She leaned back in her chair and smiled. "Blackie wanted to give you these orders himself but I offered to save him the trouble."

Avalanche handed over the datapadd and watched Dutch scan it before he turned very pale.

"I know," she shook her head. "A three day work up is rather extreme but Blackie insisted on the *full* treatment."

"I understand that the ice water enema isn't *too* bad," she added with mock sympathy in her voice while she noted that each of the flight officers had blanched in sympathy.

"Ice water?" Ravyn repeated.

"I was rather surprised myself," Avalanche replied. "Apparently it's an integral part of the medical work up," she stopped and gave Dutch a look of profound sympathy.

"Three days?" Virgil blurted out.

Avalanche looked over at the pilot. "I'm sure you'll be assigned another tac officer, Lieutenant Taylor. After all, wasn't it Captain Blair who said we're not a part of some 'touchy-feely good time social club' and we pilots should expect to be parted from our tactical officers either temporarily or permanently."

Ravyn turned to her tactical officer and lover Brett Dallenbach and frowned. "That stinks," she muttered a bit too loudly. "I don't know what I'd do without you..." she whispered to Brett.

"I hope we don't find out," Brett whispered back.

"Oh, I understand, Ensign MacRae," Avalanche replied, having overheard the exchange, "but we can't always get what we want but sometimes things have a way of working out for the best." When she was finished, she gave Dutch her best Cheshire cat grins.

Having delivered the message, she stood up from the table and began to leave. "Now that Lieutenant van der Weege has his orders, I must be going. I hope you all have a fine day."

Avalanche capped off her final statement with a broad smile.

"Good afternoon, Commander Courage," Virgil Taylor congenially replied as he watched her depart the lounge. He waited a discreet amount of time before he looked back at his tactical officer. "Is she serious, Dutch?" he whispered before he burst out laughing.

"*Sure as shit she is!*" he exclaimed as his fellow flight officers began to snicker around him. "Hey, this is *not* funny."

"Oh, I don't know," Virgil began with a wicked smile on his face. "You did start it and there is that saying about turnabout being fair play. Who knew that she had

such a sense of humor? She could actually be a fun person to be around," he mused.

Brett knocked back the rest of his beer before he turned to his fellow tactical officer. "Bud, seems to me that she got hers and you're about to get yours."

This comment prompted another snicker followed by all out laughter.

"Laugh it up!" Dutch defiantly told his so-called friends. "Next time, it could be you!"

Brett shook his head. "I don't think so, bud. I don't have any problems with twitches and neither will you by the time the medical people are done."

Dutch tossed up his hands before he tucked them under his armpits and scowled at them all. "Yeah, well..." he muttered as his so-called friends continued to laugh at his expense.

* * *

Epilog: Friday Afternoon

"We received a message," Admiral Buckminister Hamilton stated.

He sat down at the round table that was carefully secreted away from prying eyes in the midst of Starfleet Headquarters, Old San Francisco.

Wynwood grunted. "We get a lot of fucking messages, what's your point, Bucky?"

Hamilton grimaced before he answered the question. "It seems our field agents bungled the assignment."

"*What!?*" Wynwood exclaimed.

"Have a look, I'm sure you'll find it as amusing as I did," Hamilton grimly replied. He shoved the datapadd in Wynwood's direction.

Wynwood took the offered padd and quickly scanned it, his expression going from one of astonishment to one of pure hatred. *That bastard did it to me again.* He slammed the datapadd down and shook his fist. "This is your damned fault, Cordell."

"Let me see." Cordell held out his hand and Wynwood bounced the padd on the table and onto the floor. Cordell stooped over to pick it up and scanned it

quickly. He felt a smile cross his face. Kyle didn't mince any words but he had to admit, they did have a certain amount of elegance to them.

Hamilton snapped. "You had let one of our best agents go without as much as a by-your-fucking-leave, Naismith!"

Cordell dropped the padd and narrowed his eyebrows. "After all that media exposure before, during, and after his win at the Rigel Cup, his subsequent marriage *and* his taking over of *Nexus Station*, he was becoming less and less of a valuable asset to us and--"

"*Enough!*" Wynwood thundered. "You didn't even consult us before you unconditionally let him go. We don't even have a replacement, dammit! How many more of our casino chips are you going to give out without consultation? How many more of our people are we to let go?"

"Listen to me," Cordell continued with a steely edge to his voice. "You had enough time to find someone else, so spare me that crap. Besides," Cordell added quietly, "I didn't want Kyle here with the way things were going around here."

"Meaning?" Wynwood grumbled with a deadly edge to his voice.

"It's one thing to engage in supra-governmental activities where the regular government is not allowed to go, but lately our activities have taken on a decidedly more petty and almost criminal aspect. This was not what we were supposed to be all about."

"Don't you lecture me, boy... I eat your kind for lunch," Wynwood retorted with a deadly edge in his voice.

Cordell sat back and smiled. "Just like your operatives ate Argent's, eh?"

Hamilton finally interrupted the discussion. "If you find us so objectionable, why don't you just leave. I'm sure we can carry on without you."

"Oh?" Cordell replied with a decidedly smug tone to his voice, "I think you have that backwards."

As if on cue, the room began to fill with troopers clad in combat armor and wielding the latest in infantry equipment.

Both Hamilton and Wynwood glanced around them, visibly shaken.

"You see," Cordell smiled at his comrades' discomfort. "There is a reason why we function as a committee. For example, it allowed us to block schemes as idiotic as the one you two had just implemented. But since you both opted to make due without our input, we've decided that it is time to make due without you. Period."

"You can't do this!" Wynwood cried. "I'm a fucking Starfleet Admiral, dammit!"

"If accidents can happen to a Starfleet Captain," Cordell replied with a considerable amount of steel in his voice, "who says they cannot happen to an Admiral?"

With that last statement, Commodore Cordell Naismith nodded his head and the troopers escorted Admirals Hamilton and Wynwood out the door. He thought that the others would be very careful before they would ever try to cross him again. After this little escapade, many of them would think that he had deliberately orchestrated things to discredit his chief rivals in The Bureau. And maybe, just maybe, they were right...

Cordell's smile of triumph turned to a frown of concern as he picked up the datapadd he was studying before he had been so rudely interrupted. He scanned the padd once again and felt the same empty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The official *Space Station Nexus* report concerning the chocolate smuggling incident combined with other official and unofficial reports left The Bureau with the distinct impression that the long period of peace the Feds had felt so damned proud of was about to come to a crashing end.

Except, Cordell wryly mused, this time I'll be ready for the bastards.

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Next: *Isn't Life Strange?*

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"Angel Eyes" -- M. Dennis-E. Bren, Bradshaw Music, Inc. BMI

"They Can't Take That Away From Me" -- G. Gershwin-I. Gershwin, Chappel Music.

"Our Love Is Here To Stay" -- Words by Ira Gershwin, 1936, 1937 (renewed), George Gershwin Music/Ira Gershwin Music (ASCAP)

"Serenade in Blue" -- Music by Harry Warren and Lyric by Mack Gordon, Copyright 1942

"When You're Gone" -- Words by Dafydd Neal Dyar, 1998.

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