

The Great Game

REGENCY STATION, RIGEL II SYSTEM CROW'S NEST

"Un-bee-lievable!" bellowed Intergalactic Entertainment and Sports Network broadcaster Don Parrish from one of the many holoscreens dotting the private lounge. *"Captain Jackson Nakamura wins the 2338 Solo Event Rigel Cup, overcoming the strong challenge posed by Colonel Morag of the Imperial Klingon Fighter Bureau. For a guy who earns his bread as a Federation Border Patrol Officer, this is quite a feat..."*

Rigel Cup Analyst and former Rigel Cup winner Jimmy Mahoney could barely contain his excitement as he took out his stylus to circle the winner. *"You said it, Don! He was downright awesome... In fact--"*

Any remaining commentary was pointedly ignored by the gamblers gathered in Regency Station's ultra-exclusive lounge...especially Boffin Duchamps Gateway, who leaned back in his plush chair and beamed broadly at his compatriots who were gathered around him.

"Well, gentlemen," he began in an extremely pleasant voice, "I guess the drinks are on me this day."

Boffin's genial pronouncement was greeted with equal mutters of "well done!" to "fuck you twice over!"

While he wanted to savor this moment a might longer, he had arranged for his private transport to pick him up in a few hours, consequently he needed to wrap up a few loose ends. He excused himself from the knot of gamblers remaining in the Crow's Nest and sauntered over towards a dejected-looking Roscoe slumped in a chair. "Would you be a good chap and go pick up my take. Two percent of it is yours, after all..."

Roscoe looked up and crankily replied, "Yeah, whatever..."

"Your reaction is hardly befitting one of the quadrant's newest millionaires," Boffin pointed out.

Roscoe bolted out of the chair, grabbing the credit chits. "Ask me if I give a shit," he muttered before he stomped off.

* * *

**OLD SAN FRANCISCO, EARTH
FIGHTER CORPS TRAINING COMMAND
OFFICE OF THE COMMANDANT**

"Commander Deveraux, this will *not* do," sternly announced Commodore Will Emmerich through clenched teeth. "Though your past career and training scores indicated that you are an officer of considerable talents, nothing and I do mean *nothing* you have accomplished under my command would lead me to believe that any of this is true. Are you aware of the consequences of your latest action?"

He paused for an answer he thought would not be forthcoming.

"Spyder," began the tall, dark, elegant woman who remained standing to attention, "had been trying to get a bit *too* close to me -- both in and out of the cockpit. I thought I would demonstrate to him what a good target lock was *really* all about."

Emmerich was obviously taken aback by her candor and had to close his mouth lest flies settle there. "You fired a live missile at your wingman!" he finally bellowed.

"I did detonate it two seconds before impact, sir," she quietly pointed out.

"As damned well you did, or else we'd be talking about an attempted murder charge!" Emmerich loudly grumbled then paused to gather his thoughts. "I hope you understand that based on this incident as well as the numerous reports of your callous if not downright rude behavior *in and out* of the cockpit, there is no more room for you here." He paused to tap the datapadd on his desk. "I have entered your unconditional release from duty as of eighteen hundred hours today. You may apply for reassignment to other duty posts as you see fit. However, given your record, I sincerely *doubt* anyone is likely to take you on."

Ayesha briefly mulled over what the Commodore just told her as she nervously gnawed on her lower lip. So, this was it. She had finally done it. She had washed out of Fighter Training School. This was her last chance at getting back in the cockpit since the Marine Corps grounded her due to a medical injury. She had been accepted as a Fighter Corps Pilot after she demonstrated that she still had The Right Stuff during an attack on the *Stellar Wind*. But now, she had squandered her last chance completely. She stopped her contemplation when she finally realized that a response was required.

"Yes, sir. Will that be all, sir?" she formerly answered.

Will sadly sat back in his chair and sighed. "Ayesha... is there anything I can help you with? You're an experienced Marine pilot, after all. Seems to me that all this..." He paused and tapped the datapadd again, "started fairly recently. If there's anything you need to talk about..."

Ayesha paused to gather her thoughts as she fixed her gaze on her now former commander. "Perhaps if you were half your age and twice the man, we would have something to talk about."

With that final pronouncement, she spun around and walked towards the door out of his office. However, before she left, she quickly turned back to the stunned officer and added, "Sir."

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***SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
NEXOLODEAN RESTAURANT***

"Thought you'd be interested to know," began Kyle Argent as he munched on his late supper, "that the rest of the Shadowhawks will be here as well as the rest of the new flight crew the day after tomorrow."

Arcadia nodded as she speared a stalk of asparagus. "We're already set for the influx of new fighter personnel. Having a dedicated Flight Surgeon's Office is making the difference, otherwise, my people would certainly be scrambling about," the Chief Medical Officer replied between bites. She put her fork down and smiled benignly in his direction. "Interesting coincidence that Virgil was assigned here. Know anything about this, Kyle?"

"Of course," the Station Commander replied as he took a bite out of his pepperoni and pineapple pizza. "You know what they say, 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer.'"

"Oh really? I never thought this was quite your style, Kyle." Arcadia paused for a long moment. "I was just considering what category I fit into." She stopped to eye him carefully. "So you married me to be spiteful."

Kyle smiled as he finished off the remaining slice. "Naw... you buy me pizza and... you're naked a lot." He stopped to stare at her before giving her a toothy grin. "My kind of woman."

Arcadia's first impulse was to smack him clear out of the restaurant. But owing that she had a certain amount of decorum to preserve as the Station's Chief Medical Officer, she merely offered a noncommittal reply. "I see."

Kyle's response was to smirk which only caused her further irritation. Noting that they'd both become silent and were probably now the source of restaurant speculation and gossip, she decided that the best course of action was to continue the conversation. However, before she could press on an unwelcome intruder had descended upon them.

"Captain Argent, sir?" the timid young man boldly interrupted.

Kyle glared in Arcadia's direction indicating that he had expected some peace this evening but opted to be polite to the intruder lest this be something of importance.

"Sorry you weren't in the Rigel Cup this year, I won a *bundle* off of you last year!" The well-dressed young man suddenly stopped and beamed broadly in Kyle's direction.

Arcadia attempted to stifle a laugh but instantly realized how annoyed Kyle had become. After all, it was her idea to dine out at the Nexolodean and the unwelcome interruption drove home to her that no matter where they went, there was no such thing as privacy. On the other hand, as far as she was concerned, there was just no substitute for a freshly dished up double-chocolate whammy.

Kyle smiled benignly at the young man as he contemplated the idea of punt-kicking this yahoo straight out of the restaurant. However, he ultimately realized that he was, after all, the Station Commander and as such, had to appear in public displaying a certain amount of propriety.

"I'm glad to hear that," Kyle genially replied before he pointedly went back to the business of eating.

Arcadia was pleased to note that their erstwhile intruder had some sense and was leaving them though, upon reflection, it could have been the glare the duty manager gave him as she rushed towards their table while the intruder dashed away.

"I am sorry, Captain, I'll--" Melonie Howard replied quickly taking over from the Argent's usual server.

"Think nothing of it," Kyle smoothly interrupted. "I assume you want your usual, Milady?" Kyle asked.

"But of course, Pilot," she purred.

"One double-chocolate whammy and a slice of cheesecake with strawberries," he informed her.

"As usual," Melonie chuckled as she cleared away the now empty dishes. "By the way, Doctor. Thought you'd like to know that you're not the only one around here addicted to this dessert."

"This is the best chocolate dessert I've ever had and I've had a few in my time," Arcadia wistfully smiled.

"It is quite good," the duty manager agreed but then became more sober, "however, unfortunately for one patron, it seemed to be a bit much, and we had to call for medical assistance."

Arcadia instantly switched into her role of Chief Medical Officer. "What happened?"

"Shortly after she was served, she went into what seemed to be a... well... a seizure. The mobile medical team quickly arrived and took her away in restraints. We just heard that she's doing fine."

"Restraints?" Arcadia mulled this over for a moment before continuing. "Did they mention what the diagnosis was by chance?"

"No, but then, we were so relieved, none of us bothered to ask. We assume there will be a full investigation by your department."

"Indeed," Arcadia mused.

"Let me go and get your desserts. We handed over the suspect batch and just whipped up a fresh one. You should be fine," the manager added with a nervous laugh.

"I don't doubt it," Arcadia replied as the manager went off to get their food. She paused for a moment then finally spoke to Kyle whose face displayed a number of unasked questions. "I'm sure I'll be reading all about it in the morning and if this was more than just an isolated incidence, I would have been immediately notified."

"I agree..." he nodded as they were served their desserts.

Arcadia greedily dove into her double-chocolate whammy, saying nothing for a good few moments as she savoured the various varieties of chocolate skillfully blended with other delicacies destined to go from the pleasure centers of her

brain straight to her hips. While Kyle enjoyed his cheesecake, he didn't quite do so with the relish that his wife now publicly displayed.

"Too bad you never looked at me like this," he ventured as he watched her lick the ultra rich concoction from her spoon.

"You don't taste like a double-whammy, Kyle," she smiled as she seductively licked her lips.

Kyle smiled wickedly in her direction. "You know... I could dip it in..."

"No!" she replied a bit too emphatically. "Not the same!"

Kyle cocked a wry eyebrow in her direction as he decided that the best course of action was to get their conversation back on track lest they become the center of attention... again.

"To answer the question you posed a while back, I did specifically request that Virgil be assigned here."

"So, what the Great Man asks for, he shall receive?" she tossed at him as she licked her spoon.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Pretty much. It'll be good to have some people around that you... we're familiar with. Perhaps you won't have to go out to dinner with mean old me all the time."

Arcadia put down her spoon and looked at her husband sitting across from the table from her. "That wasn't necessary, you realize. I've been a CMO before...." She took a long look at the man sitting across the table from her and decided she loved him more than anyone else in the universe. "But that was very sweet of you..." She paused and gave him a slight grin. "You do realize that every time you do such things you become more the politician than the gruff and grouchy soldier I married."

Kyle shuttered. "God forbid I ever stoop that low."

"Comes with the territory, you realize," she smiled and then decided to change the subject. "However, on to more pleasant subjects. I heard from Boffin today and speaking of the Rigel Cup... he seemed to have had yet more luck this year."

"And I wasn't even flying this year!" Kyle exclaimed wryly.

She glared at him. "You do realize that there are a few other pilots for Boffin to gamble on," when she noted that she had made her point, she pressed on. "Boffin mentioned that he had some business dealings and--"

Kyle cut her off. "Presumably, only semi-legitimate ones."

She rolled her eyes. "*Presumably*. But... he mentioned he was going to drop by the station on his way back."

"Oh, good. Let's invite him over for dinner and I'll inform security that we have yet another scoundrel on the station."

"Far be it for me to stop you," Arcadia tersely replied. "I'm sure they have nothing better to do than to help you secure that nomination for Federation President you so *obviously* crave."

Kyle narrowed his eyes in his wife's direction. "Low blow."

"If you insist," she replied demurely.

He cocked a wicked eyebrow in her direction. "Any....way...." he started as his demeanor suddenly changed to a more serious one. "Speaking of old home week, you won't believe what I came across in one of the Fighter Corps dispatches. Seems that Ayesha decided..." Kyle paused to consider how to break the news to his wife, after all, Ayesha was one of her bridesmaids, "to... flush her career out the nearest airlock."

"*She what?*" she exclaimed forcing those remaining in the restaurant who'd purposely left the Station's Commander and Chief Medical Officer to eat in peace to covertly stare at them. "How could this have happened? I thought she was doing so well cross training from the Marines into the Fighter Corps. She went on and on at the wedding about how happy she was..." Arcadia allowed her voice to drop off as she looked questioningly at her husband.

Kyle winced slightly, making a mental note *not* to forget his anniversary, which was, after all, approaching very quickly. "Well.... Seems she pickled off a missile on her wingman which scared him half to death and--"

"*Bloody hell!*" Arcadia interrupted, once again prompting other patrons to cast a furtive glance in their direction. Noting the sudden silence in the restaurant, she cringed slightly before quietly asking, "Truly?"

"I'm afraid so," Kyle replied as he sipped his iced tea. "Then she compounded things by telling the Old Kaiser where to get off."

"She did what to who?" Arcadia asked, clearly confused.

"Commodore Will Emmerich, one of my early commanders and now head of Fighter Corps Training Command." Kyle's voice suddenly became wistful. "Sweet old man, kind of short, with a very *gentle* disposition..."

"In other words, a real hell raiser," she ventured.

"Well.... Yes, but he *is* short and he's quite sensitive about that."

Arcadia snorted. "I bet he couldn't wait to get you out of his squadron," she wickedly opined.

"I think he took my height in stride," Kyle smiled wistfully. "Though I was always ordered to land in the berth furthest away from his..."

Arcadia chuckled but quickly got back to business. "Just what did Ayesha do?"

"He doesn't say in so many words, but he gave a lengthy write up of her insolent and insubordinate conduct citing examples and adding statements from others. In short, this is the kind of write up that we call 'a career killer' in the Fighter Corps. No squadron commander in their right mind will want a certified head case like that on their team."

Arcadia paused. "I was her CO and didn't find her at all like this. I saw her perform miracles under the worst possible conditions. Do you think anyone will give her a chance?"

He shook his head. "Most likely not."

"Kyle... You..." Arcadia stammered but then quickly pushed the thought from her mind. "Never mind." She attempted to cover up her blunder by purposely finishing off what remained of her double-whammy.

Kyle instantly knew what she was going to ask him and had she been a normal spouse, she would have just spoken her mind. But Kyle knew Arcadia better than that. She never interfered with his station policy and wouldn't start now, even for a friend. But still, *he* knew what she had on her mind.

"Finished?" he asked, finally noting that they were both done with eating.

"Indeed. I have a full slate tomorrow so we'd best be off," she replied as she settled the tab.

Even as they engaged in small talk while they walked back to their quarters, Ayesha's predicament was clearly on Kyle's mind. He finally concluded that it was no good having all the political clout in the universe when he couldn't even help out an old friend...

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CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER'S MORNING BRIEFING

The Chief Medical Officer stifled a yawn as she half-heartedly listened to her Department Heads rattled off what had gone on during the last 24 hours. Luckily for her, the morning briefing was about to end but not before her interest was finally piqued.

"Amongst the general calls last night," Doctor Harvey Cushing began as he wrapped up his portion of the briefing, "we had a rather unusual case come through. Someone apparently OD'd on a...." Harvey snickered as he checked his padd, "a double-chocolate whammy... whatever that is," he added under the chuckles of the briefing attendees.

"And why do you find this amusing, Doctor?" Arcadia sternly interjected.

"Err... Nothing, ma'am. It's just that we've never seen anything like it." A rebuke from his superior was enough to put the senior surgeon back into business mode. "The patient was a forty year old female Galenan native. Around seventeen hundred hours last night, she apparently had an adverse reaction to a dessert known as the 'double-chocolate whammy' served at the Nexolodean -- at least that's our preliminary analysis for the moment. Our Mobile Medical Team was quickly dispatched to take care of the patient. Toxicology was also dispatched to collect the remaining dessert and they're still conducting their analysis."

"Why did the doctor on duty assume it was the dessert?" the CMO asked.

Harvey paused as he consulted his datapadd. "A quick check revealed nothing in her medical background that would cause such a reaction and her dinner companion confirmed that she was fine until she was half way through the dessert."

"I see. Have you done any cross-checking for other such cases?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Nothing definitive though the search did reveal several possibly related occurrences but we're still checking. I also put in a call to the Galenan Medical Authority in hopes they may lend us some assistance." Noting the unasked question on his superior's face, Harvey quickly added, "We consulted

the Galenan civilian doctors here at *Nexus* and they suggested we contact the authorities. However, I must admit that I can't say they're being cooperative."

Arcadia nodded as she considered the next course of action. "Typical government bureaucracy. For the moment, we'll treat this as an isolated incident. However--"

The CMO was interrupted by a priority message from their satellite hospital. She read it quickly, then turned to morning briefing attendees.

"It seems we have another incident. Same details. Galenan woman was eating a..." Arcadia paused as she looked up the name, "a chocolate damnation and part way through, fell into a seizure. Ike," she now addressed her Chief of Staff, "I want you to assemble a med team and investigate this latest occurrence. Harvey, I want you to lean on the Galenan Medical Authority. Tell them we have another case. Let's see if that will spur them into being more forthcoming with any additional information."

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SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM

Boffin Duchamps Gateway was very much delighted for the opportunity to stretch his legs after the day's journey from their gambling trip on Rigel II to *Space Station Nexus*. He and Roscoe had been on the Station less than twenty-four hours and he was impressed with what he'd already seen. He'd spent the last few moments considering how much he really liked the look of the station when he thought he spotted someone he didn't quite expect to see here of all places.

"*Virgil!*"

"Is that you, Boffin?" Lieutenant Virgil Taylor eagerly greeted his old friend then stopped when he spied a rather glum looking Roscoe trailing behind. "Roscoe?"

Roscoe grunted an acknowledgment, obviously leaving any semblance of conversation to Boffin.

"It is indeed, old son," Boffin began as he and Virgil heartily shook hands. "And may I be one of the first to congratulate you on your recent acquisitions." Boffin pointed to the new gold fighter wings perched on his uniform before sweeping his hand over Virgil's new Lieutenant bars.

"Thank you, Boffin," Virgil beamed in return. "What brings you and... err... Roscoe here?" he asked. Virgil was about to say a word or two to Roscoe but

he'd already wandered off to supposedly look at a window display that dotted the Merchant's Mall.

"Just got back from the Rigel Cup and thought I'd pass by and visit with some old friends. You?" Boffin began.

"Just got assigned to the Flight Academy on Galena for extra training. Once I'm done, I'll be back here and assigned to a squadron," Virgil told him proudly.

"Good show, Virg! Always knew you'd go far," he beamed, obviously happy with the news.

"Thank you Boffin. So where are you headed off to?"

"Secured a meeting with the Station Commander but I had some time to pass so I thought that Roscoe and I would just tool around and take in the sights before we grabbed a bite of lunch," Boffin replied as he looked around for Roscoe who'd apparently had taken off yet again for parts unknown. *Hopefully*, mused Boffin, *he'll stay out of trouble this time.*

"It just so happens that I have a bit of time on my hands myself. Mind if I join you?"

"I'd be delighted!" Boffin exclaimed as he and Virgil proceeded to spend time together hashing over old times from their days on the *Stellar Wind* and last years Rigel Cup until Boffin had to leave for his early afternoon appointment with Kyle Argent.

It took no time for Boffin to find his quarry. He stepped into the Command and Control Center and was immediately taken aback by the beauty who was obviously the Station Commander's Yeoman.

"Mister Gateway, I presume?" Melody brightly asked.

"At your service, madam," he replied with a slight bow.

Melody smiled and pointed towards the door. "The Captain is expecting you, Mister Gateway."

"Thank you Ms Marlowe," he replied making it a point to use her last name that was displayed on the nameplate on her desk. As a former commanding officer's yeoman, he knew that this little touch would mean the universe to her. And one never knows when one may need a favour or two.

Boffin entered the dimly lit office and walked over to the desk. The Station Commander in turn formerly greeted him which Boffin thought was a bit odd owing to their long association.

"Doctor Argent mentioned you have some potential concerns over my activities here at the station," Boffin began as he placed his rather bony frame down in the chair he was offered. While he knew the Station Commander socially, as a former commanding officer's yeoman, he also knew the value of keeping his business and social lives as far apart as possible, especially after being greeted so formerly himself. "Let me assure, you, Captain that I have no such interests. I'm here strictly for pleasure and to see a bit of the station."

Kyle relaxed slightly. "Don't sweat the security issue. If they find you participating in anything illegal they have standing orders to flush you out the nearest airlock."

Boffin carefully studied the former *Stellar Wind* Wing Commander and decided not to take any chances, therefore he opted to answer with a noncommittal, "I see."

"But it is your pleasure that has brought you here," Kyle pointed out. He had meant this meeting to serve as a reminder that all the friendship in the world wouldn't save him if he was caught partaking in any illegal activities aboard *his* station but, was in general, satisfied with Arcadia and Boffin's assurances to the contrary. Besides, there were other things to worry about at this moment.

"Oh..." Boffin Gateway benignly responded.

Kyle smiled before he replied. "For whatever reasons you brought our mutual chum Mister Roscoe along, I do not know, but as long as he's listed as one of your associates, you *are* responsible for his conduct."

"I understand, Captain Argent, but..."

The Station Commander cut him off by reaching over and picking up a datapadd. He began to idly tap it as he looked in Boffin's direction. "Are you aware that he almost single handedly demolished a bar not two hours ago?"

"Oh?" Boffin replied, fearing the worst. He knew he should have kept closer tabs on Roscoe.

Kyle picked up the padd and scanned it. "Seems they refused him service after he got a bit rambunctious and promptly beat up anyone in sight. We've got him in the drunk-tank right now and according to the several reports by the local merchants association, this isn't the first time he's gotten out of hand since he's

been here. In fact, we've got evidence that he's spent virtually every waking moment since he's arrived in a state of *extreme* inebriation."

Boffin was totally amazed at how much trouble Roscoe had gotten into in such a *short* a period of time. "Naturally, I'll take care of any damages, Captain. But you are quite right; his behaviour of late has been worrisome to say the least. Ever since Ayesha dumped him..." Boffin allowed his voice to trail off.

"*She did what?*" Kyle exclaimed, obviously taken aback by the news.

"Oh, haven't you heard, Captain? She left him." Boffin sighed. "Seems that for whatever reason she became convinced that his..." Boffin paused as he considered how to put it into words, "...lack of ambition was contrary to any future plans they might have and she would be better off with someone with more *compatible*... goals."

Kyle also sighed. "In other words, she was ashamed of going out with him or taking him places."

Boffin nodded his head. "Aye."

Both men simply looked at each other knowing that each was thinking the same thoughts: been there, done that.

"He never was quite the same after that," Boffin continued. "We would go have a drink now and then when I returned from my... err... business activities. Roscoe would take me to the seediest dives about the planet telling me that I'd best not forget where I came from."

"Leave it to Roscoe to know every sleazy bar where ever he finds himself," Kyle mused.

"Indeed. One day he showed up at my estate looking like he just crawled out of a sewer. His breath would have disinfected the worst sanitary facility in Scotland. I took him in and gave him a job as my body guard."

Kyle cocked an eyebrow as well as a bemused look towards Boffin.

"*Hey!*" Boffin exclaimed then quickly covered his gaff with a small cough as he went back to being the country gentleman. "One thing I've learned over the last few years is that no matter how nice a bloke you really are, making a few quid always seems to attract one's enemies and friends equally."

"Too true. So you gave him a job...."

"Oh, I did more than that. I gave him a stake in my business. Every credit I make, he gets two percent," Boffin glibly tossed off.

"Two percent? That would mean..." Kyle allowed his voice to trail off.

"It does. He's a millionaire several times over. And the Deity knows he's earned it. He saved my life twice...." Boffin replied grateful that despite his initial reluctance that he had taken Roscoe in.

"So what's his problem? Seems he's done well for himself."

Boffin paused to consider. "Grief, I suppose," he began in a somber tone. "He's never been quite the same without Ayesha. You've known him longer than any of us and..."

"Being with Ayesha was the best thing that ever happened to him," Kyle considered. "He's lived like a vagabond all his life, never staying in one place longer than necessary. I think that more than anything he just wants to settle down."

"Most of us would like nothing more than to tramp about the galaxy and see the sights so I suppose it would be the dream of someone in his boots to settle down, marry and have the proverbial two point six offspring."

"Right..." Kyle agreed but quickly went back from being Roscoe's concerned friend to that of the station commander. "But in the meantime, here is the security information along with the damage assessments. If you care to bail out your body guard, you're free to do so." Kyle stood up indicating to Boffin that his time was up.

"Thank you, Captain." Now that the business portion of their meeting was over, he switched into a more casual tone. "Are we still on for dinner?" Boffin began as they walked towards the door.

"Arcadia will be ready around eighteen hundred. Bring Roscoe along if you think he'll be presentable and he wishes to come."

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GALENAN CUSTOMS MAIN OFFICE

"May the Gods preserve us!"

Chief Envoy, Imperial Galenan Customs Service Levina Ree'Kontaar didn't bother to look up from her inventory padd at the unwelcome intrusion. After all, she

had a report to finish. Finally, she allowed her eyes to take a leisurely tour around the tiny office and grimaced once again. *With a space station this big, you'd think they could have spared something a bit larger for an office.* Expelling a sigh, she looked up, no longer able ignore the hovering figure above her.

"What is it, Dekle?" she grumbled at the intruder. "Don't you have any work to do?" When he didn't answer her, she finally raised her eyes and noted the shocked expression on his face.

Dekle looked down in time to notice that his chief was waiting for an explanation. He coughed slightly before he began. "It's from homeworld. State Security reported seventy separate incidents where people had choc'd out. They are demanding that *we* take action."

She stopped to consider then shrugged her shoulders. "A few random cases are to be expected..." Her demeanor quickly changed as she mentally ran through the implications. "But this is different. Call an all-staff meeting immediately. We will need to implement the Milka Protocol."

He didn't move, instead stared questioningly at the heavy-set woman sitting at her desk. "I don't understand..." he finally stammered.

She tossed side the padd she was working and glared up at him. "Just tell everyone to assemble in room fifteen." When he remained stationery, she barked. "Don't just stand there -- *move!*"

Levina watched with great satisfaction as her assistant finally scurried out of the room to complete his appointed task. She took those few moments before the meeting to refresh herself on the Protocol then sauntered over to the meeting room.

"*Attention!*" Chief Envoy Ree'Kontaar barked as she took the podium. She allowed her eyes to sweep the assembled, zeroing in on one poor soul who was now quivering in his boots from her gaze. "*You!*" she bellowed, "next time I see you, you'd better be in a regulation uniform!" He was too scared to say anything so he merely nodded. Satisfied that she had gotten everyone's attention she began the briefing.

"We are experiencing a choc epidemic. As per our oaths as Galenan Customs Officers, we are required to inspect and certify any and all goods coming through this system for transit planetside. The fact that some choc got by us nonetheless leads me to believe that there is only one conclusion to be drawn here..." She paused as she became very angry and she felt her eyes narrow in fury. "Those damned Federation types must be smuggling it past us."

She paused to allow the crowd noise to subside then made her announcement. "Therefore," she began in a very serious tone, "I'm declaring an emergency situation. We will implement the Milka Protocol."

"*You can't be serious!*" an older man burst out.

Levina Ree'Kontaar frowned but she found it melting into an unnatural smile towards the source of the interruption. "Please restrain your outbursts or prepare for permanent confinement. Do you have any idea of the penalties your behavior can necessitate during a state of emergency?"

Senior Custom Technician Marnin Uziel ignored the veiled threat and continued his protest. "But you're talking about the forcible removal of all non-Galenan personnel from *Space Station Nexus*' Trade and Commerce Areas! I just don't think that the Federation will be taking this lying down especially since the Milka Protocol predates our membership in the UFP. It's wholly ob--"

Furious, she unceremoniously cut him off. "*I* will be the final authority on what is obsolete or not, *Junior* Technician. It is *my* decision that we try to safeguard the best interests of Galena and her people through the Milka Protocol. If you are not up to honoring the oath you took when signing onto the Imperial Galenan Customs Service, then perhaps you need a reminder of what the penalty for mutiny during a state of crises is."

"*Off with his head!*" someone in the rear tossed out.

Levina cast a smug eye towards the back of the audience. "That's right: Off-With-Your-Head," she shot back in a deliberate voice as she zeroed back on Marnin and leveled a sinister smile at him. "Are you prepared to pay the price for your insolence, Uziel?" she asked in a quiet but deadly voice.

Uziel bowed his head in defeat. She smiled a self-satisfying smile because she knew she'd won the day. Levina allowed herself a smirk before continuing in a measured voice. "Very well then. Let us begin with Phase One of the Milka Protocol. I expect every non-Galenan removed from the Station's Trade and Commerce Area within sixty minutes. After that, we seal up every entryway until such time as we can ascertain the source of the choc contamination or receive new orders from homeworld. *Dismissed!*"

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ARGENT QUARTERS

"Now that was interesting...." Kyle murmured as he walked out of his office to join his wife in their living room.

"What was Kyle?" Arcadia asked as she fussed about in preparation to receive their dinner guests.

"Galenan State Security wants all records concerning any Galenan citizens who've had seizures here on the Station."

Arcadia stopped and looked at him. "*Quite* interesting since their medical people won't talk to us. Any attempts to contact the Galenan Medical Authority is just met with typical bureaucracy. You'd think they'd have a vested interest in assisting us in helping their people."

"Perhaps there's more to this than we realize," Kyle ventured.

Before Arcadia could answer, the annunciator signaled the arrival of their guests.

"Boffin! So good to see you again!" Arcadia greeted her former yeoman warmly with a hug. As she was embracing Boffin, she noticed that Roscoe appeared to be hovering, not really interested in being there.

She quickly pushed that thought out of her mind and invited her guests to sit in the living room. They all chatted while Kyle finished preparing dinner. As it turned out, Kyle was finished faster than expected and all of them sat down at the table to enjoy one of Kyle's culinary delights.

Most of the meal was spent in congenial chitchat when it eventually wandered around to the most recent Rigel Cup.

"I take it you did well, Boffin?" Arcadia asked as she finished off the prime rib that Kyle had expertly prepared.

"Very well, Mam'selle," he replied as he too polished off his meal. "In fact," he continued his attention now directed at Kyle, "Commodore Jamison and I shared a drink at the bar. He told me to give you both his regards."

Kyle snorted in response. "How did he take not winning this one?"

Boffin leaned back as he wiped his mouth with the napkin. "He was obviously disappointed that he couldn't make it a back-to-back win, but he was essentially pleased with the results nonetheless." Boffin eyed Kyle. "He did mention he was thinking about retiring though."

"I just couldn't imagine a Rigel Cup without Johnnie as the Team Manager," Arcadia considered.

"I think the Fighter Corps will survive," Kyle replied genially. "But honestly, I'm not surprised. He's been doing this for a long while now. Besides, he's always told us that he always wanted to get back to farming."

"Farming?" Arcadia asked.

Kyle looked at his wife and nodded. "Farming. Chicken farming if you can believe it."

Arcadia laughed then turned to Boffin. "Speaking of farming, how's your friend Lawrence doing? Last I heard, he'd just purchased a large farm in the midlands."

"Lawrence?" Boffin began about his gambling partner. "He's not doing as well as he expected. He did purchase the farm in England but it ran into some unexpected financial difficulties. I offered to help but he'd turned me down. I was a bit surprised since we'd been through so much together."

"I can understand that," Arcadia nodded.

Boffin sadly shook his head. "All I can presume is that he was tired of hanging on to my coattails and he wanted to prove to himself that he still had what it took. In fact, he didn't even come to this year's Rigel Cup and that would be the first one he's missed in many years." He paused to take a breath. "I'm concerned, of course, but Lawrence knows that if he needs assistance, I'll be there for him."

Before Arcadia could reply, Roscoe, once again, punctuated the table's congenial chitchat for the umpteenth time with an extremely audible belch.

"Would you care to have some food with your liquor Roscoe? Or are you merely content to simply drink us out of house and home?" Arcadia requested of her guest through clenched teeth after she watched him down yet another alcoholic drink.

"If I'm that much of a bother, I'll just remove myself!" he snapped back as he jumped up from the dinner table.

"*Mister Roscoe!*" she bellowed in her best command voice as he raced towards the door.

He stopped suddenly and whipped around to stare at her. "You're *not* my commanding officer anymore! No one is!"

Arcadia rushed from her chair to stop him but Roscoe had already departed. She paused for a moment then turned back to the table. "Kyle," she told him quietly, "why don't you and Boffin enjoy some port in the sitting room while I tidy up here."

Kyle eyed his wife wondering if he should say anything to her but ultimately decided that she wanted to be left alone. "Boffin?" he suggested as he stood and pointedly walked towards the sitting room.

"Right behind you, Guv'nor." Boffin followed him out finding Kyle admiring a decanter of port.

"Never cared for the stuff much myself but I simply would not be a proper Englishman without some of it around," Kyle declared as he poured Boffin a snifter.

"It's a recently acquired taste of mine, to be certain. And for what it's worth, given your usual conduct, I would think the proper thing for you to do was to stock an outrageous amount of beer in tins," Boffin replied as he sat down on one of the two couches in the sitting area of the Argent's station quarters.

Kyle chuckled. "Just because I've grown up in the states doesn't mean I have had to renounce *all* benefits of civilization."

Boffin returned the smile as he received the offered drink. "But all that aside, I really need to apologize to Mam'selle for Roscoe's behaviour." Boffin paused as he tossed up his hands in exasperation. "I just don't know what to do with him. If I could only reach him somehow but he won't even talk to me..."

"Let me show you something... and by the way..." Kyle began as he put his glass of port down and walked towards where Boffin sat, "...you did not see this."

"See what?" Boffin smiled as he began to read the report. Once he was finished, he sighed wistfully. "So.... Ayesha is in the same way?"

"I'd say so. She's already had three assignment requests refused. If she can't lock down an assignment within the next few weeks or so, she'll be forced to resign from the Fighter Corps," Kyle replied as he sat back down.

"You're thinking that their behaviour is linked then?"

"Seems to me that it's the only logical explanation out there. It started roughly at the time you said they split up and the symptoms exhibited seem roughly the same, wouldn't you agree?"

"Aye."

"So what are we going to do about it?" Arcadia demanded as she walked into the sitting room and purposely stared at the two men sitting on the couch.

"We?" Kyle exclaimed. "I would like to think they are both adults. And I would like to think they could settle their own affairs without the need of outside intervention."

Arcadia's fury intensified as she marched over to where Kyle was sitting, ignoring Boffin's presence. "Kyle Descoyne Argent let me remind you that on the *Stellar Wind*, it was in fact Roscoe that kept your Wing together in your absence and he--"

Kyle lifted his hands in surrender, prompting Arcadia to stop in mid-tirade. "However, in anticipation of just such a circumstance, I've taken the liberty of drafting something I thought you two should see." He reached over and handed Arcadia a second padd.

She read it then handed it to Boffin. She remained silent keeping a careful but bemused eye on her husband.

Boffin's response, however, was to laugh out loud. "I can't believe you're going to do this to him, Guv'nor!"

"Hey, turnabout is fair play, don't *you* think," Kyle exclaimed. "At least *I* didn't have to resort to plagiarizing Rod McKuen, Perry Como *or* Elvis."

"I must admit, Kyle, your 'letters' are improving... but not by much," Arcadia added wickedly. "However, I must reluctantly admit that this is much better than '*I yearn for the burning passion of your bod and bodice...*'"

"You actually remember what we wrote!" Boffin exclaimed in horror.

"As bad as it was, it was still a *love* letter, Boffin. In fact, I still have it," Arcadia replied wistfully.

"With *my* name attached to it," Kyle sighed as he buried his head in his hands in mock shame.

"But of course," she replied, smiling at him. "At least this one *is* better."

"Well, I'm only trying to woo a lieutenant commander this time, not a starship's captain. It should be 'easier' or so one would think," he retorted.

Arcadia just shook her head in amusement and was about to add yet another pithy comment or two when the comlink interrupted her. As she was closest she walked over and took the call.

"Good evening, Doctor, is the Captain available?" the Station's Executive Officer requested.

"I'll get him for you, Commander," Arcadia replied as she put the 'link on pause and informed Kyle he was wanted.

"What can I do for you, Commander Romanova?" Kyle asked his Executive Officer as he quickly switched into Station Commander mode.

Sasha took a deep breath before she answered his question. "Captain, we have a crisis on our hands."

* * *

OFFICE OF THE STATION COMMANDING OFFICER

"I'm sorry to have called you away from dinner," the Executive Officer began as the Station Commander walked into his office to join the other senior officers assembled at his briefing table. Kyle hadn't bothered to change into his uniform and was still wearing his off duty clothing. He didn't immediately respond though he noticed that other than the Assistant Chief of Security and Sasha Romanova, everyone else was clad in their civilian attire as well.

"Don't worry about it, Commander Romanova," he responded casually to his XO. "So what's this about a hostage situation?"

"As far as we can ascertain," began his Chief of Staff, "it's not a hostage situation as we know it."

Kyle leaned back in his chair and stared at Jefferson El Jafeer. "Oh?"

"It's much more of a blockade, Captain," the XO clarified.

Kyle became clearly confused. "Then who's barricaded and why should I worry?"

"It all started," Jefferson began, "when some Galenan Custom's Technicians suddenly marched into the station's cargo docks and ordered any and all Federation personnel to immediately vacate the premises."

Assistant Chief of Security Emerald Strontium added, "Several of our personnel tried to resist and were forcible removed."

"Any casualties?" the Station Commander asked in a concerned voice.

Sasha Romanova checked her datapadd. "Just a few minor ones and they were treated at the scene."

Kyle nodded his head. "Good. So what brought all this on?"

The Executive Officer nodded to the Assistant Chief of Security who quickly picked up her cue. "We're currently at a loss," Emerald Strontium began. "All we can tell is that there was a spontaneous occupation of all our docking areas by members of the Galenan Customs Service. There's been no attempt to contact us. No reason for their behavior given. Any and all attempt to contact them has resulted in failure. All known entry points have been heavily secured."

The Station Commander nodded as he listened and scanned the report. "I see. Recommendations?"

"We could contact the planetary authorities and see what they have to say," Sasha suggested. "I've read several sketchy reports about people planetside exhibiting some remarkable bizarre behavior over the last few days. Perhaps this is just another such incident."

Kyle considered Sasha's suggestion but abruptly turned to Emerald. "Security?"

Ensign Strontrium paused. "Well... you could invoke your emergency privileges and flood the area with gas perhaps, sir." Emerald sheepishly looked up at her superior knowing that her suggestion was likely to be dismissed.

The Station Commander, as expected, tossed off the notion. "But we don't know what kind of response that might trigger. I don't think *this* should be our first response, however, we do need to keep our options open." Kyle leaned back in his chair and he idly fingered his datapadd. "Ensign, I want you to put the Omega Unit on standby. If we can't get in touch with the occupants, we *will* have to take drastic measures. In the meantime," he smiled at his senior officers, "let's try good old fashioned communications."

"*But Captain!*" the Assistant Chief of Security cried out. "We've been trying for nearly forty minutes now without any response!" Emerald realized that her outburst was out of line when she noted the cocked eyebrow of her Commanding Officer before she sheepishly added, "Sir."

Kyle sat up as he smiled benignly at the now red-faced junior officer. "Ensign, it's been my experience that sometimes people won't talk to *anyone* in general

but *someone* in specific. Let's see if this is the case. Open communications with the port authority."

Sasha Romanova who was keeping track of communications quickly opened up a channel for her superior. When a visual link was established on the large screen, she nodded to Kyle.

"This is Station Commander Kyle Argent. May I talk to the person or persons currently occupying the port authority?"

"This is Levina Ree'Kontaar," replied the heavy-set woman in a very controlled voice, "Chief Envoy, Imperial Galenan Customs Service. How may I be of service?"

Kyle smugly cocked an eyebrow back at those assembled around the table then leveled his attention back to the comlink. "Surrendering our port authority would be a good start. Could you oblige?"

"I'm sorry," the Imperial Galenan Customs Service coolly replied, "but I can not. We are currently under the operational guidelines of the Milka Protocol. Therefore, we are not bound by *your* authority. Until completion of the protocol, any attempt to forcibly enter the area will result in the total decompression of the entire docking area. Please note that I am in possession of what you Terrans call a Dead Man's Switch. If you intend to release some sort of chemical agent, the results will be the same. Until the protocol is completed, there will be no further communication. Officer Ree'Kontaar out..."

Kyle sat back in his chair. "Analysis?" he casually tossed out to his senior officers.

Figuring that he might as well be the sacrificial lamb, his Chief of Staff ventured. "I think she's a mad woman. You could clearly see the shock on her peoples' faces when she mentioned total decompression. They clearly did not know what she was planning."

"Agreed. Anybody know what this Milka Protocol is?"

The Station Commander's yeoman who'd remained silent all this time as she carefully maintained the official station log brightly piped up. "I've never heard of it but it sounds kinda official."

Sasha Romanova sneered at the obviously stupid remark though the Assistant Chief of Security merely nodded. "My thoughts exactly," Ensign Strontium agreed. "It's as if it were an official policy of some kind, Captain."

"If this truly is a Galenan policy, I'd like to know more about it." Kyle paused then looked towards his Executive Officer. "Commander, please get in touch with the appropriate authorities. Go right to the top if necessary."

Sasha removed the comm piece as she looked up to him. "Interesting you should mention this, Captain, I was just on the link with Galenan State Security when I was abruptly interrupted and directed to inform you that the Regent wants to talk to you."

Kyle sighed, not pleased with the interference. "Please inform the Regent that I'm busy right now and will get back to him as soon as possible."

"I already tried that, Captain. The response was that he requests your presence planetside..." Sasha gave him a dramatic pause before she continued, "*now.*"

Kyle carefully considered what Sasha had just told him and didn't miss the emphasis placed on her last word. "And?"

The Executive Officer chose her words slowly. "Captain, in general, when the Regent wants to you see, it's a good idea to go and see him immediately. His summons have never been known to be optional sir."

* * *

***PLANET GALENA, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
NERSON PALACE***

Something was very, very wrong here, Captain Kyle Argent considered as he leaned back in the passenger seat of the shuttle on his way towards Galena. He'd been on station almost ten months and never once was summoned to see the Regent or given him much thought. He'd known that the Regent served more or less as the nominal head of government of Galena but his position was generally considered not much more than ceremonial. So why would this ceremonial head of state give him a call in the middle of his night for some tete-a-tete during the most puzzling event during his tenure on the station?

Something definitely wasn't quite right here.

"Captain," the shuttle pilot announced interrupting his thoughts, "we're about to land."

"Thank you Ensign," he responded but then went back to his contemplation until they landed.

The Station Commander was greeted by what Kyle could only describe as a typically nondescript Imperial Secret Service Officer who simply requested that he follow him. Kyle complied and was soon on a monorail heading towards the Imperial Residence. Noting that his companion wasn't interested in striking up a casual conversation, Kyle decided to take the plunge.

"Is there a reason why I couldn't beam down directly to the Imperial Residence?" Kyle asked, clearly puzzled why he was obviously taking the long way around.

The Agent gave him a grave look. "No one is allowed to beam down into the Imperial Residency. Anyone wanting to enter must first transit through space port. Security," he added, "you understand."

"Security....." Kyle mumbled discontentedly as he leaned back in the seat.

"But we should be at the transit station," the Agent attempted to mollify him, "shortly."

Rather than spend any further time engaging in a one way conversation or contemplating the situation he now found himself in, Kyle opted to sit back and enjoy the scenery that was quite striking, after all. Galena truly was a scenic wonder where modern spires mingled with wood and stone dwellings that looked like they were quite ancient and all bracketed by fields and rolling hills all bathed in bright sunlight. He made a mental note to suggest a day trip here with his wife. It would make for a nice change of pace for the both of them.

Suddenly, the car stopped. The Security Agent broke the silence as they both left the monocar. "Please enter the coach for the final leg of your journey."

Kyle stood dumbfounded as he stared at the horse and buggy before him. "Are you serious?"

The Agent gave him a bemused look. "Any powered vehicle going more than twenty kilometers will be fired upon. It's either this or a bicycle. But as you are an honored guest, you do rate a carriage."

"I'd hate to be on the Regent's bad side," Kyle mumbled as he looked at the steep hill that separated him and the palace.

Making no further protest or conversation, Kyle stepped into the carriage and simply allowed the driver to take him to his final destination. The long trip was finally over when the carriage stopped and it was obvious to him that he was to get out. A rather grim faced majordomo walked out of the palace to meet him. Wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible, Kyle tiredly began, "My name is Captain Kyle Argent, the Regent--"

The majordomo unceremoniously cut him off. "...is expecting you," he stiffly completed the sentence for him. "Please follow me."

Kyle silently followed the majordomo for what seemed to be a small eternity. He'd been in transit for the better part of the 80 minutes. Whatever it was that the Regent to talk about, he decided it better be damned well important. If this Regent wanted some sort of silly assurance that the crisis at hand would taken care of, Kyle would have no qualms about telling his majesty just where to get off and furthermore, to stop wasting his time. The man wasn't *his* regent, after all. Kyle was surprised when he suddenly deposited at the entryway to a garden.

"The Regent awaits you in the Rose Garden," the majordomo sniffed then quickly departed leaving Kyle to obviously fend for himself.

The Station Commander sighed in exasperation. Standing there for a few moments with his hands on his hips, he realized that he was to merely to walk in, wander around, and hopefully just happen upon the Regent. Shaking his head in disgust, Kyle began to roam around in hopes that he would happen upon *someone*. As he walked through the garden, he did briefly consider how much Arcadia would enjoy this place as it was filled with roses of every type and variety, shining brightly in the sunlight. Finally, he spotted a thin, older man in casual clothing busily fussing about some extraordinarily beautiful light blue rose bushes. Impatient and tired, Kyle barked to the gardener. "Hey, Gardener! Do you know where the Regent is? I was supposed to meet him. All this shuttling around is trying my patience."

The gardener looked up and put his trowel down as he slowly got up, dusting himself off. He then slowly turned to face the noisy intruder.

"Then I'd best not try your patience any longer than necessary, Captain Argent," he began in a controlled and measured voice. "And yes, *you* have found me."

That last realization immediately overcame Kyle as he finally recognized the Galenan Regent Hakon Ja'Fadey from his official portrait. Kyle also realized that this was quickly turning into another one of *those* days... or nights as the case may be.

"Please forgive my insolence your majesty," Captain Argent managed to stammer, realizing that he needed to right this *extremely* unfortunate situation quickly. "I did not know I was addressing the... your highness... and..."

The Regent put up his hand to cease further embarrassment. "Actually, I thought it was rather refreshing having someone *not* fall over themselves. Think

you can keep that up or will you be insistent on sustaining this mindless prattle you're obviously *not* very good at?"

Kyle eyed the man standing before him who looked like a casual laborer dressed in soiled clothing but who obviously was a man who, without much effort, commanded attention. "*Hell, no!*" Kyle finally blurted out much to his own amazement.

"Good! It ought to be rather nice talking to someone like a real person for a change. Now then, I supposed your wondering why I had you come out here at this time. After all, it must be middle of the night on that station of yours -- what with the eight point five hour time difference and all..."

Kyle demonstratively yawned and punctuated it with a terse, "Quite."

"It seems to me," he began as they walked down the aisle of blue roses of various shades, "that you have a little problem with an overzealous customs officer. I thought I'd shed some light on the situation."

Kyle narrowed his eyelids. "How very kind of you," he drolly responded.

The Regent gave him a coy smile as he motioned to Kyle to sit at a garden table. "It seems that I haven't won you over yet," he smiled at Kyle as he too sat down at the table.

The small garden table that was nestled in a grove of red roses held refreshments. As far as Kyle could recall, no one asked him what he wanted to drink, yet there, in front of him was cold tea, iced and sweetened the way he liked it. The Regent, he noted, preferred his tea hot and steamy similar to the way that his wife enjoyed hers.

"Tell me Captain Argent," the Regent asked as he absently stirred his tea, "what do you know of chocolate."

"*Chocolate?*" Kyle replied, almost choking on a sip of tea.

"Yes, chocolate," the Regent calmly repeated.

Kyle cleared his throat as he considered his answer. "Sweet substance, usually made from the cocoa nut and my wife is quite addicted to it."

"Ah... yes, those double-chocolate whammies," the Regent smiled as he sipped his drink.

Kyle leveled a suspicious eyebrow at the Regent.

"Let me ask you something else," the Regent continued, becoming more serious. "What do you know of Galenan physiology?"

The Station Commander leaned back and crossed his arms. "You're asking the wrong Argent. Medicine is *her* field of expertise."

"True enough. You are *just* a fighter jock, after all," the Regent tossed off with a twinkle in his eye.

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***SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
SENIOR OFFICER'S BRIEFING ROOM***

As a former starship Commanding Officer and now the Chief Medical Officer of a space station, Arcadia Argent knew that being woken up in the middle of the night to take care of a situation that demanded her *personal* attention was just part of the job. However, she considered as she quickly dressed, Kyle had suddenly been called away and even after several hours, hadn't yet returned to their quarters. Whatever is going on she finally decided must be somewhat important though not necessarily an emergency.

The trip to the Command and Control Center was uneventful though she did notice an increased amount of activity for this time of evening. Despite the fact that the station ran on an Earth standard 24-hour schedule, most of the senior officers worked the beta and gamma shifts leaving the junior officers on the less desirable alpha and delta shifts. On the surface having all the senior officers on the same two shifts seemed inefficient. However, experience demonstrated that while in theory having the *very* senior officers spread out through all four shifts made more sense on paper, it made meetings and general networking a very dicey affair. Hence the decision to have the division chiefs and most of the senior staff on one of two shifts and the lesser senior and junior officers spread amongst the other two.

Though, she finally reflected, there were times like this when it didn't matter which shift one was assigned to, when duty calls it knows no time of day or night. Arcadia was about to continue her contemplation when suddenly a voice behind her caught her attention.

"There had better be a damned good reason for this," Terrence Blair grumbled as he joined her walking into the Senior Officer's Briefing Room. His sentiments were echoed by the audible yawn behind him.

"Just who called this damned meeting anyway?" the Medical Division Chief of Staff mumbled as he stifled yet another yawn while taking a seat at the briefing table next to his boss. Ike Ivanan yawned as he stretched. "Have any idea what this is all about, Darce?"

Arcadia leaned back in her chair and looked about the table. She wasn't too surprised to see that at least one senior officer from each Division present but what puzzled her was that her husband was no where to be seen. On the other hand, she knew this *had* to be important because most of the senior officers were here -- albeit, very tired as they were likely just woken up from their sleep.

"Not a clue, Ike," she finally replied to her Chief of Staff. "Though I can tell you that Kyle was called away earlier this evening."

"Figures. I did a quick status check before I left my quarters and found that the Omega Unit was put on standby as well as our Medical Emergency Response Team," Ike told her as he too allowed his eyes to sweep the table.

The CMO's face showed some confusion. "That would explain why Kyle was unexpectedly called out tonight, however, if there is some fuss brewing," Arcadia paused and noted that everyone was just milling around or sitting at the table tiredly drinking coffee, "we're certainly being downright casual about it."

"What fuss?" Terrence Blair asked having finally taken the seat on the other side of Arcadia with a steaming cup of coffee in hand.

Arcadia looked over at the Director of Flight Ops and sighed. "That's what we were wondering, Terrence," Arcadia responded as she idly tapped her fingers on the table.

"Fancy meeting you here, Mister Ivanan," Terrence wearily tossed out as he took a long sip of his brew while he looked around.

"I'm always invited to all the smart places, Mister Blair," Ike tiredly lobbed back.

"Yeah... right..." Terrence mumbled but then stopped. He looked around the table again with a confused look. "Where's Kyle?"

Arcadia shrugged. "We were having dinner last night when he was called out and I haven't seen him since."

Terrence slammed down his coffee cup. "Then who the *hell* called this meeting?" the Director of Flight Ops grumbled just a bit too loudly.

"I did," the previously unnoticed man quietly emerged from the shadows with a very tired-looking Station Executive Officer trailing behind.

Arcadia eyed the stranger with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity. She also quietly waited for Kyle to appear but was somewhat surprised when he was nowhere to be seen. She felt herself tense slightly at his non-appearance but just as quickly felt a calming sensation course throughout her body. While she didn't *sense* Kyle in the area, she also knew that he was in no danger though she did wonder just where the hell he was.

"And *who* are you?" Terrence crankily asked the newcomer as everyone quickly sat down around the briefing table.

"My name is unimportant," the man began as he took seat at the end of the table, "if it becomes necessary, you may call me sir." He leveled a smile at his audience, then continued. "Suffice it to say, I am an operative with Galenan State Security and this briefing is to be considered classified under the rules and regulations of Starfleet, the UFP and Galenan State Security."

"Yessir, Mister Spooky-sir..." Terrence mumbled under his breath in Arcadia's direction. She glared at him and indicated in no uncertain terms that he should be still.

The officer also scowled in the direction of the muttering but opted to ignore it as best he could. "As some of you may or may not know, your Station Commander has been requested for a special briefing by the highest level of Galenan Government. In the meantime, it is my obligation to bring you up to date on a development concerning the customs operations of this station."

Ike Ivanan, who was sitting on the other side of Arcadia, leaned over and whispered, "So I gather our job is to remove the big sticks from their asses?" Arcadia whipped her head towards her Chief of Staff and scowled at him as well.

"Our sticks are State issued and removable only by order of the Regent, Lieutenant Ivanan," the Galenan Officer glibly tossed back.

Noting the stunned silence, the agent was satisfied that he had their attention and continued. "As you may or may not know, Galenan are by and large, physiologically similar to most any other humanoid species. However, not all humanoid races are quite the same. In our case, a profound difference exists concerning..." the man stopped as he seemingly gathered his thoughts and continued *sotto voce*, "chocolate."

"*Chocolate?*" the CMO blurted out expressing the surprise they all felt.

"What, it makes your skin break out?" Ike tiredly snickered. "There are treatments for that you know."

The Galenan Officer chose to ignore the last comment and opted to answer the first. "Lieutenant Ivanan, this is a *very* sensitive issue with my people. Understand that there is no such thing as indigenous cocoa on our planet. During first contact, cocoa was introduced and it was an immediate success. It was quite unlike anything they'd ever tasted before. Unfortunately, every single one of my people, who partook of the chocolate, subsequently died. "

The audience, who had initially considered this all a joke, suddenly became more attentive.

"A naturally occurring substance, xococ, causes a fatal reaction. For the most part, we were successful in establishing a quarantine of such lethal foodstuffs mostly because almost all of them taste awful to the Galenan palate. Unfortunately, the same was not true of chocolate. Despite the known risks, people would smuggle it in and partake of it in small doses just to soothe their cravings. Federation and Galenan scientists spent nearly two decades working on a counteractive drug without any true success. The only result was a drug given to newborns that we hope over generations will render our systems immune to the effects of the chocolate."

"Why not just go with genetic engineering?" Ike soberly asked.

"Because *we* determined this was our best course of action -- allowing our bodies to adapt rather than directly circumvent the system. Current estimates report that within several generations, newborns will develop natural immunity. As it is, the effects of some chocolate in smaller quantities is non-lethal though they can induce epileptic episodes as the dose is increased."

The light suddenly dawned on Arcadia and she nodded her head in understanding. "So this would explain the apparent seizure in the Nexolodean the other night as well as the other reported incidents."

He nodded appreciatively in the CMO's direction. "You must understand that at the time this 'problem' was discovered, both your Federation and my government worked together to keep the matter under wraps."

"Why? What's the problem?" someone asked.

"Perception," the Galenan Officer responded. "How would you like to be a planet known for its intolerance of chocolate? We would have been the laughing stock of known space in a short amount of time."

"I very much doubt that this would have been the case. Most members of the Federation tend to be very tolerant of other's shortcomings," the Executive Officer pointed out.

The Galenan Officer put his hand up. "Commander Romanova, this decision was reached well before our time. And right or wrong, it was a policy that both parties agreed upon."

Terrence Blair rolled his eyes in disgust. "Politics," he spat out.

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NERSON PALACE

The Station Commander rolled his eyes in disgust. "*Politicians.*"

"Ah, yes," the Regent responded with a disarming smile. "You are no great friend of politics," the Regent added with a wry grin.

Kyle shrugged his shoulders. "I always considered myself a soldier and as we like to say, ours is not to reason why...."

"Ours is but to do or die," the Regent finished the sentence for him. "You realize the politician in me is rather disgusted by the archaic wasteful nature of such thinking."

Kyle chuckled. "And if only more politicians thought just like you do, chances are I wouldn't have had as many problems with them as I did."

Both men allowed themselves to share a laugh.

Kyle waited a discreet amount of time before continuing. "But seriously, why exactly did I have to receive this information from you in person? Why couldn't some intelligence operative do the same thing? And for that matter, why wasn't I briefed on this matter?"

"In all actuality," the Regent replied, "one of our intelligence operatives is currently briefing your senior officers. But permit me to elaborate some more before I answer your many questions."

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SENIOR OFFICER'S BRIEFING ROOM

"We only have three licensed importers of chocolate goods," the Galenan Officer continued. "And in return, for their cooperation, we turn over all chocolate tax and tariff revenue to them as a matter of policy. This matter is not so much a secret than something that we Galenan's do not wish to talk about. We do not want to be known throughout the galaxy as the people that *can't* consume chocolate."

"That would explain the rather restrictive trade laws," Sasha ventured.

"Correct, Commander. We cannot effectively police trade on one substance unless we are vigilant on *all* substances. Otherwise, it would then be far too easy to smuggle contraband. We import chocolate that our people can safely consume though most consider the 'real' stuff to be much better."

The XO smiled but became more sober as she sat back and thought for a moment. "So basically you have somebody importing non-regulated chocolate and some of it showed up here on the Station?" Sasha Romanova concluded.

"That would be the case," he readily agreed. "The questions are now, who and why?"

The Executive Officer leaned back in her chair. "If we assume for a moment that this so-called secret of yours is anything *but* secret, then it's obvious that there is a really easy way to pinpoint a suspect or lock down a motivation. However, if I had to make a guess, my money would be on large-scale terrorism. This is far too subtle to be the act of your run-of-the-mill psychopath."

"Our intelligence service shares your assessment, Commander Romanova. However, even they are at a loss as to why anyone would bother. We're not exactly at war with anybody and in the scheme of things, this isn't Earth or Vulcan we're talking about. But those matters are unimportant as far as you are concerned."

"In other words, we're not politically important enough to be kept informed," the Terrence grumbled as he finished his coffee.

"Very much so Captain Blair, but then *you* are the one that doesn't like politics so this arrangement *should* be to your liking."

Terrence merely glared at the smiling Galenan Officer while Arcadia snickered.

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NERSON PALACE

Kyle cocked an eyebrow in the Regent's direction. "Charming."

"One of the primary responsibilities of the Imperial Customs Service is to certify and enforce the controlled substances act. It is their responsibility to ensure that Galenan space is not contaminated with 'choc'. The Milka Protocol was established to isolate any and all facilities from use by off worlders during an epidemic exposure to choc. Please understand that these custom's officers take an oath to preserve the security of our planet at all costs even if it means relinquishing their lives. To them, an outbreak of choc poisoning is a *very* serious problem. Though in this case, the invocation of the Milka Protocol did seem a bit hasty if not uncalled for."

"I'm so glad you agree," Kyle replied between clenched teeth with an expression that reminded the Regent of a predator moving in on his prey.

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SENIOR OFFICER'S BRIEFING ROOM

The Galenan Officer paused to sip a glass of water. "Please understand that Internal State Security at this juncture does not believe that the choc is coming through compromised Federation personnel. In fact, shortly before your arrival, I was informed that every specimen of choc recovered so far had proper tax stamps affixed to them."

"So how exactly it is put into circulation then? One of *your* suppliers?" Terrence angrily tossed out.

"Perhaps. Each and every shipment is indexed and numbered. The contaminated items conform to no intimidation scheme currently in use. However, the only way to tell them apart from properly processed chocolate would be to either scan them item by item or visual inspection of the tax stamps."

"In other words," Sasha concluded, "someone is smuggling the contraband onto the planet itself bypassing the station and your customs officials entirely."

"So it would seem," the Agent nodded.

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NERSON PALACE

"So am I to understand that you would like our assistance in tracking down and eliminating this smuggler or smugglers?" Kyle suggested.

The Regent nodded his head. "Yes, this would be very much the case."

The Station Commander paused to consider. "Very well then, I will pass your request on to my superiors and see what they have to say."

The Regent seemed unfazed by the blow he'd just received. "You do realize that it will take weeks if not months."

"That's generally how it works," Kyle agreed.

"You realize that as a member of good standing of the UFP, we can request any and all Federation assets in our time of need and you're well within your abilities to grant us that assistance on your own authority," the Regent quietly suggested.

The Station Commander leaned back and smiled benignly in the Regent's direction. "Ah...yes... *my* authority. You mean the one *your* customs' officials so happily circumvented?"

The Regent also sat back in his chair while he purposely sipped his drink. "I see. Name your conditions."

"Nothing outrageous really. I would care for some cooperation and communications on such matters in the future rather than being hauled out from my dinner table only be confronted with the paranoid ravings of someone preventing my people from performing their appointed duties."

"There has been no such request for cooperation in the past," the Regent quietly pointed out.

"That was then and this is now!" Kyle angrily tossed back. "If you do not want to talk to us then why should any of us feel compelled to talk to you?"

Rather than answer him, the Regent stood from his chair, walked over to one of many rose bushes, and plucked several small pale blue roses from the vine. He strolled back over to the table and placed them in his now empty cup.

"Very well, Captain Argent. Anything else?" the Regent quietly asked as he sat down again.

The Station Commander took his time while he sipped his iced tea. "Answer me a question if you could. What are the implementation parameters of the Milka Protocol?"

The Regent shrugged his shoulders. "They are fairly fluid and quite situational. Why do you ask?"

"Do they entail notification of one's superior officers?"

The Regent nodded. "Yes, of course they do."

Kyle leaned back and smiled. "Then I request that the customs' officials be subject to Starfleet disciplinary protocols."

"We had planned on reassigning the officer in charge to less.... involved duties. However, I do not see why she should be made subject to Starfleet disciplinary protocols. After all, she did contact Galenan State Security and informed us of her decision."

"In that case," Kyle began angrily, "feel free to requisition any and all assets necessary to interdict your smuggler and see what happens. As long as the Federation is tasked with the overall administration of *Nexus*, I expect even your customs' officials to adhere to its rules, policies, *and* its chain of command. None of *my* officers were informed of this situation until *after* the fact. As such, they flagrantly violated Starfleet security protocols and will be punished accordingly."

The Regent smiled and clapped. "*Bravo!*" Noting the look of confusion on Captain Argent's face, the Regent clarified. "For someone who professes a profound disliking of all things politics, you certainly seem more than apt at playing the great game. At this rate, they *will* make a Federation Counselor out of you yet," he concluded with a look of triumph on his face.

Kyle found his face contorting into one of horror as his eyes rolled towards the Galenan heavens. So here he was again, nearly twenty years standing by watching politician after politician making one ridiculous decision after another allowing him to conveniently loathe them and, and yet, there was something to be said for the art of the compromise or perhaps the satisfaction of strong arming one's opposition into doing as you wanted. Maybe, just maybe... No, that's not right. He'd been out of the cockpit far too long. It was time to schedule some training flights. That should be the sure cure.

Kyle paused his contemplation long enough to sheepishly look up at the Regent still smiling at him. "I'm so glad we were able to come to an... arrangement," he finally told him.

"Yes, very good," the Regent readily agreed. "And I think you'll find that our over zealous customs official will have surrendered into the custody of station security by the time you get back. As you are a busy man," he said with a wink,

"I will not detain you any further. But I must say I'm certainly glad our intelligence was right about you. I'll make sure that State Security will provide you with any and all information available to us. We will talk again, some time after this ghastly matter is concluded but until then, have a good day."

The Regent capped his last statement by abruptly standing up and walking away to continue his gardening.

Kyle watched him as he departed then turned his attention to the roses that the Regent had left on the table. He decided not to waste this most excellent iced tea and while he finished his drink, he took one last look at the Regent pattering around in his garden. He slowly turned his eyes back towards the roses sitting on the table to admire them again. He truly wished that Arcadia were here to delight in them as well. Kyle finally stood up and walked back into the palace where he presumed he would be escorted back to his shuttle.

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***SENIOR OFFICER'S QUARTERS,
OLD SAN FRANCISCO, EARTH***

"*You've Got Mail!*" the comlink cheerfully announced.

Roscoe had told her that the sound recording was a genuine antique from the late 20th century though it might as well have come from the audio stone age. It was just plain obnoxious and yet, kind of cute... just like Roscoe.

"Oh, damn him! Who needs a space tramp like him anyway?" Ayesha muttered for what it seemed to her to be the one-millionth time.

Ever since she'd washed out of the Fighter Training School, her days were generally spent lounging around her quarters. At first, she didn't lack for company. But her demeanor had changed from one of being lighthearted to one of being downright hostile so one by one her friends dropped her like a hot potato. Now, her only tethers to the outside world were the occasional trip to the market and the occasional message that found its way onto her comlink.

She finally decided she wasn't particularly busy and therefore, she opted to take in the message that had just arrived. She briefly glanced at the sender and noted its origin was the Obsidian Sector. Oddly enough, she knew absolutely nobody there. In fact, just where the hell was the Obsidian Sector anyway?

Rather than spend any further time speculating, she opened the message and was rather taken aback by just the first line.

"My dearest, sweetest most beloved Ayesha. Love of my life!

It has been far too long that we have been apart and my heart yearns for the ecstasy of your company..."

Ayesha quickly jumped to the end of the missive to find the author of this "piece" though she already was beginning to formulate a suspicion. Sure enough, it was signed "*Forever yours, in heart, body and soul, Gareth Mykel Roscoe.*"

"What the hell has gotten into him?" she speculated aloud. He generally was not prone to run on with drivel like this. On the other hand, it was kind of sweet. And deep down, though she would just as soon deny it, she could not help but think that Roscoe did have his moments. But still, he had obviously heard of her predicament and had written solely to worm his way back into her good graces.

Well, he would not get lucky a second time! She would compose a response suited for an incorrigible cad like Mister Roscoe! Why the very nerve of him!

She sat down to compose her retort, occasionally cackling with glee over a particularly skillful put down or an especially imaginative insult. Finally pleased with the effort, she sent the reply on its merry way.

"I never did look up where this damned Obsidian System is located," she mumbled as the link indicated that the message had been delivered at 1523 hours local time. Well, at least wherever this system was, it was civilized enough to be operating on Federation Standard Time. Roscoe ought to have a nice surprise waiting for him -- and what she wouldn't give to see his face when he got it! But as it was just about time for her favorite afternoon holosuds -- one that Roscoe got her hooked on -- she opted to push it from her mind.

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OFFICE OF THE STATION COMMANDING OFFICER

Station Commander Kyle Argent was pouring over the information provided by the Galenan State Security as well as the results of the latest high-yield sensor sweep searching for any trace of a smuggling vessel. He was so engrossed in his activities he didn't even notice the entry of his wife with Boffin tow.

"Kyle, we've got mail!" Arcadia excitedly exclaimed to her husband who seemed lost amongst a sea of datapadds.

"Your point?" he replied as he wearily looked up at the new arrivals to his office.

"Guv'nor, the bait worked," Boffin replied.

"Oh, *that* mail!" he exclaimed while also considering how much work he had on his desk. "Let's see it."

Boffin handed the padd to Kyle who brought it up on his comlink for all three of them to read. It didn't take them long to scan the message.

"So much for that. We tried, but I guess that didn't work out. *C'est la vie*," Kyle sighed.

"I do believe that the part about '*the horse you rode in on and the hearse you'll ride out on*' was pretty definitive," Arcadia suggested.

"Can't we try again, Guv'nor?" Boffin all but pleaded.

"I don't see what good it will do, but you and Arcadia are free to work on it. Something has come up here and I'm unexpectedly *very* busy." He capped his statement by poking his nose back in the datapadd he was holding.

Arcadia decided it was time that she took over the project. "I'll take care of it." She pointedly stared at her former yeoman who was quick on the uptake.

Kyle looked up long enough to collect a kiss from Arcadia and see them leave his office. He was now free to turn his attentions back to the true crisis at hand.

"What are you going to do, Mam'selle?" Boffin asked as they walked out of the Command and Control Center.

"The problem is, Boffin, you gentlemen can't just assume that what worked once will work again. Besides, I believe a more *personal* touch is called for."

"Eh?" Boffin replied completely forgetting his upper class accent.

Arcadia stopped and turned to face her former yeoman. "Mister Gateway, there are times that men simply can't understand what women need and want. I believe I can reach Ayesha in a way that you gentleman just can't. Just leave it to me."

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ARGENT QUARTERS

"This is quite good..." Kyle told his wife as he greedily ate his dinner later that evening. He's spent the entire day going over the material that Galenan State

Security sent him that morning. As a result, he ended up skipping lunch and was famished.

"I *always* do my best replicator magic for you, love," Arcadia purred in her husband's direction.

"You may start giving me some competition in the kitchen, you realize," he smiled.

"I doubt it, love," she began between bites of beef stew. "You can cook from scratch, I hardly know how to boil water," she pointed out.

"Well, I could teach you," he offered.

"I'm sure you could..." she replied but noticed his face displayed one of concern. "Something on your mind, Pilot?"

"All this information that the Galenans finally gave up," he began as he stabbed a piece of meat. "I just wish we had had it before this current business." Kyle honestly didn't want to discuss what he'd read, actually, he really couldn't, so he changed the subject. "So how did your discussion with Ayesha go?" he asked as he chewed his food.

Arcadia had to laugh. "Quite well," she replied, however, from the look on Kyle's face, she detected that her answer would not suffice.

"And?" he prompted.

"I thought our conversation went quite well." She repeated but again noticing Kyle's unspoken question decided to set the record straight. "Kyle, you aren't going to get much more out of me than the fact that I spoke to Ayesha and our conversation went quite well."

"I see..." he finally sighed as he feebly stabbed at a piece of stew.

Arcadia looked at her husband whose eyes told her that he wouldn't be happy until she gave him more information. On the other hand, what she discussed with Ayesha was rather private but on the third hand, she *could* toss him a bone.

"I just pointed out a few... err... facts about the Marek-Wynne." Arcadia noticed his look of confusion and elaborated. "I just thought that no one from the warrior clan I'd ever known would take what I said.... err... lightly."

Kyle chuckled. "You gave her hell."

Arcadia pretended to look hurt. "I merely elaborated on a long standing... err... discussion between the Marek-Wynne and Miskinn-Warda clans on Vaega, Kyle."

"I'm sure she found the... err... 'discussion' enlightening," Kyle responded with a smile.

"I don't doubt it besides, I truly dislike people who take *that* kind of attitude... and speaking of high horses, it seems that the Galenans have finally gotten off of theirs," she tossed out with some disgust in her voice.

Kyle nodded in between bites. "They have become more cooperative of late, I will admit," he agreed.

Arcadia eyed her husband suspiciously. "Due in part with your charming the Regent no doubt."

"Aren't I always charming?" he grinned in her direction.

"It certainly worked for me... after a fashion, that is," she smiled, then became more serious. "Actually," she paused as she took a sip of hot tea, "now that the Galenans have asked for our medical assistance rather than giving us the runaround -- I'm finally now talking to doctors and not bureaucrats -- I'm finding them to be most cooperative."

"That's good," Kyle replied while he munched on a piece of carrot.

"In fact," Arcadia continued, "they invited us to observe some of their treatment facilities. I'm thinking of sending a few of the younger doctors not only to observe but also to lend a hand. I thought if we were around, they wouldn't mind us pitching in."

Kyle leaned back to think. "That's an excellent idea...." He idly played with the remaining piece of potato in the bowl as he carefully considered his words. "If I may be so bold, I think it might be a good idea if you went as well."

Arcadia looked at her husband. "Is this a suggestion?"

"A suggestion and a favor both. I just feel it would be a good idea," he finally responded.

Arcadia sipped her tea as she considered what was being asked of her. Obviously, this was *more* than just a request or a suggestion. "Mind telling me why?"

"While I trust your people as you trust them, I would prefer someone down there that I can *really* trust. The Galenans have been more than forthcoming since my little chat with the Regent. However, I would like someone I can depend on to pick up every little nuance possible. You have the tendency to observe a lot without actually realizing it, after all doctors are trained observers. Besides, I don't think you'd mind checking out the medical facilities yourself and I'm giving you a good excuse to do so."

"Indeed you are," she replied as they both stood from the table to clean up the dirty dishes.

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***PLANET GALENA, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
HAVRAM BEY TREATMENT CENTER, SOUTHERN CONTINENT***

Chief Medical Officer Arcadia Argent sat back as the Galenan skimmer wove its way through the dense forest into a clearing. The Havram Bey Treatment Center was apparently located in one of the less densely populated areas of the planet judging from the lack of any surrounding towns but an abundance of livestock and farms. Much to her surprise, there weren't many trees and those that she did spot were few and clustered in small groves. While she wondered why they couldn't just beam down -- she was informed that this part of the planet didn't have enough portals to support a non-emergency beam-in -- she actually enjoyed the ride and the lovely sunset.

The center itself was located on a small knoll that overlooked lush farmlands. She noted that the air smelled sweet and the sun was warm though there was a distinct chill in the air. The center seemed to be an older building, judging from the obvious wear on the outside but the area surrounding it seemed nicely tended to.

Arcadia sighed as the party of officials strolled towards them as they disembarked the skimmer. The bureaucratic dance they'd been engaged with was beginning to take a toll on her people but once they had actually started talking to fellow doctors, they had started to make progress. She had found that the Galenan healers were more than willing to assist them in treating those cases of choc that had occurred on the station and impart as much information as they could.

However, Arcadia's optimism was slowly turning to that of pessimism as she took a good look at the party greeting herself and her people. She inwardly sighed as her initial suspicions were verified. The representatives of the Galenan Medical Authority seemed more interested in not breaking any protocol than interacting with them as fellow physicians. She noted that her people also

sensed that this trip was slowly turning into a giant waste of time. But she knew in the back of her mind that she was not only taking this trip to make personal contact with the Galenan Doctors but she was there as the eyes and ears of the Station Commander. She put an obviously fake smile on her face as they all began their tour of the facilities.

Arcadia had to admit that despite the fact that this facility lay in the middle of nowhere, it appeared to be quite up to date. The patients seemed well cared for and nothing seemed out of sort. In fact, she found herself actually enjoying the tour though, despite it being conducted by obvious bureaucrats. Suddenly, and thankfully, the officious bureaucrats were summoned away, leaving the doctors by themselves.

"My apologies for their abruptness..." Doctor Lad'ren, the facilities senior doctor began as he watched them scurry away. "But... it appears that the Medical Authority has more important things to do."

Arcadia smiled at the older man. "No need apologize, Doctor. I had the suspicion that they are more at home pushing papers about patients than actually applying their trade."

Doctor Lad'ren looked at the *Nexus* Chief Medical officer and decided he liked her very much. "I detect that things are no different for you then?"

Arcadia laughed. "You can be assured, that no matter where you come from or where you work, bureaucrats are the same all over."

"I'm not sure if that's good news or not," Doctor Lad'ren opined aloud.

"It's *bad*, trust me," one of the *Nexus* doctors added prompting a laugh from everyone.

The laughter fell into an awkward silence, neither one of the senior doctors wishing to make the next move. Arcadia felt as the visiting physician, it was up to her to begin. "Doctor, we're here to observe first hand the treatment protocol. However, it seems to me that we could do much more than just observe, we can help, if you feel we can be of assistance that is. We find it is far better to learn hands-on than just observe."

While it was evident to Arcadia that Doctor Lad'ren was hoping that this offer would be given, he attempted to keep his emotions in check before he responded. "We feel the same way. Far better to *feel* than to observe."

"Indeed, Doctor Lad'ren," Arcadia nodded and smiled.

Doctor Lad'ren considered for a moment. Having made up his mind, he responded. "We never expected the number of cases in such a short a period of time," he answered quietly.

"That would explain," Arcadia replied shaking her head, "why it was difficult... No, downright impossible to get any information about what we were facing on *Nexus*."

"I don't doubt it. The Galenan Medical Authority is quite touchy about this latest epidemic but even I under estimated the wide swath it cut this time. We just never expected this number."

"So... what can we do and where should we start?" Arcadia prompted.

Doctor Lad'ren didn't answer them right away. Instead he went over to the desk and picked up a datapadd. He briefly scanned it then walked back to the group and explained where they were most needed. With the *Nexus* Medical Team safely dispatched with his people, he turned to Doctor Argent. "I thought you might want to stay with me and take a look at some of the more interesting cases we have."

"I would like that, Doctor," Arcadia replied as she followed him into the isolation ward.

Doctor Lad'ren and Doctor Argent walked into the ward but Lad'ren was quickly called away leaving Arcadia to casually stroll around by herself. She didn't get too far when she noticed a nurse having a problem with a patient who was obviously delirious.

"May I be of assistance?" she asked.

The nurse obviously didn't know who Arcadia was but did see that she had walked in with the Chief Doctor so she was inclined to put her trust in this stranger. Besides, she was at her wit's end.

"I need to go and retrieve his medication but he can't be left unattended," she replied tiredly. "And everyone else is busy."

"I'll be happy to sit with him whilst you retrieve his medication," Arcadia replied as she pulled up a chair to sit next to the patient.

"Thank you.... Err... Doctor." The nurse scurried off leaving Arcadia to tend to him.

The patient was obviously demented and not making sense though it seemed to Arcadia that he wanted to talk. Having nothing better to do, she attempted to engage him in conversation.

"*The flowers!*" he moaned.

"What about the flowers?" Arcadia asked as she rubbed his forehead.

"Gotta be the ship. I shouldna taken the money. I just wanted the roses for her..." he mumbled.

"What money?" she prompted.

Rather than answering her, he continued his ravings. "It's the ship! The sickness, it's the ship!" He grabbed her tunic and yelled, "My roses!" He sunk back into his bed, dragging Arcadia with him. "But the choc was so good..."

Arcadia disengaged the death grip he had on her uniform while attempting to ask more questions but it was obvious to her that he wasn't listening or better stated, his madness had totally overwhelmed him.

"Thank you for watching him... err... Doctor," the nurse replied as she returned to administer the medication.

"My pleasure. Tell me, how long as he been like this?" Arcadia asked as she followed the nurse back to her duty station once they both determined that he was safely sedated.

The nurse frowned then looked up the information in the computer. "Almost two months." She shook her head. "He's been here the longest."

"I'm not sure I understand. I wasn't aware that such dementia was part of the symptoms...." Arcadia asked, obviously confused.

The nurse frowned at Arcadia's use of dementia and had to look it up on the Universal Translator. Once she was satisfied on the meaning, she turned back to Arcadia. "Usually it isn't, Doctor...."

"Argent," Arcadia supplied with a warm smile.

The nurse smiled in return. "Doctor Argent, it looks like he had a seizure. Some friends treated him themselves rather than taking him to a doctor. You're seeing the effect of the treatment not the choc poisoning."

"That would explain that then. I didn't remember reading anything about dementia being a primary or secondary symptom." Arcadia paused for a moment while she considered further. "I gather his friends noted that he had had an overdose and didn't want to be caught therefore thought they could take it care of it themselves?"

"I would think so, Doctor Argent. It's a rather sensitive subject to some," she added quietly.

"So I understand." Arcadia was going to leave the nurse to her duties when she realized that one reason she was there was to gather information, no matter how insignificant.

"I'm curious," Arcadia cautiously began. "Is there any information as to circumstances of his illness?"

"Let me check..." the nurse busily tapped some keys before the answer came back. "No, there are very few details here. The information might be a State Secret," the nurse replied in a mocking tone. "However, I can tell you that he was a wed-tech."

"A what?" Arcadia blurted out.

The nurse looked at her quizzically then remembered that she wasn't Galenan and therefore wouldn't be familiar with the term. "Our climate is controlled by several weather satellites and he's a technician." She stopped to read more of the file. "In fact, he was stationed not too far from here.... " The nurse snorted. "So *that* would explain our odd weather," she chuckled but became immediately sober.

"I take it you've had some bad weather?"

Realizing that she'd probably said more than she should have, the nurse hesitated but decided that she'd tell the stranger because, for some reason, she trusted her. "Yes. We had several severe storms during the planting season. The farmers were very unhappy. They yelled at the politicians. Just when the politicians promised that it wouldn't happen again *another* bad storm appeared. It almost wiped out the fall crop. That's never happened before."

Before Arcadia could ask any more questions, Doctor Lad'ren came back and they continued their tour.

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**SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
ARGENT QUARTERS**

Station Commander Kyle Argent dutifully listened to his wife -- who also just happened to be the Station's Chief Medical Officer -- as she prattled on and on about her trip to Galena's Treatment Facility. From what he could gather, the journey apparently yielded nothing out of the ordinary but as he had specifically asked her to take this trip, he felt obliged to remain attentive.

"...And then we left. It was your basic meet and greet tour, Kyle..." she concluded as they were finishing off the last of the smoked ham and sharp cheddar cheese omelet they were eating for dinner.

Arcadia looked to her husband patiently waiting for a response. It was then that she realized that she'd gone on about this business for a good 20 minutes and he was probably "in another place."

"Kyle?" she prompted.

"Sorry, Milady... I was just... thinking," he sheepishly replied in between bites of his dinner.

"You did specifically request that I take this trip and you did ask me for everything I did and saw. I was kind to you and skipped most of the medical bits as well as the buffet we had before we left. However, in the interest of completeness, let me tell you about them."

Kyle raised his hand in surrender. "No need, Arcadia. And I am sorry. I did hear every word you said, it's just that..." he allowed his voice to trail off.

"You expected more?" she finished the sentence for him.

He sighed. "In a word... yes...." he paused as he idly played with a chunk of ham with his fork. "Tell me something, was there anything that caught your attention or fancy?"

The Chief Medical Officer mulled the request over as she took another bite of omelet. "Weather satellites."

"*Weather satellites?*" he blurted out, rather surprised by her admission. "They have an extensive satellite system. Many planets do have them, Arcadia."

"Oh, I know that, Kyle. Vaega has a few but there were those who felt it sacrilege to use something 'artificial' to control the environment. Luckily for us,

cooler heads prevailed though our satellites are used in a limited capacity. Sometimes the most enlightened people can be so afraid of technology."

Kyle shrugged his shoulders. "The fact that the Galenans use satellites isn't that out of the ordinary."

"Kyle love, I'm not *that* dense..." she smiled. "It's just that the area seemed so remote. However, that's how it was set up. The area serves as an artificial bread basket and the satellites stabilize the weather."

"I still don't see what this has to do with anything," he pointed out.

Arcadia scowled in his direction. "You asked me a question and I'm giving you an answer, Kyle."

"True enough," he conceded. "Anything else? Even medical?"

"Medical? You are desperate, aren't you?" she mocked but immediately became all business. "Now, medical, yes. The Chief Doctor specifically had me look at one of the earlier known cases of the current outbreak to demonstrate what happens when some well meaning friends try to take care of someone who's had a xococ overdose."

Kyle wasn't specifically interested in this subject, but he opted to keep the peace and indulge his wife. "So what did you find out?"

"Nothing specific. His medical records seemed straight forward though this particular patient was delusional and in fact, was ranting and raving about all kinds of things."

"Like?" he absent-mindedly prompted.

"Oh.... You name it: women, flowers, ships, money, chocolate. He made no sense whatsoever. In fact, before the Chief Doctor had specifically showed me this case, I had assisted a nurse in sedating him. I even attempted to engage him in conversation but he was too far-gone for anything meaningful to ensue."

Noting that she was slowly losing her audience again, and also realizing that Kyle had been working long hours lately, she decided to wrap this up. "In fact, that's when I learned about the weather satellites because she told me that the patient was a wed-tech."

Kyle looked to her with a frown on his face. "Wed-tech?" he asked.

"Sorry, weather satellite technician." Arcadia paused and chuckled. "The nurse jokingly implied that the state of the patient was directly proportional to that of the weather satellite."

"How so?"

"Oh, the patient had been in charge of a satellite downlink station in the area and apparently there had been some recent problems with it."

"Where exactly was this?" Kyle asked finally becoming interested in what she was saying.

"Around the Treatment Facility, on the Southern Continent," Arcadia responded as she finished up the last of her omelet. "Which rather explains why the center was located where it is," Arcadia prattled on. "The Galenans are quite touchy about this chocolate business and it makes sense that they'd build the center there than in the one of the bigger cities. Out of site, out of mind...." she concluded as she noticed once again that she had lost her audience.

The Station Commander had leaned back in his chair and considered for a moment all the bits and pieces that had crossed his desk recently that seemingly had nothing to do with each other were now starting to come together.

"Southern Continent? Interesting. Very, *very* interesting...."

"What is Kyle?" Arcadia asked, surprised that he'd actually been listening to her.

"Just something I remember reading in a Galenan Security Report. It seems that a tracking station around that area had had problems with the weather control system. It seemed pretty minor to me." Kyle paused to think. "If I recall correctly, the unit was due to be overhauled, but apparently, it was enough to cause at least one politician to lose a job over it."

Arcadia thought for a moment as she finished up her cup of tea. "It's likely to be the same one. The nurse confirmed that it was quite out of the ordinary. The farmers were quite annoyed by the whole business and probably raised a major fuss. So you think there's a connection?"

"I'm not sure, Arcadia," Kyle began slowly as he felt his mind racing to put various bits and pieces of unrelated information together, "but one can do a lot of 'interesting' things with weather satellites." He stopped to consider before making up his mind. "Right now, I think we need to find out more about their planetary satellite system."

* * *

OFFICE OF THE STATION COMMANDING OFFICER

"Captain Argent," the Station Commander's yeoman began over the link, "Lieutenant El Jafeer has just landed and will be in your office shortly."

"Thank you, Ms Marlowe," Kyle replied before he snapped off the comlink to await the return of his Chief of Staff and the computer technician who had just returned from Galena.

Jefferson had assured him that he tech was the best in the business. Kyle thought that he had better be because, despite of the now cordial relationship with the Regent, it still took some fancy dancing to get his people access to the satellite control station especially during the evening. Captain Argent was duly informed by the Galenan State Security that this was a *highly* restricted area but they were under orders from the Regent to grant access.

"Captain Argent?" Jefferson El Jafeer tentatively interrupted his boss whom he could see was obviously wrapped up in some private musings.

Kyle looked up and gestured for his Chief of Staff to enter his office. He watched as they slowly walked in and stood in front of his desk.

"Captain, may I introduce Computer Technician Percival Manwarren," Jefferson El Jafeer began in his crisp, upper class British accent.

Captain Argent took a moment to size the newcomer up. "Please have a seat gentlemen."

Kyle sat back in his own chair and watched as they sat down. The tech introduced as Manwarren had some trouble squeezing into the chair. Despite his youth -- Manwarren was in his late twenties -- Jefferson assured the Captain that he knew his business and was the best in ferreting out the most minute of computer secrets.

Jefferson looked to Kyle who nodded his head. "The trip was *most* eventful, Captain."

"What did you find out?" Kyle asked, still leaning back in his chair.

Rather than answer him directly, Jefferson looked to the tech. "Pym?"

Manwarren fidgeted in his chair as he nervously ran his hands through his greasy hair while his eyes darted between that of the Chief of Staff and Station Commander. "Captain...." Pym started in a feeble voice.

"Mister Manwarren, *please* speak up," Kyle sternly interrupted.

"Yes, Captain," Pym replied in a slightly stronger voice.

Kyle listened intently as the young technician carefully started to explain what he did and what he found.

"They tried to do a good job with covering up the alterations to the official record... but once I realized what we might be looking for.... I was able to zero in on any departures in the official log," Manwarren replied, in a rather hesitant voice.

Kyle turned his attention to his Chief of Staff. "I take it you found what we were looking for?" he asked Jefferson not really interested in an overly technical discussion that the young crewman was obviously itching to give.

"Yes, Captain. We found it," Jefferson replied with clear certainty, much to the relief of the young technician who was seated in front of the Station Commander.

Kyle nodded as he gave a wry smile. "Thank you gentlemen. Please have your reports to me as soon as possible. You are dismissed."

The Station Commander watched them depart his office as he sat back and considered the new information. Making a quick decision, he switched on his comlink, putting it in secured-private mode.

"Arcadia?" he asked the woman sitting at her desk, obviously very surprised by the intrusion.

"Something wrong, Kyle? You're using my private channel, after all," the Chief Medical Officer asked with some concern in her voice.

"I'm just glad I caught you at your desk," Kyle quickly changed from husband to that of her Commanding Officer. "I need you to tell me *exactly* what that patient told you when you visited the Treatment Center." Kyle could see that she was mentally switching gears from the project that she was working on to his request.

The Chief Medical Officer frowned slightly. "You mean the delirious one?"

Kyle nodded. "That's the one."

Arcadia shrugged her shoulders as she shook her head. "He was very incoherent and rambled on about money, chocolate, gi--"

The Station Commander cut her off. "*No!*" he shouted a voice a bit more forceful than warranted. He put his emotions once again in check before he continued. "No," he responded in a more controlled tone, "I want to know *exactly* what he said. His very words."

Arcadia frowned as she pulled her thoughts together and eventually told him what she remembered.

Kyle listened attentively and when she was finished, he posed a question. "Is it possible that there is a way that we'd be able to question him?"

The Chief Medical Officer considered for a moment. "I honestly don't know. I'd have to get his records and see what we can do. And then--"

Growing impatient and feeling that he had no time to spare Kyle cut her off. "We don't have time. Right now, I need you to postpone all pending appointments and accompany me down to the planet. I want you to bring whatever or whomever you need to bring this patient to a state of sanity. I need to ask him some questions and time may be of the essence."

Arcadia busily took notes then looked back to the comlink. "I'll be ready in sixty minutes, Captain."

"Meet me on the hangar deck. I'll have Ms Marlowe send you the details. Argent out."

Kyle immediately snapped the comlink off, as he stood up to rush out of his office. "Ms Marlowe..." he began, "I want a shuttle and pilot ready in sixty minutes and send that information to the CMO. Is the Lieutenant in his office?"

"Yes sir, he is," she answered as she busily prepared the request.

"Thank you," Kyle replied as he rushed off to the office of his Chief of Staff.

Jefferson obviously wasn't expecting any visitors because the invasion of his office by his superior took him very much by surprise. "Captain? What can I--"

"Lieutenant!" The Station Commander cut him off before he could ask the question that Kyle was about to answer. "Contact Galenan State Security and tell

them that we want access to the Treatment Center. We'll fly there directly and arrive within the hour and I want you with me."

"Yes, Captain." Jefferson replied as he keyed in the request. "You realize that the Galenan State Security won't be pleased by this request."

The Station Commander folded his arms. "Fuck 'em. They will just have to live with it."

Jefferson looked up at his superior and finally asked *the* question. "May I ask why?"

"We need to talk to that patient I told you about. Based on what you just told me and my conversation with Arcadia -- I just spoke to her and she told me *exactly* what he said -- *we* need to talk to him and as quickly as possible."

Jefferson frowned as he finished keying up the request. "From what you told me she said he was in no condition to talk to us."

"Doctor Argent is accompanying us and I have great hopes that she'll be able to administer drugs that will open up a window of sanity."

"That's a pretty tall order, Captain," Jefferson ventured as he shut off the comlink having finished putting in the formal request.

"I have faith in the fact," Kyle started as they both left Jefferson's office for the hangar deck, "that she'll be able to pull off the necessary miracle."

* * *

***PLANET GALENA, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
HAVRAM BEY TREATMENT CENTER, SOUTHERN CONTINENT***

"Doctor Argent! How good to see you again!" Doctor Lad'ren brightly greeted his fellow colleague, though for him, it was the middle of the night.

"Good to see you again as well," Arcadia warmly returned the welcome as she shook his hand. "Doctor Lad'ren, may I introduce to you the Station Commander of *Space Station Nexus*, Captain Kyle Argent and his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Jefferson El Jafeer."

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen," Lad'ren happily greeted the *Nexus* officers, heartily shaking their hands. He pointedly ignored the members of the Galenan State Security who had met the landing party at the entrance of the Treatment Center and who would probably stick to them like glue during their visit.

"This way, gentlemen and Doctor Argent." Doctor Lad'ren pointed towards a door and the party dutifully followed directions allowing Doctor Lad'ren to drop back and have a private word with Doctor Argent.

"Our preliminary testing showed that the drug you propose to try isn't toxic," he whispered with an anxious edge to his voice.

"Good.... but it still may not do the trick," she replied with some concern.

"It is my understanding that it is imperative that this patient regain some semblance of sanity. It isn't every day that we receive a direct request from the Regent and the presence of Galenan State Security here underscores this request." He paused for a moment and gave her a sly smile, "Especially being woken up in the middle of the night." He looked at her and grinned. "May I ask you a personal question?"

Arcadia turned to him and laughed. "Actually, I think I can answer it before you ask it. Yes, he is my husband."

"Just the curiosity of an old man, Doctor..." he answered with a slight smile. "Here we are," he stated in a loud enough voice so that everyone heard him. They stopped and waited at the entrance for Lad'ren then all walked in together.

Doctor Lad'ren pulled the hypospray from his tunic as he walked into the room. He briefly looked at the vial one last time, then gave it to the duty nurse. "Nurse, please administer 10cc to the patient," he requested.

She dutifully took the hypo from her superior. She adjusted the dose, injected the drug then stood back to monitor his vital signs. Both Arcadia and Lad'ren had their medical tricorders out and were privately monitoring the patient's reaction to the medication.

"Thank you nurse, we'll take over now," Doctor Lad'ren announced.

She took one last look at the monitor before she left the room, closing the door after her.

"Looks like this is doing the trick," he whispered as he consulted the tricorder once again. He looked at the crowd that had formed around the bed. "I believe you can ask your questions now."

One of the Galenan State Security Officers moved forward and Kyle abruptly headed him off.

"I will ask the questions," Kyle stated firmly as he defiantly folded his arms against his chest.

The senior officer of the group started to protest. "Captain Argent, we were--"

"Your orders," Captain Kyle Argent began with an ever so slight hint of danger in his voice, "were to *assist* me."

The senior of the Galenan State Security Officers stood silent as he considered what his next course of action was to be. He looked at Captain Argent defiantly blocking his access to the patient and quickly made his decision. He spun on his heels to join his other officers standing in the back of the room.

Doctor Lad'ren couldn't help but smile as he noted the look of disgust on the faces of the Galenan State Security officers as their leader took his place next to them. Kyle looked to Doctor Lad'ren who smiled benignly at him as he moved out of the way. Kyle sat down in the chair next to the bed then looked to Doctor Lad'ren.

"The patient's name is Rheven Courtage, Captain," Doctor Lad'ren supplied then quickly looked back at his medical tricorder.

Kyle nodded his appreciation before he turned to the patient. "Mister Courtage, can you understand me?" he tentatively began.

The patient opened his eyes and was obviously startled by all the concerned faces hovering over his bed. "Where the hell am I?" he croaked as he looked around the room trying to figure out what was going on.

Doctor Lad'ren gave an audible sigh of relief which was matched by that of Arcadia as they both stood by and watched their medical tricorders for any signs of distress.

"You're in a Galenan Treatment Center. My name is Captain Kyle Argent. I am Commanding Officer of *Space Station Nexus*." Once he finished, Kyle observed Rheven's eyes grow wide with fear.

Rheven didn't answer for quite a while as he looked around the room again, finally noticing the Galenan State Security standing in the back. "I *am* in trouble," he finally concluded.

"That's not for me to say, however, I would appreciate it if you would give me some answers," Kyle replied in a very controlled voice.

He hesitated but then his eyes zeroed in again on the Galenan State Security and stared at them for a long while. "I don't think I have a choice," he finally stated.

Kyle gave him a wry smile before he continued. "While the Chief Medical Officer of *Nexus* was ministering to you the other day, you said a few interesting things to her." The *Nexus* Station Commander briefly paused when he noted the look of confusion on his face that Kyle decided to ignore. "You mentioned it was on the ship that you shouldn't have taken the money and that you did it for the roses."

Rheven simply stared at Kyle as many different thoughts and ideas flashed through his mind almost overwhelming him. This caused his vital signs to wildly fluctuate immediately causing the doctors in the room to become alarmed. The physicians consulted their tricorders, wondering if they should intervene. Suddenly, they heaved a sigh of mutual relief as the patient's vital signs finally stabilized again.

The patient finally regained his composure and decided to ask a question of his own. "How long have I been here?"

"A long time," Doctor Lad'ren replied, still keeping his eye on his medical tricorder.

He shook his head. "The last thing I remember is having a bite of chocolate. The next thing I know, I'm looking at you people." Rheven paused to gather his thoughts. "Look, I know what I did was wrong." He shook his head. "It didn't seem all that wrong at the time. At least at first..." he replied as he allowed his eyes to drift off into the distance.

The Station Commander decided to cut to the chase. "You were asked to adjust the weather satellite to mask the ship."

Rheven whipped his head around towards Kyle, realizing that even if he were prone to lying, it wouldn't do him any good. "Yeah," he began, shaking his head. "I figured that no one would notice it. The unit was due for maintenance soon. I figured I could just write it off as a problem with the old unit." He leaned back in his pillow and sighed. "All I wanted to do was just get some extra money so I could get her a bouquet of the Blue Regent Roses for her birthday."

Kyle overheard the State Security Officers snicker. He whipped around and shot them a deadly look whereupon they immediately went back to the business of looking officious.

"Two weeks later, you created another storm to mask the presence of another smuggling ship," Kyle prompted, getting the discussion back on track.

"I was originally told that it would only be once. I obviously couldn't say no so I created another storm. I was alone one evening when Tal barged into the station. He went on and on about the fact that all they were smuggling was chocolate!"

"Chocolate can be dangerous, you realize," Doctor Lad'ren pointed out.

"I know Doctor," Rheven replied to Doctor Lad'ren, then turned his attentions back to Kyle. "He thought they were smuggling Ice because of all the money. He had a sister that got sick on choc once. Tal said that he really wanted nothing further to do with those buzzards. However, he told me that they'd need one more storm. I pointed out that I couldn't produce storms that close together. Tal said not to worry because the next one would be needed in two months. He also gave me some choc... as a reward he said... the last thing I remember..." Rheven's voice trailed off as he closed his eyes. The doctors checked his vitals but seemed unconcerned.

"How long as he been here, Doctor?" Kyle directed his question to Lad'ren as he quickly stood up.

Doctor Lad'ren consulted the chart. "Seven weeks."

"Thank you Doctor." The Station Commander paused as his eyes picked his people out in the room. "Let's go, we have work to do."

Arcadia walked over to Doctor Lad'ren to thank him then rushed off to catch up with her husband and his party who were making a mad dash for the shuttle to take them back to *Nexus*.

* * *

***SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
SENIOR OFFICER'S BRIEFING ROOM***

"...And that's how they got the stuff past our checkpoints." Captain Kyle Argent leaned back in his chair as he had just concluded his part of the morning briefing. He'd spent most of the evening putting his notes together from the visit to the treatment center. He gave his Senior Officers a few moments to digest the information he'd just given them before he added. "From there on out it was pretty easy to just filter the contraband into regular distribution channels and then sit back and watch the show...."

"Isn't this presuming a little much?" Chief Sensor Officer Hank Bacquerel cautiously opined. "A smuggling ship with a cloaking device? That sounds a bit far-fetched if you ask me, Captain."

"It's been known to happen," Captain Terrence Blair interjected. "Kahless only knows there are more than a few Klingons who have fallen on hard times or are being hunted by the Empire who won't hesitate to do a dirty deed or two for the right price."

Ensign Bacquerel frowned as he shook his head. "It still doesn't jell," he replied to the Director of Flight Operations. "Both Klingon and Romulan cloaking devices leave behind rather obvious emissions signatures. You might not be able to track them with a starship sensor array, but with the power, we got behind this station -- piece o'cake. We can ID cloaking signatures from as far back as eighteen months ago." Hank sat back in his chair and sighed. "But there isn't a solitary damn thing out there over the Southern Continent. We've been checking for almost three hours now..."

"Maybe some new bit of Technology?" Terrence suggested. "It wouldn't be the first time the Empire opted to field their latest Toys on Federation Property..."

The Assistant Chief of Operations tried to discreetly roll her eyes at the officer who was very senior to her. "Oh, please..." she muttered under her breath.

Kyle leaned back into his chair while the fracas surrounding him began to pick up steam. Ops and Sciences were obviously not too fond of Terrence's "naturally paranoid" and "cheerfully militaristic" point of view. Terrence in turn told one officer to go rescue a puppy from the biolab and the other that he too, was an officer of the military branch of the Federation and what the *hell* was wrong with that?

This had gone far enough.

"Gentlemen..." Kyle spoke with a tone of voice that made it quite clear to everyone that he expected their bickering to stop. "Fact: we have testimony that a ship has in fact been making deliveries. Agreed?"

Most of the Senior Staff present nodded their assent, though one opted to mumble that said testimony had been obtained with the aid of drugs.

"Which would still be admissible as evidence into any and every known Federation Court," the Station Commander interjected sharply, effectively killing the chances of this point being discussed within an inch of its life. He stopped for a moment to consider his next point. "We also have a suspected rendezvous for a third delivery within the next few days. I propose that we not only interdict

this drop-off, but we capture the ship outright. I think it would go a long way towards answering any and all questions as to how and with what these operations are being undertaken, no?"

Kyle pointedly stopped and awaited any comments. This time there was no dissent to be heard. He sat back in his chair and smiled. "Very well, then. Options?"

"Since we're assuming that this cloaking Device doesn't conform to the specs of similar devices we have on record," Ensign Hank Bacquerel began, "I think we can just about forget more conventional methods of tracking a cloaked ship. Nevertheless, we'll keep a passive sensor lock on all approach vectors to the Southern Continent."

The Director of Flight Operations nodded at the Sensor Chief. "Can't hurt. We do have a location of where the transaction is supposed to take place," Terrence considered. "If their cloak gets them past our sensors without notice, I sincerely doubt the planetary ones will have any better luck. All this business with the storms makes me think that they are being used to mask a planetary descent of sorts."

Hank agreed. "Good point, Captain Blair. A good size thunderstorm would most likely hide the normal energy signatures associated with a planetfall. Especially if you aren't looking for such signatures, that is."

"And if you are looking for such signatures?" Kyle asked the Sensor Chief.

"We can track them coming and going, not a problem, Captain," Ensign Bacquerel confidently replied.

"I think as a gesture of good faith, we might want to share this information with our 'Friends' over in Galenan State Security," Kyle contemplated aloud. "After all it might be kind of nice for them to apprehend the dirtside members of this little cabal."

Terrence snorted. "It would look good in the local media, I'm sure," he echoed mockingly.

"Wouldn't it just," Kyle all but purred. "In the meantime," he started, becoming all business again, "our job will be to track the craft during its descent phase and either snatch it during its ascent phase or see if it won't lead us to its mothership. Captain Blair," the Station Commander turned to his Director of Flight Ops, "do you think you can have a tactical presentation ready for me today by say, fifteen hundred hours?"

Terrence Blair considered for a moment. "I think that's doable, Captain Argent."

"Very well then. I suggest we re-convene here at eighteen hundred hours to discuss our tactical options. Until then, we need to keep up surveillance -- as discreetly as possible. Any other problems?"

Captain Argent looked about the room waiting for a response. None were voiced.

The Station Commander nodded as he stood up from the briefing table indicating that the meeting was over. "Then let's get to it."

* * *

JHANTACK'S JOINT

Boffin Duchamps Gateway rushed into the restaurant and stopped at the door, allowing his eyes to sweep those assembled as he searched for his quarry. Finally spotting him on the other side of the room, Boffin rushed over. He was already late and he found that he greatly disliked being late for anything, even to attend a luncheon in such an establishment as the one he unfortunately found himself in.

"What can I do for you?" Boffin asked as he cautiously sat down at the table.

Roscoe lazily raised his eyes to view the new arrival. "Nice to see you too," he replied in surly voice.

Boffin allowed a wry smile to cross his lips. "I don't hear from you for two days and then you beg me to meet you in this..." He paused to allow his hand to sweep over the assembled.... Err.... patrons, "place of all things."

Roscoe looked astonished. "What? You don't like gagh in sweet and sour sauce? I thought their special was particularly reasonable..."

"Gareth," Boffin began quietly, "you do know you are a man of means now. That means you can actually afford real food, never mind Klingon quickies of all things."

"Hey! If I knew they had a Fight-n-Go here, I would have visited it a long time ago. I *love* this stuff."

Boffin turned up his nose as Roscoe shoveled a mass of his squirming lunch into his mouth. "Well.... to each their own," Boffin finally replied in an attempt to keep 'lunch' off his mind. "So why is it that I am down here exactly."

Roscoe motioned to Boffin to hold up while he finished the mouthful of food. He swallowed then washed it down with a quick gulp. "I need money."

"I thought you took out some two thousand creds before we left," Boffin pointed out.

"Yeah, and?"

"I see..." Boffin replied. "Naturally you do have more than enough coming to you but to be honest..."

"Yes?"

"Seems to me you haven't been doing all that much in the way of earning your keep lately," Boffin pointed out as he took a swig of wine himself, mostly in a feeble attempt to keep away the hunger pangs.

"Awww.... Give it a rest," Roscoe started with a tinge of sarcasm to his voice. "You're here on the Station of Kyle Argent and everybody knows you used to be his Old Lady's yeoman. They as much tweak your hair, they'll be facing some really brutal Wrath of God stuff."

Boffin sat back in his chair and sighed. "I'm ever so glad you feel that way but it isn't exactly what I call reassuring."

Roscoe considered a moment as he wiped off the sweet and sour sauce that had dribbled down his chin. "Oh, trust me, you can take it as the gospel's own truth. I've had more than my share of contact with the kind of people that usually would be most threatening to you and they're scared witless of the prospect of rousting you. In fact, that Andorian merchant on Level Five has a bit of a backdoors casino going. I'm willing to bet you could run up a few creds if you'd like...."

"Excuse me," Boffin disgustedly interjected, "but when's the last time you've known me to go shake down some mom and pop, nickel bag stuff? Hell, the last time I placed a bet under ten thousand, you were still drinking champagne out of Ayes--"

"That'll be enough of that!" Roscoe angrily interrupted then forced himself to get back to the matter at hand. "Can I have it or what?"

Boffin shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "Aye." Boffin reached into his case and pulled out a chit. "Here you be."

Roscoe took the five thousand-credit chit and thanked him with a mock flourish. After waiting a beat, he added a sardonic, "Thank you *ever* so much."

"Gareth, a word to the wise. If you flush that chit through your kidneys like you did with the other one, then I would strongly suggest you look for other means of employment. I need a bodyguard, not some sot working on his PhD in boozeology."

"Aww... I didn't know you cared," Roscoe began in a mocking tone. "Thank you once again, *Dad*, but if it's all the same I'll take care of my own business myself!" And with that, he summoned the waiter and ordered a case of blood wine to be delivered to his table pronto.

All Boffin could do was watch as the waiter brought over the requested wine. He finally just stood up and left the table leaving Roscoe to enjoy his newly acquired bounty.

* * *

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR, FLIGHT OPERATIONS

The Station Commander turned off the datapadd and looked to his Director of Flight Operations after reviewing the material he had requested at the morning briefing.

"Option A is kind of risky if you ask me. Lying deadstick in the middle of a massive storm-front for a few hours isn't the kind of mission even *I* would care to fly."

"Can't disagree with you there. If lightning hits you or any number of other things that could go wrong -- well, you gotta just hope it doesn't," Terrence agreed somberly.

The Station Commander allowed a wry smile to cross his lips. "Option B could get us into serious trouble with the Empire, you realize."

The Director of Flight Operations held up his hand. "Not necessarily so..." Terrence began. "The fact that there are always a few renegades around might just work both ways here. All we would need to do is make a few discreet arrangements. Far better than to wait for diplomatic approval from on high if you ask me and you did ask me, after all."

Kyle couldn't help but chuckle. To hell with the Bureaucrats and Politicians! This was how *real* warriors went to battle -- with every dirty trick in the book.

"Very well," the Station Commander nodded, "I'll work on some of those discreet arrangements. Have the plan ready for presentation at the briefing at eighteen hundred hours tonight."

"I figured you might see it this way and took the liberty to draw up the necessary battleplans," the Director of Flight Operations stated casually while handing him a pair of iso-chips. "Might I add that Dock 462 is currently occupied by a craft that would be most suitable for this endeavor?"

"I'll keep that in mind," Kyle smiled, "anything else?"

"Well..." Terrence began as he slouched back in his chair, the hard part of the briefing apparently over with, "you won't believe what just crossed my 'link before you arrived," he causally tossed out.

"Oh?" Kyle benignly replied as he sipped his iced tea.

"Ayesha Deveraux just put in for a transfer."

"Is that a fact?" Kyle calmly replied. "Well... she was a capable pilot on the *Stellar Wind*. I suppose we could do worse. Might not hurt to have another veteran pilot around..." he opined aloud.

Terrence bolted straight up in his chair. "*Are you fucking kidding me?*" he bellowed. "Have you seen her career jacket recently? One reprimand for insolence and insubordination after another. I mean, good old Will Emmerich gave her a write up that made you think that she's the anti-deity. You don't honestly think I'm going to have a head case like that running around *my* Flight."

"Oh, you know Will," Kyle quietly tossed back. "Always exaggerating and always going off on something or the other. I'm sure it's not as bad as it sounds."

"Will Emmerich is a dear, sweet old man! Will was the man who took on a litter of stray puppies during a colony evac because he felt sorry for them, Kyle," Terrence defiantly informed him.

Kyle cocked a wicked eyebrow in Terrence's direction. "He also is responsible for every other dick joke along the Klingon frontier," he retorted.

"That's not the Will Emmerich I knew from my stint at Fighter HQ! I trust his judgement. If he thinks she's ready for the rubber wing squadron, then by all means, she's more than welcome to it."

"Maybe a change of scenery might be all that she needs. Be somewhere amongst friends. You know, stuff like that," Kyle further opined aloud.

Terrence eyed Kyle very suspiciously. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Kyle casually leaned back in his chair as he toyed with his ice tea glass. "Let's just say someone took a chance on a desk jockey feeling the need to do field work one more time -- as a gesture for a friend. Isn't it nice when you can do something for your friends?"

Terrence winced. "If you keep this stuff up, we'll make a politician out of you yet..."

Kyle narrowed his eyes in Terrence's direction. "Been hanging around my wife again?"

"Only when she feels the need for a real man, that's all," Terrence glibly retorted.

"Pity..." Kyle quietly considered. "She mentioned that you and Ike Ivanan would make a cute couple and was thinking of setting you two up, but I guess he's a bit too much man for you, ain't he?" Kyle ended his rejoinder with a benign smile in Terrence's direction.

Terrence there and then decided to take the offensive. "Haven't kept up with station gossip have you?"

Kyle rolled back his eyes and sighed. "As soon as I found out that there was a daily betting pool going around concerning the color of my yeoman's panties, I opted to stay as far away from station gossip as possible."

"Wuss," Terrence responded but then took a more serious tone. "So I take it you'll want me to approve the transfer request?" Terrence cautiously queried.

"I'm not the DFO," the Station Commander pointed out.

"But if you were," the Director of Flight Operations sighed, "you would do what?"

"You just never can have enough veteran pilots around, don't you agree, Captain Blair?"

"Oh, indeed, Captain Argent," Terrence reluctantly agreed as he keyed the acceptance of the transfer request.

* * *

OBSIDIAN SYSTEM, IKV DAUNTLESS

IKV Dauntless Ship Commander Khodos G'ompoc was naturally suspicious of any and all Federation scum -- which, in his mind, was altogether right and proper for any True Son of Kahless. However, when the gaunt human had come to him 4 days previous with promises of not just hard currency -- Latinum no less, not the usual worthless Federation Credit Chits -- but also perhaps a few trading privileges in the sector, he knew it was an offer he just couldn't refuse. His last few "business" trips had been marginal at best and this would give him a half-year worth of profits for just one day's worth of time. He wasn't even needed for the return trip. Just drop off the cargo and scam.

But the cargo... For the umpteenth time Khodos looked above and asked Kahless to forgive him for letting Starfleet (*Kahless forgive me*) Officers board his ship.

"You sure this cloaking device of yours is working?" Captain Terrence Blair politely asked as he stood near Khodos on the bridge of the *IKV Dauntless*.

Khodos looked at the Starfleet (*May Kahless forgive me*) Officer and pondered the feasibility of setting up something simple -- like a transporter accident, perhaps -- to rid himself of this loathsome Blair. But alas, transporter accidents are few and far between these days. He finally concluded that it just wouldn't work. What a pity; it would have been a nice and painful way for the insolent Starfleet (*May Kahless forgive me -- please!*) Officer to go... However, for the sake of his pocketbook, he opted to remain as civil as the circumstances required.

"It is working just as nominally as it did five minutes ago and ten minutes before then," he finally replied, giving his voice the necessary edge he felt necessary to communicate that the next such question could very well be the last thing Blair would ever utter... period.

Terrence Blair carefully observed the look on the Klingon officer's face and wisely opted to just nod silently. Terrence turned his attentions to the personnel from *Nexus* who were manning some of the sensor equipment on board the *Dauntless*.

"Sir," the Sensor Officer broke the silence, "sensors show that the climate control system on the Southern Continent has just had a massive breakdown. There is a storm front building off of Havram Bey."

Blair felt himself grow slightly pale with the advent of that news -- whatever was about to take place was finally underway.

Khodos snorted derisively as Blair quietly ordered his Federation personnel to battlestations. With cowards such as this -- who actually paled in view of glorious combat for one's Empire! -- in command, it seemed like a cruel joke that the Empire hadn't swallowed the Federation whole. Perhaps Kahless wasn't listening to his prayers after all...

* * *

***SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
TACTICAL BRIDGE, COMMAND AND CONTROL CENTER***

"We're tracking them five by five, Control."

"Roger that," the Tactical Bridge's Control Officer responded to the pilot who was currently part of a mobile team assembled near Galena.

"So far, so good," the Executive Officer remarked to the Station Commander who was standing silently next to her.

"Too smooth if you ask me," the Station Commander finally responded.

Too damned smooth by far Captain Kyle Argent silently concluded. They had tracked this vessel almost from the moment it began its approach path to the Southern Continent nearly an hour before it ever made planet fall. Regardless of what the sensor officer had might have considered, this vessel was very much of Klingon design as well as its cloaking device. They had been able to track this smuggler in, down and back up with almost no effort at all. Sensor had even remarked that the cloaking device sure was in serious need of a tune up. This was not at all the picture painted during the earlier intel briefings. This was far from any sort of new technology and therefore, just didn't make much sense to him. Things were going far too easily.

"All right, it's cleared the stratosphere," Terrence Blair reported over the comlink from the bridge of the *IKV Dauntless* to the Command and Control Center. "Time to go!" he ordered.

And with that their trap was sprung. The Klingon K'T'inga class ship, the *IKV Dauntless* dropped out of cloak and began deploying the four fighter craft and one boarding shuttle that had been berthed in its cargo holds. So far, their plan had worked exceedingly well. They had trapped the smuggler and were about to take home the prize and yet...

"Unidentified vessel," Captain Terrence Blair began in a calm and cool voice from the bridge of the *IKV Dauntless*, "you are here by ordered to stand down

your defenses and shields and prepare for boarding. Be advised we have you on our station sensors and you will not be permitted to leave this sector, cloak or no cloak."

Predictably, the smuggler tried to call their "bluff" and began to rabbit. However, a quick salvo decisively impacting its engineering deck changed that tune almost immediately.

"Federation patrol, we're standing down and preparing for boarding," a gravelly voice rasped.

"Acknowledged," Blair replied. The Command and Control center personnel could hear the audible switch that indicated that Blair had switched channels to that of the mobile field units. "Harbinger Five get going. You know the drill."

"Roger that! On our way," the boarding shuttle CO replied over the link.

Those assembled in the Command and Control Center silently watched the scene unfold on the forward screen as the boarding shuttle approached the cloaked vessel.

"Hard seal in fifteen seconds," the CO announced over the link. "Prepare to board hostile craft."

"Whoa sir!" the shuttle XO excitedly interrupted. "We're getting some damned strange readings from that bogey over there. Damn, those readings are off the scale!"

The Station Commander leaned over to the comm officer. "Display those readings."

"Aye, sir!"

It only took one second for almost everyone to grasp what those readings meant. But before anyone could recover from the shock, Kyle had already reached over and commandeered a link to the shuttle. "Harbinger, this is Home Base. *Abort!* Clear out of there now!"

Captain Argent noted with some satisfaction that his order was followed by almost instantaneous execution as he watched the shuttle speed away from the smuggler's ship that promptly began to spout ribbons of fire from various sections on its engineering deck until it finally exploded in a massive fireball.

"*What the fa--?*" Terrence bellowed over the link from the *IKV Dauntless*.

"*Shit!*" Sasha Romanova exclaimed in the C&C as she shook her head in wonder.

The only one that displayed no emotion was the Station Commander who had simply crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. "This was just too damned easy, far too easy," he muttered.

"I supposed you win some and you lose some," Sasha sighed. She turned to look at her boss, "I think we just lost one."

"Maybe not quite, Commander Romanova," Kyle responded before he opened the link again. "Ground Zero, this is Home Base. Did you get your catch?"

"Home Base, this is Ground Zero. We sure did. Galenan State Security thanks you for your cooperation. We've been monitoring the events space side and will make sure that our suspects will be questioned most rigorously on the subject. We will, of course, give you full cooperation with any and all of interrogation data."

"It's appreciated." Kyle responded.

"If that's all, this is Ground Zero signing off."

* * *

***ALIEN CAP SHIP
SOMEWHERE IN NEXUS SPACE***

"I suppose that went as expected?"

"Indeed it did. I think we've got conclusive proof now that our stealth skins are able to fool their sensors. They were able to track that cloaked Klingon without much effort and yet we remain undetected and within visual range of even their fighters."

Madrek turned to his "superior" and nodded his agreement. "I think this bodes well for our future operations."

"Doesn't it though? And we were even able to sow some discord in amongst your Galenan friends. I'd say all in all, this mission was most successful. But now it is time for us to depart, don't you think?"

Madrek could never quite figure out the emotional nuances that his superior seemed to revel in but then, figuring out just about anything about 'them' was daunting to say the least. Galenan friends? Hardly. Even though they most likely would never know it, this day would be forever marked as the day in which the

opening salvo of the final battle was fired. But for now, there were other matters that need attending to.

"Helm, bring us about. We're going back to base," Madrek finally ordered.

* * *

***SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
CATSEYE BAR***

"Man, was that a clusterfuck or what?" an extremely drunken voice barked to his compatriots as they all sat precariously perched on their barstools.

"Would you self-appointed 'experts' just shut the fuck up... You've been here pissing and moaning about yesterday's god damned mission for the last god knows how many hours. It's getting to the point where I can't even get drunk without some asshole being loud about it. Isn't that right, Belle?" Roscoe slurred to his companion.

"Are you paying for the drinks?" she mumbled back.

"Don't I always?" he replied as he knocked back another one. "Barkeep! Another bottle or two for me and my... err... lady friend here."

"There's no end to what a big spender like you can do with me. If you know what I mean." She suggestively squeezed her less than ample bosom together.

Roscoe peered down at her cleavage and shook his head. "Just keep them in, honey. I've seen better."

Not realizing she'd been insulted, she just smiled drunkenly at her new companion for the day. Roscoe on the other hand was beginning to contemplate the fact that he'd gone without for quite a while now and while Belle wasn't the pick of the litter, any port in the storm would have to do.

"C'mon over here babe and give me some lovin..." Roscoe commanded to his inebriated companion.

Belle lurched forward but before she could get anywhere near her drunken benefactor, she found herself being hurled from the bar clear across the two booths and crashing with a loud thud onto a table that had been waiting to be cleared for hours. Before she passed out in a blissfully drunken haze, she could make out the agitated features of something that looked like a big dark bird of prey. She thought she heard a growl and something like 'don't dress with my fan' then Belle happily gave herself over to oblivion.

Roscoe, ever quick on the uptake finally realized that his would be bedtime companion had just been express shipped into what seemed to be a destination far, far away.

"Wa' the fugg? You cr'zy or sum'ting..." he slurred to the back of the interloper.

The stranger slowly turned around and to his total horror, Roscoe recognized the face of the assailant.

"Ayesha? What are you doing here?" he asked as he suddenly sobered up as only Roscoe could.

"The better question would be, just what in the hell are *you* doing here?" she asked with her hands perched on her hips.

"Err.... I asked first?" he ventured.

"And I can also give you a hand so you can join your little bar-floozy over there. What is your point?" she retorted.

"Nice to see you?" he tentatively asked.

"Better. And?"

"I've missed you?"

"Good. And?"

"My-life's-been-miserable-without-you-and-I've-missed-you-terribly-and-I-wish-you'd-never-gone-away-and..." he looked up at her hoping he'd said the right things.

"Enough already! Nothing is sadder than a grown man groveling," Ayesha finally told him.

"So you'll take me back?" Roscoe tentatively raised his arms to hug her.

"Not like this, I will not," she replied as she pushed him away. "You reek. And I will not even discuss that disgusting smell of liquor on your breath."

"But.... But... but...!" Roscoe stammered.

Ayesha's reply was to grab him by the scruff of the neck and drag him out of the bar. "Well, let us go! You need to be cleaned up before we can make any further..." She looked down and smiled, "...progress."

The sight of Roscoe being dragged out of the bar was met by the sudden cheering and whistling of the patrons but just as abruptly, they went back to the business of drinking and bitching.

"Well, y'know, she was right. He was kinda smellin' funky come to think of it. But an'way, as I was sayin'," the barfly continued to no one in particular, "that god damned raid yesterday sure was one big clusterfuck..."

* * *

***PLANET GALENA, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM
NERSON PALACE***

This was the second time that Kyle unexpectedly found himself in the Regent's Rose Garden. He almost didn't mind the lengthy commute it took to get him and fro -- but only almost.

"Ah.... Captain Argent. I'm so glad you were able to grace me with your presence yet again," his imperial majesty, Regent Hakon III warmly greeted his visitor.

"According to my staff, refusing an audience with the Regent is more or less not permissible regardless of what sort of advanced hour it might be," Kyle replied with a just a hint of sarcasm.

"Oh, come now, Captain," the Regent genially began. "Getting up at four in the morning certainly must have been an improvement over when we last met."

The Station Commander briefly considered the fact that it most certainly was but he was determined not to let it show and simply opted to snort in derision.

"I suppose it's not hard to figure out why I've asked you to come here today," the Regent asked as he pointedly walked towards the table at the far end of the garden.

"A somewhat personal debriefing on the matter at hand?" Kyle ventured as he followed his host.

"More or less," began the Regent as he sat down. "However, first things first. How are your people -- any casualties?"

"Nothing major," Kyle began as he too sat down. "The shock wave bounced the shuttle around pretty darn good and we had quiet a few broken bones and lacerations on our hands but nothing we couldn't take care of. The shuttle itself is more than likely destined for the junk pile though."

"Well... that's good," the Regent responded as he absently stirred his hot tea. "Shuttles can be replaced, people, on the other hand..."

Kyle took a long sip of ice tea, once again prepared just like the way he liked it, then nodded. "Agreed."

The Regent leaned back in his chair. "So, what did you think of the whole tactical situation?"

The Station Commander looked at the Regent with a look of surprise on his face. "Honestly?"

The Regent smiled as he nodded. "But of course."

Kyle leaned back while he took another swig of tea. He put the glass down with an audible thunk then looked directly at the Regent. "Frankly, it stunk. There is something that was altogether not right about all this if you ask me."

"Such as?"

Captain Argent crossed his arms and frowned. "According to our sensor people, there were no discernable cloaking signatures resulting from the prior incursions. However, this one came rolling in with a signature so loud anyone could have tracked it without breaking a sweat. If you were to ask me about *my* tactical opinion of a situation like that -- and by golly, you are! -- then I'd have to say that this was nothing more than a put on."

"Go on," the Regent prompted as he sat back to sip his tea.

"It just fits," Kyle relaxed a bit before he continued. "Why else have an almost two month delay between shipments? They knew that they were going to be found out and just wanted to offer a ruse of some sort just to toss us off track."

The Regent considered what the Station Commander just told him as he sipped his tea. "So you think this matter is now resolved?"

"The chocolate business? Sure.... I think we've seen the last of that nonsense for a while. In fact if you ask me, given the nature of these missions and their lack of regularity, I'd have to conclude that the chocolate was in fact not the objective at all but something else was. We're just meant to see it as such."

The Regent idly rubbed his chin before he continued. "How so?"

Kyle shrugged. "Any terrorist worth his salt interested in making such a scheme work would be very diligent about keeping the supply of tainted product up for as long as possible. Instead, we get two covert shipments and one thoroughly half-assed attempt at a third. That to me is more indicative of a test protocol than a large-scale attempt at poisoning a planet." Kyle paused and looked to the Regent. "But your mileage may differ."

The Regent sat back in his chair, totally lost in thought. "No..." he started as he shook his head sadly. "I have to say that we're very much on the same frequency here. Your conclusions for the most part echo the findings that my State Security submitted to me earlier today. I think the most telling morsel contained within their report was the insistence by the perpetrators that the craft that landed yesterday was in fact much larger than either of the previous vessels."

Kyle nodded. "That makes sense. So that leaves us with a few answers and a rather sizeable question, doesn't it?"

"Just what was this truly all about?" the Regent offered. "Yes, that question has been on my mind for much of the day. I don't suppose you have any suggestions?"

The Station Commander was unexpectedly taken aback by the question. "Me? None off hand but to be realistic, we know that we are not dealing with some run of the mill nutball outfit here. Even if this was some elaborate test, it's way beyond the scale that even some of the bigger privateering outfits could undertake. That leads me to conclude that whoever did this isn't done yet." Kyle paused, then added solemnly, "They will be back."

The Regent sadly agreed. "Indeed they will, Captain. So what do you propose we should do in the meantime?"

"Eternal vigilance, I suppose."

"Ah... yes, the price of freedom," the Regent murmured. "Very well then, I must say I've found our conversations most enlightening. You may not think of yourself as one who is adept in playing the great game that is politics but truly, your actions underscore that you are indeed a player of some caliber. Why, most any soldier I know would have opted for some foolish display of uncommon valor by hiding a few powered-down crafts in the heart of the storm and waited until the culprits were upon them. Instead, you opted for a plan that

displayed some cunning, akin to the finest tradition of Galenan court skullduggery. You really should be proud of your accomplishment."

Kyle winced in response. Had he truly learned so little from the despicable lot most politicians were? Was he truly one of *those* he once so despised?

The Regent chuckled at Kyle's obvious discomfort. "Perhaps the knowledge of your political savvy does not sit well with you?"

"*It does not!*" he spat out.

"Very well then, perhaps I can give you a little bit of advice. Think of it as from an old politician to a new one. It's perfectly reasonable to despise politicians as a whole for they are a despicable lot. But in order to formulate an opinion about how truly bad politicians can be doesn't it stand to reason that the same person ought to be capable of formulating an opinion on how truly good a politician can be? If you know the negative, perhaps *you* can become the positive."

Kyle sat back and mulled over what had just been imparted to him. It still did not sit well with him but after a brief reflection that might just be a good thing.

"In any case," the Regent continued breaking into Kyle's thoughts, "permit me to give you one more small token of our appreciation. Consider it a thank you for all the time you've spent on our behalf."

The Regent suddenly issued a slight nod and his officious majordomo suddenly appeared carrying a large bouquet of light blue roses. He handed them over to the Regent for inspection.

"I think your wife will find them a most acceptable anniversary present," the Regent told Kyle as he handed over the flowers. "My people prize them greatly as sign of love and appreciation."

Once again, Kyle's expression betrayed the obvious fact that he had all but spaced off his first wedding anniversary and at the same time, he began to get the sinking feeling that there was just about nothing that the Regent didn't seem to know.

"I suppose you know my shoe size as well?" he finally blurted out.

"Federation standard sixteen wide but a simple thank you would suffice, Captain," the Regent replied with a mischievous glint in his eye that matched the smile on his face.

Finally regaining his wits, Kyle managed to retort. "But knowing what you do know isn't it a foregone conclusion that you know you have my sincerest gratitude for the flowers?"

"Touché!" the Regent replied with a flourish. "But be that as it may, my time is somewhat at a premium. I've yet another one of those dreadful state dinners to prepare for. It's time for me to say goodbye, however, rest assured; we will meet up again in the near future. Perhaps you would bring your wife along. I'd very much like to meet her. I hear she's a fellow rose gardener, after all."

"I do believe she would like that very much," Kyle thoughtfully replied, then he lifted his eyes towards the Regent and smirked. "And have fun pressing the flesh tonight."

"I somehow think your evening will be far more entertaining than mine," the Regent replied gravely.

"Oh... I've been to a few state functions, I *know* my evening will be more entertaining than yours." Kyle capped his comment with a wicked smile.

The Regent grinned before both men fell into an easy laugh that was ended when the Regent stood, warmly shook Kyle's hand and went off into the Palace leaving Kyle to be escorted to his shuttle.

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SPACE STATION NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM SENIOR FLIGHT OFFICER'S QUARTERS

As buoyant as Boffin felt, he decided to quietly consider all that had gone on since he first came to *Nexus Station* -- mostly as an effort to calm himself down. While he greatly enjoyed catching up on old times with old friends -- as well as be of service to the Station Commander over a sticky problem -- he really disliked the idea of having to make good on all the problems that Roscoe had caused during his many benders. As Boffin made his way from one merchant to the other in an attempt to placate hurt feelings as well settle Roscoe's damages, he found that his initial impression of *Nexus Station* was correct. This was a lovely place and one that he thought he could make a parcel on.

As big as the station was, he found it lacked in one area: a really classy eatery. Boffin had been contemplating giving up the gambling as a full time endeavor and moving on to other enterprises. He toyed around with the idea of opening a bar, which is how he ended up as a gambler because he needed the money to purchase his friend Mho's Bar. As it turned out, he discovered that he had a real flair for gambling and the rest, as they say, was history.

But now, Boffin had had his fill of gambling and his initial idea of opening a bar seemed like a good idea. However, rather than just a boozery, he'd open a class joint. Once he realized that he had a plan, Boffin was so excited, he started pounding on the door.

"C'mon, Roscoe! I *know* you're in there! Open up, already!" he bellowed as he furiously hammered the door to Roscoe's quarters.

Suddenly, the door slowly slid open and a specter of a man appeared.

"*Cor Blimey!* I've never seen booze do that to you before," Boffin cried out in his thick cockney accent, only to be consciously replaced by the fine uppercrust one he'd carefully cultivated. "What ever you are drinking, old son, you need to give it up now."

Roscoe motioned to Boffin to keep still while he attempted to open his eyes.

"Lock your jaw, Bof, she's sleeping right now. And I want to keep it that way, for at least a while longer. And anyway, it's been nearly two days since I've had any hooch, thank you very much."

"Egads, lad. You haven't moved on to ice or something like that...." Boffin allowed his voice to trail off as he attempted to discern just what put Roscoe into such a state.

"Hell no! I'm not that far-gone yet. So, where's the fire and what's this announcement you're yapping about? And by the way, I got some pretty shocking news for you too."

"Well.... I've spent the last few days looking over this place and I've decided to open a business here. It'll be big, really big! And you'll be my.... Partner."

Before Roscoe could reply, an ebony calf, decidedly female flexed above the couch in full view of Boffin but obscured from Roscoe's view.

"Oh, Roscoe... Where are you?" a husky voice wafted towards the door.

"Oh, shit. Here we go again," Roscoe mumbled as he brusquely shoved Boffin out the door. "Look, Bof, she goes on duty tomorrow, so we'll have time to talk then but right now, I'm busy. OK?"

"But what was it you wanted to tell me?" Boffin asked.

"Never mind! Looks like we're both here for the long haul." And with that, the door emphatically shut and soon muffled noises were coming from behind them that made even the worldly Boffin blush.

* * *

NEXUS COMMAND & CONTROL CENTER

Now that he had a plan -- and some unexpected time on his hands due to Roscoe being.... err... busy -- Boffin Duchamps Gateway was a man who was used to dealing with movers and shakers of the universe. He decided that Starfleet would be no different than his usual business dealings, so, as usual he would start at the top. When he arrived unannounced at the C&C around lunchtime, the yeoman informed the Station Commander of his presence and instead of either being told to buzz off or be escorted in, Captain Argent came out of his office.

"Busy?" he asked Boffin.

"Actually, I wanted to chat to you, Captain," Boffin replied in an even voice.

"Then come and take a stroll with me, Mister Gateway."

They walked to their destination in silence until Station Commander Kyle Argent motioned to Boffin to stand beside him on a rather exclusive perch above the station's main hangar bay. They stayed quiet for what seemed to be an eternity to Boffin.

"Do you spend a lot of time here, Captain?" Boffin finally asked as he too watched another fighter take off.

"Not often enough," Kyle replied wistfully then winced as he watched a pilot make an obviously rookie mistake.

The former yeoman to the Commanding Officer of the *USS Stellar Wind* carefully eyed the former *Wind's* Wing Commander. "Miss being down there, don't you?"

"You better believe it...." he replied but quickly became all business though he stifled a yawn as he *had* gotten up very early this morning. "So what can I do for you, Mister Gateway?"

"I thought you and the Doctor ought to be the first to know..."

"Know what?" Kyle interrupted as he hastily jumped to conclusions. "You're getting married? Why you sly dog you...."

"*Cor Blimey no!*" Boffin replied a bit too emphatically wiping away all those months of elocution lessons. "I'm just planning to open a restaurant. Well... not really just a restaurant, more like a club like we have back home or one of those fancier digs back on Rigel II."

Kyle had been smiling but suddenly became more solemn. "Why?"

Boffin was momentarily taken aback by the question. Rather than immediately answering him, he strolled away from Kyle to lean over the railing and pretend to watch the fighters taking off before he answered.

"Captain," Boffin began slowly, still not looking directly at Kyle, "I don't know how much Mam'selle has told you about me." Boffin quietly waited for an indication from Kyle.

"She's told me some things but obviously not everything," Kyle replied as he too fixed his attention back on the fighters.

"The long and short of it is that Mam'selle was the first person that ever treated me with any kind of dignity."

Kyle snorted prompting a laugh from Boffin. "It's true, Guv'nor. As an orphan, I always found myself on the run, mostly from the authorities. Yet when I.... err... managed to find myself in Starfleet, she didn't care what I had done or who I was running from, all she cared about is whether or not I could do the job." Boffin paused and looked at Kyle who in turn, looked to Boffin. "She had faith in me and I've never forgotten it."

"What does that have to do with now?" Kyle asked.

"Once I managed to accumulate my fortune, I realized that something was missing. All the money in the world couldn't purchase what I had back on the old *Wind*: a feeling of belonging... of family. It really felt good to help you and then I realized while walking around the station that you and Mam'selle were the only family I really had and quite honestly...." Boffin looked away and murmured quietly, "I *miss* having a family."

Kyle remained silent for a while as he quietly studied Boffin. "I understand." He thought for a moment longer before he changed the course of the conversation back to the matter at hand. "Well... we certainly could use a nice classy joint around here but I really think we've got more than enough good eateries."

"I'm ahead of you, sir. Actually, I was thinking of using the theme of some of those swanky American clubs from the Nineteen Forties. Y'know, with fine dining, dancing and live entertainment -- a supper club."

Kyle smiled. "As long as you stay away from staging performances of *My Best Friend*, *the Klingon* or *Death of a Merchant Marine* and keep it relatively affordable, I think you'll do fine. Truth to be told, I had been kind of wanting a more intimate place where I could grab a bite to eat with Arcadia without every Tom, Dick or Bhotock trying to congratulate or berate me over something or the other. Think you can get me a private booth in your joint?"

"I believe I can do one better, Captain. I assume you've been to Club Ninety-Seven?" When Kyle nodded his assent, Boffin continued, "How about a hideaway perched over the main ballroom floor? You can have the illusion of eating out without the bother."

"Sounds good to me..." Kyle murmured but suddenly looked at Boffin. "So what's the catch?"

"Well... there is the matter of getting the permits from the construction authority as well as securing the relevant facilities. I thought maybe..." Boffin purposely allowed his voice to trail off.

Kyle picked up his thought. "...I could give you a hand. Sit on the authorities, circumvent the system and influence officials for my own gain?"

"Well... yes," Boffin stammered.

"In other words, since you scratched my back," Kyle began somewhat pensively while tiredly rubbing his temples as if in pain, "I ought to rub your back a bit, no?"

"Something like that, guv," Boffin replied jovially.

"Send me the specs and the property you want and I'll make sure you get it. And we're even on the count of your assistance in procuring the.... Err... transportation. Agreed?"

"My pleasure, Guv'nor." Boffin paused then tossed off a wicked grin and a twinkle in his eye. "Now just 'oo says that politics is difficult, eh wot?" he purposely used his cockney accent to emphasize his point.

Kyle eyed him suspiciously. "Have you been talking to my wife again? Never mind, I--"

"Captain Argent?" a decidedly female voice interrupted him.

Kyle was now convinced there was no safe place for him anywhere on this damned station. He slowly turned around to see a familiar face prompting an uncharacteristic smile on his own.

"Hello, Ayesha. I heard you'd just arrived. Like your new station?"

"Oh, very much so, Captain. You might say, it got my juices flowing again," she told him with a very wicked smile.

Boffin's response was to snort though he did consider the fact that the last time he saw... err... heard Ayesha, she was busy and he wondered how the hell she... err... finished and got here so quickly, properly dressed and all. Perhaps exhaustion had finally taken its toll on poor Roscoe. Boffin decided to tease him about being out of shape the next time they met up -- besides, who'd want an out of shape bodyguard, anyway?

"I see," Kyle finally responded after several seconds of uncomfortable silence -- mostly his. "Was there anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, there is, Captain."

"Go ahead, then," he prompted.

"Begging the Captain's pardon, but would the Captain's wife be very upset if this Commander were to kiss her Station Commander?"

"I... don't... know..." he finally stammered, clearly dumfounded.

"Well... she can take it up with me later if need be." And with that, Ayesha swiftly and decisively planted a kiss on Kyle's cheek.

Boffin who had wisely remained silent carefully noticed how red the Station Commander had suddenly become. In all the years he'd known him, Boffin had *never* seen his face this color before.

Kyle nervously straightened his uniform in an attempt to buy him time to regain his composure. "Commander, if I may be so bold, but what was that for?"

As Ayesha had already started to turn to leave, she stopped and turned back towards him with a broad smile on her face. "Let's just say it was for *your* extraordinary writing talents."

"Oh...?" was all that Kyle could muster as a response.

"This is good to know," Boffin opined aloud still smiling at Kyle's discomfort.

"What is?" Kyle replied as he watched Ayesha leave.

"From here on out, you're going to write all my love letters."

"Think I have a future?" Kyle ventured, still trying to regain his wits.

"I believe so, Captain. Though...." Boffin allowed his voice to trail off.

"Though what?" Kyle prompted.

"I was just wondering," Boffin began as a wicked smile covered his own face, "what the station gossips are going to say about this."

Kyle rolled his eyes. "I don't want to know. Perhaps they'll start another pool."

"Perhaps," Boffin replied making a mental note to check out such a possibility.

* * *

THE COCKPIT LOUNGE

The Director of Flight Operations grimaced as he looked at the pile of datapadds and mentally ticked off all the reports he had to write or review. When he was finished with the inventory, Terrence Blair finally decided that even when the mission wasn't successful, the paperwork multiplied accordingly. And according to that formula, he still had a *lot* to do.

Terrence sighed as he diligently went back to finishing his report -- knowing full well that this was a report he wasn't anxious to file -- until he ultimately decided that he couldn't stare at his terminal any longer. He looked around his office and briefly considered just what he could do this evening....

Surprisingly, he concluded that what he really wanted to have was a drink and he always liked the Cockpit Lounge for drinks.... *Though*, he mused as he stood up from his desk, *going to the 'pit was like going to yet another staff meeting.*

Upon his arrival, he noted that he wasn't the only one who had had the same idea. He grabbed a drink from the bar and allowed his eyes to sweep those assembled. He saw that many of his people were scattered around various tables huddled within their squadrons or wings no doubt intently discussing the mission. Terrence smiled pleased to see that many of the new pilots were blending in quite nicely.

Being the Director had some disadvantages, one of them was that while he was welcome at any table, he felt most comfortable sitting with the more senior officers of the Flight Division. That was mostly because he knew that the junior officers would spend more time impressing him than just enjoying his company.

As expected, the topic of conversation around the small table in the corner was over their "defeat." Terrence was sure that the evening's conversation had probably been more animated before he arrived -- having their "boss" around did tend to have a dampening effect on the most lively of topics but even his presence didn't diminish the careful dissection of what had gone wrong.

Finally, much to his amazement, the post mortem had run its course and the discussion meandered to the more standard one of personal war stories liberally fueled by copious alcohol. He'd just finished up yet another war story when Ike and Lars came strolling in. Terrence watched as they grabbed their drinks, then noted there was room at his table, waived them over.

"Obviously, we aren't the only ones with this idea," Ike ventured as he sat down.

"Nope," Lars began as he downed a beer. "I overheard that this was going to be *the* place tonight which is why we're here, Ike."

"Oh, is *that* the reason, Lars?" Ike asked with a wicked smile.

Terrence eyed the couple and then decided to take a chance when the other senior officers had gotten up to refresh their drinks. "I have a question for you, Ike."

"If it's about the raid, I'm not your boy...." he glibly tossed out between sips of beer.

"Trust me," Terrence began with a sigh, "I came here to get away from the paperwork only to find myself discussing the damned thing within an inch of its life."

Ike snorted as he looked around the room. "What the hell did you expect from a joint that caters to you zoomies, Mister Blair?"

Terrence laughed. "I guess I should have known better, eh, Mister Ivanan?"

Lars observed the pair with their easy banter, casting a sly smile in Ike's direction.

Ike grinned at Lars in return then turned to Terrence. "You started to ask me a question, Terrence. Ask away."

Terrence suddenly became hyper-aware of his surroundings. He carefully looked from side to side ensuring that no one would overhear him. "Do you gamble?"

"Do I what?" Ike cautiously echoed in a whisper.

Terrence grimaced as he shook his head. "Nothing *really* illegal, Ike. Just pool stuff."

"Oh..." Ike replied, visibly relaxed. "Occasionally. Why?"

Terrence nervously darted his eyes around the bar behind him before he continued. "Well... I... err... overheard some of the... err... zoomies discussing a pool concerning Melody's undergarments."

"Her what?" Ike responded with a chuckle tinged with genuine astonishment.

Lars who had carefully listened to the repartee while drinking his beer, brightly interrupted. "Oh, the Pretty Panty Pool," he tossed out. "Very popular, I might add."

"You *know* about it, Lars?" Terrence asked trying not to come across as his Commanding Officer but as someone who was genuinely curious.

"Yes... err... sir. It's probably one of the most popular pools around. I don't bet on it myself," Lars began, casting a sheepish glance in Ike's direction, "but the ComChan chatter surrounding the pool is very entertaining." Lars chuckled. "Personally, I'd like to know whom this 'Gray Eminence' is. He's a steady winner and he likes to rub it in. As you can well imagine, the wankers..." Lars realized his gaff in employing user-speak and quickly attempted to cover up his gaff, "err... the participants don't take too kindly to such."

Terrence simply nodded as he mulled over the possibilities. "I just never knew," he muttered, then smiled. "Perhaps I should check this out myself."

Ike leaned back in his chair and issued a snort. "And if you win, Mister Blair, do let us know 'coz the drinks will be on you."

"If I win, Mister Ivanan I won't mind at all...." Terrence replied wistfully.

* * *

ARGENT QUARTERS

"You can open your eyes up now," Kyle prompted as he led his wife from their bedroom into the sitting room.

Upon her arrival home that evening, Kyle had convinced Arcadia to wait for him in their bedroom until he called for her. As it was, she was so tired, she not only didn't protest, but also fell fast asleep on the bed. It took some effort to roust his wife from her peaceful slumber but he ultimately concluded that she would eventually thank him for it.

"Kyle, you remembered our anniversary! I was totally convinced that you would forget it. You just seemed so wedded to your work these days," she sighed wistfully.

She had opened her eyes to a lavish table set for two, soft candlelight and vase full of the most magnificent light blue roses she'd ever seen. After staring several moments at the scene before her, she finally rushed over to the table and carefully picked up one of the roses to admire it.

Kyle frowned mildly. "Let's just say I have friends in high places who look out for our mutual welfare."

Arcadia took a second or two to admire the flower while carefully stroking the delicate bud. "I most certainly agree..." she told him in a dreamy voice.

Kyle stood several seconds savoring this moment. He smiled as he grabbed his datapadd to start the music. He put down the padd and walked over to his wife. He stood in front of her, offering his arm in his usual disarming manner, adding his most winning of smiles. "May I have this dance, Milady?"

Arcadia simply smiled. She put down the rose and instantly fell into his arms. She looked up at his warm slate gray eyes and felt herself fall in love all over again. While she wasn't able to discern the actual music being played, she did recognize the words that had become familiar to her the night he asked her to marry her.

They held each other closely and swayed gently to the beat.

"It's very clear, our love is here to stay....."

*

Next: God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

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