

Manhunt!

One: You Lock The Target

Friday Early Morning

"I figured it would be you."

The sudden appearance of Terrence Crown Blair momentarily startled Kyle Argent from his reverie.

"Oh?" Kyle feebly replied.

"Yeah," the Director of Flight Operations replied while he sat down beside his Station Commander. "Some of the Tech folk have been reporting a 'presence' of some sort up here on the gangway. And you know how superstitious they can get..."

Argent winced. Ground Technicians were indeed a most superstitious lot. It didn't take much to set them off. He remembered one down-checking a fighter because he saw a rodent of some sort scurry out from underneath. That just was enough for the tech to suspect sabotage...

Kyle stared off into the distance. And it also seemed to have happened 20,000 years ago.

"Since this mysterious specter only showed up during the breakfast and lunch periods, they *immediately* feared the worst," Terrence continued.

Argent sighed. "They were gonna try and ambush me, weren't they?"

"And," Terrence nodded with dry smugness, "beat you senseless, yes. But I figured that this bogeyman was most likely nothing more than some old second-rate fighter jock feeling lonely away from the cockpit."

Kyle turned to face Terrence. "*Hey!*" he replied easily. "*Who* are *you* calling old?" He paused before continuing in a sober voice. "So, I suppose my secret is out."

"Nah..." Terrence replied, leaning back in the chair as he ran a hand through his short gray hair. "If it means this much to you, I'll just spread the word with a few of the senior techs. Chances are they'll like having you watch over them like some saintly father even more than beating up on an odd rogue agent."

Kyle winced while he shook his head. "Now I really am beginning to feel old." He paused before continuing in voice that was decidedly creaky, interjecting a few

well-placed fake coughs. "Saintly Father? Why in my day we flew *real* fighters! They hurt like hell and we--"

"Kyle -- please!" Terrence all but winced as he interrupted him. "Stick to your day job." He added with a decided twinkle in his eye, "I think you are *almost* good at it."

Argent chuckled. "Deal."

"So..." Terrence decided to shift the conversation back to the matter at hand, "just what are you doing up here?"

"Watching, for the most part," Kyle murmured as he returned his gaze to the comings and goings down on the flight deck below them.

Terrence gave him a quizzical look before he too looked down. "You've got monitors for that, you know."

"It's just not the same," Kyle sighed without looking at Terrence. "I think I'm finally getting comfy with this whole 'Big Chair' business, but--"

"You miss the flight deck, don't you?" Terrence finished for him.

Kyle sighed. "More then words can express. Would you believe I've only logged ten flight hours this month?"

"No!" Terrence exclaimed with mock exasperation then winced. *And who am I to talk?* He suddenly realized. *I've only got some 20 hours myself. I really need to schedule more flight time, but....*

"Paperwork, always more paperwork," Kyle continued, interrupting his thoughts.

Terrence sighed. "You got that right." Terrence suddenly turned to Kyle. "Despite my stint in Cordell's office, I honestly never thought you'd be out of the cockpit for good before me. I really didn't."

"Neither did I! How did Cordell put it to me: 'take the station, keep on flying, build up the fighter presence'," Kyle replied brusquely, imitating the Chief of Staff of the Fighter Corps style of talking, prompting both men to chuckle in unison. "Cordell sure knew how to sell me on this one," Kyle continued. "It seems that the only flying I do these days is with a Desk and Chair, never mind a Fighter."

"Word to the wise," Terrence began as he stood up, reminding Kyle that it was perhaps time to do likewise, "I'd rather be a Station CO with a future than just a pilot with a past. There are too many of those out there anyway."

"A pilot with a past?" Kyle chuckled in a way that told Blair that his thoughts were really somewhere else. "Yeah, I suppose that's me." Kyle gave brief consideration to the fact that he had recently received an invitation to his Academy Class' 25th reunion next year... *is it 25 years already?* He suddenly ceased his contemplative self, and became his more relaxed self. "Care for some breakfast? Arcadia had an early day and didn't have time eat with me."

Terrence considered it for a moment. He had been somewhat hungry after this morning's workout. And breakfast with the CO seemed like a good excuse to put off the mountains of paperwork that were piling up on his desk just that much longer. Never mind, this morning's briefing.

"Lead the way," Terrence finally deadpanned, "I was told to respect one's elders and allow them to lead."

Kyle turned to Terrence and opted to pinch the DFO's cheek while responding in a creaky voice. "Thanks, sonnyboy."

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Friday Mid-Morning

"Good morning, Ms Marlowe," Station Commander Kyle Argent began as he walked into the Command and Control Center slightly later than usual.

"Good morning to you too, Captain Argent!" came the ever-cheery response from his yeoman. "Did you have a good breakfast?"

"Captain Blair is a most congenial eating companion," he responded before becoming all business. "Anything special on the docket this morning?" he asked, stopping in front of her desk.

She paused to scan her terminal. "Nothing special, Captain. Security is putting in extra time in preparation for the opening of the new nightclub as well as for the influx of visitors and new personnel for the club."

Kyle nodded. "Anything else?"

Melody frowned. "No, not really Captain."

"Very good, Ms Marlowe." Kyle had started to walk into his office when he spotted the bouquet of blue roses on her desk. "I see you're fond of the blue roses also. Arcadia loves them."

"*I know!*" Melody exclaimed. She reached over and plucked off a perfectly formed petal. "They are the most exquisite roses I've ever seen."

Kyle gave her a wry smile. "Secret admirer?"

Melody blushed ever so slightly. "Not really secret, Captain. They're from Mister Orumoff."

"Oh?"

"He has some sort of Import-Export Business down in the mall," she continued, flushed with excitement, "I'll be attending the opening of the club with him!"

"I see...." Kyle considered for a moment whether or not to tell his yeoman about the singular fact that her erstwhile dinner companion was also reputed to be something of a crime Kingpin around here, but for now opted not to. However, a memo with this little tidbit would find its way to the security chief post haste.

"In that case, I'll see you there."

Melody beamed a smile in his direction. "*Ooooh*, I'm so glad!"

Kyle couldn't help but chuckle at Melody's girlish enthusiasm at attending the opening night of a club with the wealthiest man on the Station. Never mind the fact that he'd acquired this money by less than honorable means.

"Oh, Captain..." Melody began, her voice stopping Kyle from entering his office, "there's a padd on your desk. It was hand delivered this morning."

Kyle frowned. "Anything special about it?"

"I couldn't tell, sir. It was delivered sealed and marked *For Your Eyes Only*. Maybe it's a special invitation," she smiled.

"Could be, Ms Marlowe. I'll be in my office if anyone needs me."

"Yes, Captain!"

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Friday Mid-Morning

"Gentlemen, be seated," began Captain Terrence Blair, the Director of Flight Operations, Space Station Nexus. "First off, some new business. We've received the first finished product from our little dirt-side satellite project."

"Let's all cheer again for Blair's Shadow Academy," LtCdr Kavindra "Avalanche" Courage, Wing Commander of the 206th mumbled to her tactical officer.

"I wish to God he would just get over himself already," retorted her tactical officer Ltjg Neville "Hawk" Takagi. "Just because the Old Man is chummy with Argent who lets him do as he pleases, doesn't mean we have to endure all his bragging."

"Bad enough some of us are going to get saddled with these nuggets," she whispered back.

Captain Blair suddenly stopped speaking and zeroed in on the pair. "You have anything to contribute before I continue, Commander?"

Avalanche flushed, having gotten caught talking in school by the teacher. "No sir!"

Terrence eyed her suspiciously but opted to continue. "Very well then. As I was saying, we have our first two junior pilots rotating into service today. As both of them have exclusively been trained on the Shadowhawk fighters, they and the next couple of pilots coming up will be rotated in the thirteen and ninety-third. And as we continue to deploy more Shadowhawks, the other rosters will be filled out accordingly. To accommodate this I will be reassigning several of you to new units beginning with Moser and Andreychuk, who will be moving on to the eighteenth and ninety-third respectively. And--"

"Sir," Avalanche interrupted defiantly, "I've been flying with Pat for nearly four years now. I respectfully request that you would reconsider not breaking up what I consider to be a very successful team."

Terrence wasn't pleased with the interruption but opted to answer the question as a lesson to all. "Rest assured, I've given these changes as well as other changes all due consideration. In fact, I approached each of crew before making these changes and they both volunteered for the transfer." He paused and allowed his eyes to sweep the room. "Let's get one thing straight folks, this is not some touchy-feely good time social club, there will be occasions when your friends and long time partners will be rotated out and there's not a damned thing you can do about it. You either live with it or turn in your gold wings! Is that understood?"

"Understood, sir," Avalanche gritted out.

Lt Pat Moser had silently watched as his former commander and the DFO spared. He allowed himself to breathe again when Captain Blair finally had delivered his final proclamation. Pat had been trying to get reassigned for two years now but that.... bitch wasn't even willing to consider giving up her prized

wingman. Now it would be someone else's chance to continuously save her sorry bacon.

Pat had become so wrapped up in his private thoughts that he almost missed the introduction of the new members.

"-- first rookie is Ensign Scott Nakamura, no less the son of Jackson Nakamura and I hope to hell you all know who he is."

Terrence paused to allow the round of whooping and cheering. Most were drowned out but he was able to pick out shouts of "woo-hoo.... a ce-le-bri-tee!" as well as the obligatory "what -- daddy couldn't get you a real job?" Terrence noted that the last retort caused the young man in question to flush noticeably.

Now that this round of frivolity was over, Captain Blair became very stern. "Let's get another thing straight, people. The Fighter Corps does not show favorites. While his father may have won the Rigel Cup last year, Mister Nakamura is here on his own merits." Once again, Terrence paused and allowed his eyes to dance over those assembled. "And let me point out to the lot of you that his scores at the academy exceeded those of any and all of you present here! So the next time some of you feel the need to question his reason for being here, just keep in mind that it very well may be him who'll save your ass someday."

"Oh, that'll be the day," Avalanche mumbled.

"I hear you," her tactical officer agreed.

"Scott will be assigned to the Ninety-third." Captain Blair paused and again sought out the Wing Commander of the 206th. "Avalanche, he will be on your wing, take care of Sunfire here. We assign new recruits with veterans pilots for a reason, after all."

She smiled her acknowledgement while she mumbled under her breath to her tactical officer. "Just what I needed."

"Better you than me," Neville grumbled in return.

Captain Blair narrowed his eyes and glared at the exchange he'd just been privy to, but otherwise, opted to ignore it, instead, continuing with the matter at hand.

"Our second new pilot is a long time officer but a first time pilot. He is following in the footsteps of his own father who just happened to be my flight instructor. He also taught some kid by the name of Argent. But that was a little bit before my time." Terrence paused as a small wave of chuckling went around the room. "And to top it all off, he's an accomplished flight engineer to boot.

So accomplished, in fact, he's got a Rigel Cup win as part of the tech squad under his belt." This comment brought forth a few appreciative whistles and some sporadic clapping from the audience. "I'd like to welcome to Lieutenant Virgil Taylor to his first assignment with the Thirteenth."

Terrence paused and sought out Raider. "Lieutenant Junior Grade Payat Petillo, he'll be on your wing. Make no mistake, even though Merlin outranks you, you're still Wing Leader." Terrence turned slightly to directly address Virgil. "Raider here is one of our more accomplished pilots with several confirmed kills already to his name. I think there's a lot you can learn from him, any problems with this Lieutenant?"

"None, what so ever, sir," Virgil replied with calm reserve.

Captain Blair nodded. "Good. Your tactical officers will be assigned to you by your Wing Commanders, but for now, let's move on to more pressing issues." Terrence paused as he shuffled datapadds. "We are continuing our policy of stepped up patrols in the various trading lanes and leading into and heading out of Nexus space. In the wake of the smuggling incident last year, we can not and will not take the safety of the commercial ships for granted. The latest set of policies handed down by our Station Commander will require us to extend the patrol radius by two additional grid blocks all the way around."

This announcement yielded many a groan and vociferous complaints from the assembled pilots.

"But sir," someone in the back piped up, "we're already at eight to ten hours round trip time on some patrol routes. Two more grids and we're looking at fourteen hours of patrol time minimum."

"I'm well aware of this and have voiced my concerns about this policy shift to the Station Commander, but his position is pretty firm. We must at all costs safeguard trade to and from this station. The Station Commander has requisitioned that a flotilla of perimeter action ships be dispatched for patrol duty around Nexus. But until the Tug Jockeys see fit to do what's right..." Terrence paused as a wave of groans swept the audience, and then continued, "we are what stands between the merchants and the raiders. And yes, some of these patrols will be grueling but no one ever said this was going to be an easy job. Keep in mind that your main objective is to escort and scout. If you encounter anything that you might consider suspicious, you are to shepherd your charge away at all possible speed and not, I repeat, not engage anyone in combat. We're not looking for heroes -- dead or otherwise -- we're simply looking for secure trading lanes. Understood?"

The assembled pilots all nodded in unison, a few of them responding, "Yes, sir."

"Very well then. Let's break down the individual assignments. Intelligence reports that there has been increased activity in grids forty-three to forty-eight, Red Omega sector. As you know that's open space towards the Neutral Zone. So, be very careful out there. The last thing we need is a diplomatic incident. Now, what I want is..."

Avalanche leaned back in her chair as she half-heartedly listened to the assignments and pondered the one she had just been given. She scarcely paid any further attention to what was said so she was quite surprised when the briefing was over.

Shaking out the cobwebs, she quickly stood up. "Time to break me in a new nugget."

"Have fun!" Neville retorted as he finished up the notes. As usual, Avalanche didn't take any so it was up to her tactical officer to cover for her.

"Oh, I plan to," she replied, with a wry grin, and considered the fact that she'd have a few days to come up with something appropriate.

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Friday Afternoon

"Are you ready to begin?" a decidedly female voice asked in a cool, calm manner. "After all, we only have less than a week to go..."

Gareth Roscoe took a swig of his imported Root Beer as he gazed at the woman standing in front of him. As he later told his boss, she was the last person he'd ever expected to see again and here of all places.

But when his boss, gambler extraordinaire and now owner of the most happening nightclubs on *Space Station Nexus* interviewed for a majordomo for *Serenade in Blue*, all six feet of Cassandra "Archer" Molyneux walked in and blew every other candidate out the nearest airlock.

Roscoe didn't even know she had applied, hell, he didn't even know she was still alive so when Boffin Gateway introduced Archer as the club's newly hired majordomo, it was an effort for Roscoe not to faint dead on the spot. Roscoe eventually explained to Boffin that Archer was his shotgun rider when he was a pilot in Starfleet. The last time he saw Archer, they'd been shot down by enemy fire: she was shipped off to a hospital and he was vanished doing things he wasn't even allowed to think about even to this day.

Archer displayed the Patience of Job while she waited for the club's Chief of Security slowly finished up his root beer float. She thought about how after she'd recovered from her injuries, she tried to look Roscoe up but no information was forthcoming. That told her that he'd either been shipped off to the looney bin and the official records 'lost' or he was doing something that couldn't be documented.

Be that as it may, they both had a job to do and they really needed to get to it.

"Roscoe?" Archer prompted.

With one smooth motion, Roscoe knocked back the rest of his drink, licked his lips and stood up indicating that he was ready.

"So how much," he began as they both started their walkabout, "is there left to be done?"

"We're on track," Archer started but was quickly interrupted by their boss's insistent voice cutting through the loud ambient noise consisting of laborers, newly hired help, and cleaning staff.

"*Cor Blimey!* Will you gits watch yourselves? That art is worth more than you lads put together!" Boffin Duchamps Gateway shouted to the work crew who was moving a statue into one of the many nooks that dotted the club.

"Cockney accent? He must be getting upset," Roscoe observed.

"Getting?" Archer snorted. "He's been running around like a mad man for the last few days. Hadn't you noticed?"

Roscoe shook his head. "I've been trying to avoid him when he's doing things like this. I remember when he was having his palace redecorated. On more than one occasion, the crew would personally invite him to assist them -- up close and personal like."

Archer smiled as they walked up the grand staircase so they could view what their patrons would first observe when they entered the club proper. Their establishment was called *Serenade in Blue* after one of Boffin's favourite tunes and as such, the club and personnel would be properly decorated to reflect it.

The club's décor was in a lovely shade of cobalt blue (now known as '*Serenade*'), black, and white -- or silver where white wasn't practical. As Roscoe put it to Boffin when the boss had insisted that the rug be white, "With all the feet and drinks being tossed about, it will end up being gray anyway."

Even the staff uniforms reflected the fine elegance that Boffin wanted in his establishment. Everyone would be clad in white tuxedos, white shirts, blue bow tie and cummerbund... everyone except for Archer who had her tuxedo tailor made to fit her curves and she wouldn't be wearing a white shirt under her suit.

All and all, though everything wasn't quite in its place, once it was, it would knock everyone's socks off.

"I imagine," Archer opined, "that he was making a big a pest out of himself as he's doing now?"

"Believe it or not," Roscoe began as he allowed his eyes to sweep the area, "he's actually gotten more mellow in his old age." Roscoe looked over at Boffin frantically jumping up and down trying to make a point. "Besides, he hasn't thrown anything."

Archer looked at Roscoe. "Thrown?"

Roscoe nodded while they both moved their attention away from their boss and took in the whole ambiance of the area. The first sight that greeted the patrons was the large black marble staircase covered in the middle with a silver carpet, leaving some of the marble exposed. The silver rails that were on both sides of the staircase were highly polished.

"Gonna be a bitch to keep these rails polished," Roscoe observed.

"That's why we have such a big staff, Roscoe," Archer pointed out.

They walked down to the dance floor and looked back up the stairs. The club had three levels, the bottom level was the dance floor that also held small tables (Boffin had pointed out that most people aren't coming to eat but to drink and dance, hence the decision to have smaller tables so that more people could be seated in the area). Tables for two dotted the area adjacent to the dance floor with larger tables seating three or more towards the back.

The other side of the dance floor held the stage for the orchestra. They walked over and found the bandleader, Duke Basie, busily talking to his piano player.

"Archer, Roscoe," Duke brightly greeted them.

"Roscoe and I," Archer smoothly began, "are taking a walkabout. How are things coming, Duke?"

Duke gave them a bright smile. "Couldn't be better. The orchestra is all here and we'll run through a few tunes this afternoon. Our clothing finally arrived

and apparently, we've had few problems on that score. And our name plates," Duke turned to look at the bandstand and pointed, "are all done."

Both Archer and Roscoe looked over and were pleased with what they saw. The three-tiered bandstand had enough room for each musician to store his or her datapadds of music, extra instruments, and anything else that would make them comfortable for a long evening of playing live music. Currently, there were 20 members of the orchestra with plans to expand if need be.

"Looks like everything is under control, Duke. If you need anything, please let me know. If I were you," Archer started as she pointedly looked at Boffin who was now shaking his fist at a work crew member. "I'd avoid the boss."

Duke shook his head and laughed, "I've been avoiding him like the plague giving him no reason to come over here and ask *me* a question."

"He'll be fine once we get this shindig on the road," Roscoe added. He and Archer left Duke and walked up the private staircase near the dance floor to the middle floor that held the VIP suites.

"This is really fancy," Roscoe whistled in appreciation as he and Archer walked around the semi-circle of private suites where the hoi-polloi could eat and dine in absolute privacy. For their opening night, the walls would be lifted to cram in a few more tables. Boffin was sure that privacy wasn't going to be an issue. After all, if someone had accepted an invitation, they should expect publicity both before and after the club's premier. Both Archer and Roscoe had readily agreed.

The VIP floor was in the shape of a semi-circle, unlike the bar floor above them which circumnavigated the club. Each end of the floor had an entryway for the club staff to come and go. Patrons who wished their privacy could take a private lift that allowed them entry to the club without anyone else in the establishment seeing them. Those who just liked the view and didn't care if anyone saw them could just take the staircase from the dance floor.

"Everything seems to be hunky-dorey here too, Archer," Roscoe reported with an approving nod.

Archer agreed. They walked back down the private staircase to the dance floor and crossed the floor to walk up marble staircase towards the bar area. The shiny black marble bar with its large comfortable leather seats formed the inner circle while the outer circle sat small tables over looking the entire club. Patrons walked in a clear aisle between the tables and the bar where they could just stand and admire the view or sit at the bar or tables. In fact, when patrons first enter into the club, they walk onto the bar floor.

"How are things going, Gash?" Archer asked the middle-aged hulk of a bartender -- who also had the largest mustache she'd ever seen -- while he continued to carefully polish his prized set of shot glasses.

Before Gash could reply, a loud crash was heard. The entire place fell silent followed by the loud voice of Boffin Gateway using language that even made Roscoe blush.

"Lord a'mercy, I'm doing much better than Mister G is," Gash replied as he returned to polishing the Waterford crystal once all the work personnel went back to what they were trying to do.

Archer nodded approvingly at the retired Merchant Marine. She watched him carefully polish his glassware to a fine luster. Gash was born in Cape Town, South Africa but you'd never know it because his accent betrayed no one place of residence. As he'd tell you, he's been there, done that, and brought back more than the proverbial shirt. In fact, Gash was one of those people who literally either knew you first hand or had a mutual friend in common with you. As such, he made the perfect bartender.

"Did you get all the extra help you needed?"

"We're now at a full compliment of bartenders and waitstaff."

Archer pulled out her datapadd and made a few notes. "You're fully staffed then?"

"*Sacre bleu!* Mister G ain't paying slave wages, Archer. I had 'em lining up the first day the notice was put out. Hasn't been quiet since."

Roscoe rubbed his hands. "So, are we done?" he asked with hope in his voice while they walked back to the front of the club.

Archer put her hands on her hips and stared at Roscoe. "You know we aren't."

"Well... look, Pierre has plenty of knives, he doesn't need me."

"Most chefs have knives, your point?" Archer asked.

"That's what I'm afraid of, Archer. It's what he might do with them," Roscoe pointed out.

"Chef Wong is a highly regarded Cordon Bleu practitioner of the culinary arts. We are very lucky to have him," Archer replied in a deadly voice.

"Look, Archer, I don't care, he's crazy!"

"Eccentric," Archer corrected. "He has his own way of doing things and has a low threshold for tolerance." She paused and looked at Roscoe, "and he doesn't tolerate you."

"Fine by me!" the club's chief of security (or bouncer, as he preferred to think of himself) replied, tossing his hands in the air.

Archer laughed. "I'll talk to him later, no need for you to accompany me. Besides," Archer pointedly looked over at Boffin who had some kind of implement in his hand and appeared to be close to doing bodily harm to one of the workers, "I think I'm needed elsewhere."

Roscoe chuckled as he watched his former shotgun rider casually rush over to where Boffin was about to commit mayhem and gracefully calmed both men down.

"Mister G," Archer began smoothly, "I believe I could use your assistance."

Boffin gave the crewman one last grimace before he followed his majordomo towards the back offices. However, before they could get there, they were interrupted by a visitor.

"*Ayesha!*" Boffin shouted in glee.

"Boffin, Roscoe told me that I should drop by now that everything is in order." She casually looked around her. "I am quite impressed."

Boffin suddenly realized that this was Ayesha's first visit and she'd not met Archer yet. "Ayesha, let me introduce you to Archer, the club's majordomo."

Rather than reciprocate the hand that was offered in friendship, Ayesha just stood there and glared.

"Roscoe," she began in a deadly voice, "did not tell me that his former shotgun rider was...." She paused, "was a woman."

Uh-oh Boffin considered as he watched Archer's back stiffen and Ayesha's rage begin to grow. Luckily for all concerned, Archer's presence was needed elsewhere and she had to excuse herself.

Ayesha's eyes carefully tracked her erstwhile rival walking away and down the steps to the orchestra area. She turned to Boffin, expecting a really good explanation for this lapse of information.

"Ayesha, I wouldn't worry," Boffin quietly began, grabbing her elbow to squire her away to the privacy of his office.

"How so?" she asked.

"She's more likely to enjoy *your* company than his."

Ayesha was itching to remain angry with Roscoe but suddenly realized what Boffin had just told her and whipped her head in Boffin's direction. "What?"

Boffin smiled. "You heard me."

"Oh..." was Ayesha's only reply, looking over to where Archer was standing wondering how she could have missed Archer being a member of the sisterhood.

Archer waved and gave Ayesha a broad smile with a subtle wink.

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Friday Afternoon

"Ok, easy now," Lt. Virgil Taylor spat out between gritted teeth. "Easy... easy... there. Locked and loaded!"

Franklyn "Pops" Williams chuckled as he retracted the missile-loading palette "Normally, I'd joke that you'd make a damn fine grounds technician for a pilot, but..."

"...it's a bit too late for that, eh?" Virgil replied before he deftly caught the rag the Senior Ground Tech tossed him and cleaned the industrial lubricant off his hands.

Pops nodded with appreciation. "Most of you flyboys are just too damned worried about getting dirt on your dainty little flightsuits to give us a hand down here."

Virgil grinned. "First rule of ordinance school: if you want to make sure that the payload gets there intact, you--"

"You put it there yourself," Pops finished while beaming towards the newly assigned pilot. "Good thing those zoomies left you some room for good old fashioned common sense."

"Once a grounder, always a grounder," Virgil smiled. "It gets to be in your blood."

"Good! Then you won't mind helping me flight-check this next bird here, would ya?" Pops smiled like a cat that had just feasted on a canary.

Virgil considered it for a minute. He had no particular interest in working on another person's fighter, but Pops had helped him load his bird, shorthanded as he was.

"Sure, why not. I still got thirty minutes before pre-flight."

So much for a nice cup of coffee before takeoff, Virgil mused as he quickly scampered up the stairpole. He was about to swing into the cockpit when he noticed that said area was already occupied.

"Whoa, easy there," the incumbent pilot mumbled at the startled Virgil.

"Sorry.... didn't think anyone was in here," Virgil stammered. "Pops asked me to flight-check this bird for him."

"No problem. I'll get out if you want me to..."

"Nah... don't bother. They did teach how to flight check at the Academy, didn't they?"

"Why, yes, sir, Lieutenant Taylor, sir. They sure did!" the pilot sarcastically retorted before he switched his receiver over to the maintenance frequency.

"My fame precedes me," Virgil easily replied while glancing down at the name stenciled at the rim of the cockpit. "Ah... Ensign Nakamura... You were in Narvinnen's unit in the Shadow Academy? Pleased to finally meet you."

Virgil thought it was ironic that both pilots were at the Shadow Academy at the same time but had in fact never run across one another. But other than Lead Instructor Narvinnen, almost nothing was ever seen of Beta Flight and more than likely the only sign of Alpha Flight Ensign Nakamura had seen was the occasional lecture by Flight Instructor Mazzik.

Scott nodded in agreement. They shook hands; both genuinely glad to make each other's acquaintance.

While Scott "Sunfire" Nakamura wanted to continue talking, he knew he had a job to do. He turned his attention back to confirming the status lights with Pops Franklin over the maintenance channel. Virgil was impressed with the speed and ease Scott completed the pre-flight diagnostic cycle that each fighter had to go through before being flight certified for another day. Many pilots, especially younger ones, would hunt and peck across the many panels and

controls in the cockpit and substantially delay the process. Virgil had done it about 1000 times as a Grounds Technician and had no problem locating the auxiliary Atmospheric Compensator switch or any of the other more esoteric toggles. But Scott was equally up to the task. Each query brought a smooth and swift response, with him finding the right item the first time, every time.

"Say, you are pretty good at this," the former maintenance engineer nodded appreciatively. "Bet your Dad had you in a cockpit by the time you could walk."

Scott's face suddenly took on a rather dark expression.

"Actually..." Scott began slowly, "my Dad left my mother and I before I was two." He turned from the control panel to stare directly at Virgil. "Whatever proficiency I have at what I do was most certainly not derived from me being my famous father's son."

Virgil's smile faded almost at once. He had stepped into it big time. "I... I... am sorry," he began to stammer.

Scott Nakamura sat back in his cockpit and relaxed for a moment. "No, I should be sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you. Unless you studied my personnel record, there is no way you could have known. It's just that... well..."

"You get tired of people thinking you are something you aren't because of your pedigree."

"*Exactly!*" Scott replied before executing a series of additional checks, allowing the silence to grow between the two men.

"Believe me, I kind of know how that's like," Virgil softly replied.

"How so?" Scott replied, instantly intrigued.

"I don't know if you know this but my dad's Jackson Taylor."

"He was a flight instructor at the Academy before he left to become an industrialist?"

"The same. Just because my dad has a private island and pots of money, everyone assumes that I had everything handed to me on a silver platter and it seems that'll never end. Now, I pretend to not hear it when folks call me stuff like 'Argent's Lackey boy' or other unsavory names but it is, nevertheless, something I've got to live down."

Scott frowned. "I don't quite understand."

"Well..." Virgil began, drawing in a deep breath. "I was stationed on the same ship with then-Lieutenant Commander Argent. He plucked me out of engineering to form his ground support squad. I was trained as a starship maintenance engineer, you see."

"That much I'd heard," Scott replied.

"My father and brother were both pilots. I was always a bit more interested in how to make things go and all. So, I studied engineering. Then Scott -- my brother -- died in the line of duty and not too long thereafter, Lieutenant Commander Argent built a squad on the old *Stellar Wind* and something just kind of... hit me. I'd been around fighters all my life, knew how to fly and all, but somehow, suddenly wanted to be in one of those warbirds, out there, on the line..." Virgil stopped and stared at Scott.

"You got the Calling," Scott reflected solemnly.

Both men became quiet. *The Calling* is what they had called it in the Academy -- the Starfleet Fighter Corps was not for everyone. It was only for those who wanted to be out there amongst the stars, be the first to fight and first to die. That willingness to lay it all on the line was *the Calling*.

Virgil nodded his silent agreement before continuing. "Argent helped me along. I thought that my Father would be dead-set against my becoming a pilot instead, he was surprisingly supportive. Captain Argent also got me into Flight School per his recommendation. And..." He paused for a moment to suppress a sigh, "...he picked me to crew his bird at the Rigel Cup a couple of years back. That more than anything was hard to live down. It instantly got me a lot of unwanted attention as the 'Big Man's Little Boy...'"

Scott frowned. "How did you cope with it?"

"Before I left flight school, Captain Argent did give me a simple piece of advice: Let people talk. Actions speak louder than words. If your Actions surpass their Words, then it's nothing more than the petty jealousy of those who are beneath you in skill and ability. So why bother giving them the time of day?"

Scott Nakamura briefly reflected on those words. "I wish someone would have told me the same thing way back when..."

Virgil looked down at the pilot. "I take it you and your dad don't get along well? Even now?"

"Jackson..." Scott paused and smiled at Virgil. "Dear old Jackson and I have an... understanding. That's about it. We talk every now and then, we see each other once in a while and in general we don't hate each other." Scott paused to shrug.

"But that's about it. When I signed into the Academy, that's all everyone saw -- 'Hey, it's Nakamura's kid!' and 'Your daddy fixing it alright for you here?'" Scott shook his head. "Six years of that nonsense does kind of try one's patience. Especially since no matter how well I performed, people just assumed it was because of my name. It was assumed I got special treatment. After a while it became somewhat tiring."

Virgil gave Scott a grim smile of understanding. "I can imagine."

"And the worst part is that I really *am* here because of my father's name. My mother and I never had much. My grades in primary school were just enough to get me into the Academy but my Dad's Medal of Honor was my ticket for free room and board."

Virgil reflected on this fact for a moment. It was a tradition going way back when that the military service academies offered a son or daughter of a Medal of Honor winner a free scholarship, but in this day and age, invoking this privilege was almost unheard of. To require it most likely meant non-Federation world and a dirt poor one at that.

"So why become a pilot like your dad?" Virgil asked.

Scott shrugged his shoulders. "Why not? I suppose it was the one good thing my dad passed on to me. I wanted to fly ever since I could walk." Scott paused, looking off into the distance. "And I couldn't wait to get the hell off of Ganymede."

Ganymede. Virgil all but flinched. A place so inhospitable, the Federation would have just as soon forgotten it ever even existed. And yet, colonists had been eking out a life between its massive polar ice caps for some 250 years now.

"I suppose deep down," Scott continued, "it might be a way for me to get back at my dad for walking out on us when he did. I won't deny that. But regardless of that, this is it." Scott stopped and gently patted the side of his Spacecraft. "This is *my* bird and it's mine because of what *I've* accomplished, not because of his name. And no one can take that away from me."

Virgil smiled. He was definitely beginning to like Scott Nakamura.

"As one rookie to another," Virgil extended his hand in friendship. "It's time to Turn and Burn. And who knows, if you are good enough, maybe someday I'll let you fly on *my* wing."

Scott shook Virgil's hand with a broad smile "Ha! By the time you are good enough, I'll be flying on Argent's wing. No disrespect intended, Lieutenant."

Virgil stepped off the stairpole. It was time for him to meet up with Dutch and do the preflight brief.

"Been there, done that, Ensign," Virgil beamed mischievously at the pilot. "It's time to get ready. Pilot with the higher mission rating buys drinks?"

"You are on," Scott grinned as he began to strap his helmet on.

* * *

Monday Night

"Now, that feels really good," *Space Station Nexus* Commander Kyle Argent purred as his wife continued to massage his aching back after a long and hard day at the office.

"If I may be so bold to observe," began his wife, who also served as the station's Chief Medical Officer, "perhaps it might be a good idea if you took just a few more rest breaks during the day. That way," she paused to vigorously rub a particularly stubborn knotted muscle, "you won't come home at night with muscles that would be better suited as pretzels."

"I don't know about that, Arcadia..." he began in an extremely contented tone of voice, "you wouldn't give me such good back rubs if I took more breaks."

Arcadia paused and decided to give the small of his back a sharp poke for her reply before continuing to massage his back, deftly avoiding all the scar tissue that littered the area.

"No?" he grimaced through clenched teeth.

"I'm more than happy to give you a massage anytime you wish, however, as the CMO I would respectfully point out that you've been abusing your back of late."

"It's not *that* bad!"

"I beg to differ," emphasizing her point by digging her fingers into yet another reluctant muscle that was resisting her magic touch.

Rather than answer her, he sighed, then changed the course of the discussion away from his back and to another part of his body. "I thought you'd like to know," he began through clenched teeth as Arcadia was going after his back with renewed gusto, "that the mental exercises have had their effect."

"Oh?" she replied as she let up just a bit.

He smiled. "I came by the hospital the other day and could actually 'feel' your presence. Sparky later confirmed that you were in your office at that time."

"No one told me about the visit, so as you can see, unless you are actually purposely... well..." she paused to consider the word she was looking for, "'searching' for the other party, it isn't as if I can track where you are at any given time. I also have to be in fairly close proximity. I think you'll find the same as well."

"I'm rather surprised by my abilities. I never knew..." he sighed, stretching his legs.

"It is unusual because you have a rather high psi... but this technique has worked even for those with low abilities." She briefly stopped to work on his thighs. "My father didn't have that high a psi rating yet he and my mother had a really strong bond. I honestly thought they could actually mentally talk to each other."

"Really?"

"Indeed. Vaegans aren't known to have the ability to communicate in words between each other but some can send impressions and thoughts. I'm not nearly that high and besides," she continued as she started rubbing his other thigh, "my abilities are more medical -- healing trances and that sort -- than communications." Once again, Arcadia deftly avoided giving her husband any hint that she could communicate -- in words no less -- with his pet cat.

"That must be nice," Kyle sighed, "to be able to communicate with someone else on that level."

Arcadia suddenly looked at Kyle and realized he was referring to her parents and not to their cat. "*Oh!* Err.... oh, yes, I imagine so. My parents spent practically all their time together, neither one away from the other for any length of time. I always thought that the bond they held together was one reason. That and," she sighed while she smiled, "pure love and devotion to each other."

"True," he murmured now applying his newly taught abilities in strengthening their mental bond.

"You are getting quite good at this," Arcadia commented. She could feel his presence while she continued to massage his back, feeling his muscles beneath her fingers. "I can feel your contentment," she commented until she noticed the wicked smile on his face.

<whap!>

"What was that for?" he wailed, having just been slapped on the shoulder by his wife.

"I don't know *exactly* what you're thinking but I *know* what you're thinking about!" she declared.

He chuckled before he burrowed his body deep into their bed coverings.

Arcadia smiled and continued her work in silence, rhythmically stroking his body. "I bumped into Boffin today," she began as she ran her hands down the full length of his back, "and he was positively flushed with excitement over the pending opening of his nightclub."

"It's a big endeavor," Kyle mumbled.

"He had expressed some reservations that everything wouldn't be ready in time for the opening. After all, it's only a week away and Jasmine Sainte Clair will arrive in a few days."

Kyle felt himself stiffen when Arcadia mentioned her. Jasmine Sainte Clair was a name he hadn't heard in years. Yet, she'd be on his station in a few days and it was painfully obvious to him that he couldn't avoid her.

"Something wrong?" Arcadia suddenly stopped because she had detected his emotion going from one of contentment to something akin to extreme agitation.

"*No!*" he exclaimed with just a bit more emphasis than warranted. He quickly calmed himself down. "No... just thinking about all the additional work. Granted," he glibly tossed off, "I knew Jasmine back in the old days, before she became famous."

"Oh?" she asked as she rubbed the small of his back.

"All the extra people coming to the station to see her, extra security, media -- we'll have all sorts of unsavory people crawling about," he told her.

"Luckily for me," Arcadia considered, casting her thoughts back to her days as CO of the *USS Stellar Wind*, "I never had anything like that occur on the *Wind*... save the odd renegade Romulan or rodent who dropped in."

Kyle snorted and stretched his back.

"Before I forget, we finally received the invitations to the club opening today. Boffin and his people did a splendid job. While it is a bit wasteful, I did enjoy

receiving a hard copy and in this instance, it's on real paper. Probably not hand-lettered though."

"Probably not," Kyle absently replied, his mind clearly on other matters.

"I take it that since this isn't an official *Nexus* occasion, we can wear our civilian attire."

"Yes, it's not on the official docket," he mumbled and stretched again.

"Good. I take it you'll wear your tuxedo and I was thinking of wearing my green dress. What do you think?"

Kyle didn't answer her right away, so she looked down at her husband, lying contentedly on their bed. She suddenly noticed a very regular breathing pattern and realized that he was fast asleep. She stood up, grabbed a blanket, and placed it over him so he wouldn't catch a chill. Arcadia gave him a gentle kiss on his forehead before she tucked him in and went out into the sitting room. She decided on a cup of tea because it was much too early for her to retire for the evening.

As she waited on the replicator, she again wondered about the scars on Kyle's back. She knew that as a fighter pilot who'd crashed landed more than one time, a few marks were to be expected, but that couldn't explain the number and intensity of the scars that littered his body. She contemplated approaching him about having them dermo-bursted but ultimately decided that he knew that the procedure was available and could have gotten it done at any time.

Still, she wondered just how he'd gotten all the scars. As a surgeon who'd seen action during the war, she'd observed her share of injuries a pilot would be inflicted with as well as other combat wounds. Some of his scarring fell into that category but the others... some of the others were different -- totally different.

She sighed before she took a long sip of tea. If she didn't feel comfortable suggesting that he have surgery to take care of the blemishes, she certainly didn't feel comfortable even asking where they'd come from.

Be that as it may, the scars that littered his body had a story to tell and Arcadia was interested in hearing it.

* * *

Monday Night

Ensign Scott "Sunfire" Nakamura gingerly dragged his sore and aching body into the pilot's breakroom. Right now, all he wanted was a nice cup of hot plum wine and then as much shut eye as he could possible handle. After requisitioning his drink, he scanned the area to find a place to enjoy his beverage in peace and quiet. Unfortunately, all the tables were occupied with one or more patrons. Realizing he wouldn't be able to secure a table for himself, he searched again for a friendly face but instead, one found him.

"Scott?"

"Lieutenant Taylor, sir?"

Lieutenant Taylor smiled. "Virgil, remember? After all, us rookies gotta stick together. So, who is paying for this tab?" Virgil was sitting with several other people who'd quickly moved over to make room for the newcomer.

As he sat down, Scott casually observed that Virgil's first mission had apparently gone much better than what he had just gone through. "If my score is anything like how I feel, I'd say it's a safe bet that I'm buying."

"Bad little round trip with Frosty the Snow Bitch?" a new voice interjected.

Scott looked over and recognized the speaker as Lieutenant Jacob "Dutch" van der Weege who was assigned as Virgil's tactical officer.

"Frosty the Snow Bitch?" Scott cautiously asked before he took a sip of his warm wine.

"You know, Avalanche... That one-person career wrecking crew they stiffed you with," Dutch bluntly pointed out.

"Geeze -- tell us how you really feel," Virgil snickered.

"Oh, it's the truth! I've seen more than one promising pilot mauled by her 'unique' methods. Personally, I would *not* want to be in one of her flights again even if you paid me."

"But she's a Wing Commander, surely you don't get that job on good looks alone," Virgil pointed out.

"Not that she has any of those either," Ensign Desiree "Ravyn" MacRae chipped in as she pulled up a chair to join them.

"Well... I'm too much of a gentleman to comment on that," Dutch replied.

"*Ha!* Never stopped you before, Dutch," Ravyn pointed out.

"Be that as it may, the reason she's a WC is simple," Dutch patiently began to the new comers, "she's been on this Station longer than anyone else that I know of -- fully six years now. If you hang around one place long enough and wait for everyone else to rotate out, eventually you will rise to the top, regardless of how inept you may be."

Virgil frowned at his tac officer. "I'm sure it can't be that bad," he retorted before turning to Scott. "What do you have to say, Scott?"

Scott sighed. "She had me doing sit and kicks and action drills the whole way up and back. Ten hours of being scrambled into full alert mode and doing combat drills non-stop. That answer your question?" He capped his response by chugging back his wine.

Everyone sitting at the table immediately ceased what they were doing and simply stared at Scott, not quite believing what he had just told them.

"You're lucky to still be alive," Virgil finally broke the silence.

"There are parts of me that I'm not sure about, Virgil. I mean, I thought all this basic fighter drill bullshit was over and done with after I got out of Narvinnen's Advanced Flight Class dirtside. I really didn't expect that front line duty would be like this."

"I heard he wasn't half as bad as Mazzik. Boy did he used to drill the snot out of us," Virgil shook his head. "But still, Payat," Virgil began, referring to the senior wingman he was assigned to, "didn't do any of that stuff with me. We had a fairly smooth ride going both ways."

"Payat is good people," Dutch agreed. "Damned good pilot. Knows his stuff. Goes in, gets the job done and comes home. No tit-for-tat bullshit. Avalanche on the other hand, is a real hard-case. And nothing will help you if you get on her bad side." Dutch paused while he shook his head. "Can't say I envy you, kid."

"Well.... She is my wing leader and I was brought up with a firm belief that you go where they assign you to go, no questions asked. After all when the chips are down, my wingman is the only one I can rely on to save my ass."

"Based on what I've heard," Ravyn retorted, "I hope that your insurance policy is paid up."

"What do you mean?" Scott cautiously asked.

"Well..." Ravyn began but abruptly changed course. "Speak of the Yeti..." she muttered as she glanced beyond the table towards the entrance. All eyes followed hers and began to track the newcomer purposely walking their way.

"Sunfire," Avalanche began in a voice pure as ice, "are you sure you have enough time for social engagements?" She pointedly paused and consulted her chronometer. "After all, you're back on duty rotation in six hours."

Scott frowned and shook his head. "I thought we were given fourteen off."

"Oh... we were," she casually tossed informed him, "but no wingman of mine is going to slack off. I've scheduled some sim time for you later today." She paused to give him a toothy grin. "Get those reaction times down a bit."

Scott groaned inwardly as he stood up from the table. "If all of you will please excuse me, it seems I need to try and get as much shuteye as I can until my next duty rotation."

Avalanche nodded her head. "Good boy."

Scott Nakamura froze momentarily at the senior wingman's use of that particular motherism. His own mother had stopped calling him a boy when he was 14 and his mother was a woman who Scott loved and cared for deeply. Avalanche on the other hand, had done little to warrant any form of respect from him. Once again, he kept his surging anger under wraps and proceeded to stalk out of the lounge.

Those remaining at the table sat in stunned silence, until Virgil finally realized something needed to be said. "We'll see you later, Scott."

Her good deed for the day accomplished, Avalanche turned and began heading back to her office. Dutch on the other hand, took one last sip of his beer while muttering under his breath something that sounded very much like "evil fucking bitch" to Avalanche's ears. She quickly spun around and zeroed in on the likely perpetrator.

"Wha--" she stammered. "What did you just say, *Lieutenant?*"

Dutch lifted his eyes to meet hers dead on without interrupting his long swallow of beer. If she wanted to have a confrontation by all means, she was going to get it. But before he could give her the retort she so richly deserved, Virgil smoothly interrupted any further proceedings.

"I think he said evil fucking err.... twitch. You see Dutch here gets a nervous twitch after most missions," Virgil calmly began before he turned to Ravyn for confirmation. "Isn't that so?"

"Oh... absolutely..." Ravyn began in a voice as sweet as honey. "We don't call him Twitchy Dutch for nothing, Commander."

And for good measure, Jacob twitched a muscle in his right cheek forcing a frown to Avalanche's lips.

"Very well," she finally gritted out. "Carry on then." With her last comment, she again spun around and marched out of the lounge.

After she disappeared from sight, the remaining three quickly looked at each other before intoning in unison, "*Evil Fucking Bitch!*"

* * *

Tuesday Afternoon

"*Hello, Nexus, Hello!*" boomed bass player Jake Brendan as he and his partner, guitar player Dag Musenda walked off their transliner and entered the disembarkation area.

"Not bad," Dag rumbled.

They sauntered up to the clerk who gingerly took the offered records. While he quickly scanned the papers and ran a computer check, he took a good look at the visitors.

Before the new supper club was going to open, the clerk would have simply stared at the newcomers wondering what the cat had dragged in. However, over the last few weeks, a number of... well... unusual characters had passed through these portals, so this latest pair wasn't anything out of what had recently become the ordinary. Though, he mused, there are always exceptions.

"Musicians?" the clerk asked.

Jake was clearly taken aback and looked down at himself before he glanced over to his partner. "Man-o-Man, how'd you know?"

"Lucky guess," the clerk tossed off as he continued to check their papers.

The one called Jake was a rather short, scrawny dark skinned man dressed in black with a goatee and his head was topped with a black beret. His partner, Dag was a tall, rotund lighter skinned man who had the appearance of extreme disinterest while Jake was interested in everything and everyone he encountered.

"Is our stuff in order, Daddy-O?" Jake exclaimed.

Daddy-O? the clerk wondered. He was going to ask them what that meant but he noticed the long line that had formed behind them and quickly decided not to waste more time. "You've requested a two week pass, is that correct?"

"Yup, we're side-boys for the Blonde Nightingale," Jake beamed to the clerk whose face betrayed his confusion. Jake gladly elaborated for him. "Y'know, Jasmine Sainte Clair."

"Oh! The singer that's gonna open the new club!" the clerk exclaimed.

"The one and only, son!" Jake replied with such enthusiasm, the clerk expected him to bounce right out of his shoes.

The clerk handed back the folder and smiled. "Well, enjoy your stay on *Nexus*. I'll be attending her second show."

"It'll be a good one, son, I guarantee it!" Jake grinned taking the paperwork while his partner, Dag, as usual, just grunted an acknowledgement.

"Come on, Dag-man," Jake began as they made their way out towards the common areas of the station, "shake a leg man. We're late already." Jake paused and looked around, quickly spotting an info-kiosk. He bounded over, leaving Dag lumbering behind to catch up. Jake requested the information needed, turned around, and raced off in the opposite direction leaving Dag to abruptly spin and follow his partner.

"Here we are, Dag!" Jake exclaimed upon their arrival, "and will you look at this!" he beamed.

Dag didn't immediately look up because he was too busy catching his breath. Finally, he glanced up and readily agreed this was a nice place. At least, the outside looked decent enough. The illuminated blue sign flashed *Serenade in Blue* and next to the double silver doors, was a static holopic of Jasmine Sainte Clair, smiling directly at anyone looking at her. She was surrounded by text stating that she was appearing here with the Bobby Zephyr Trio.

"Ain't this a beaut!" Jake beamed as he walked into the club. The club obviously wasn't quite ready but it would be a really sweet looking number when it was. He stopped and rubbed his chin. "Now who was it we were supposed to see, Dag..." Jake mumbled. He was about to put his case down to retrieve his datapadd when Dag, as usual, had the information at his fingertip.

"Cassandra Molynex," Dag grumbled.

"Oh, yeah, Cassandra. What a *lovely* name!" Jake smiled while he and Dag ventured further into the club.

"May I help you gentlemen?" a decidedly female voice wafted out from behind them.

Both men whipped around and saw a lovely lady standing there. She was tall and wore her straight black hair very short. Her skin was pale but it only added to her very exotic features. While as beautiful as a porcelain doll, she had an aura that bespoke, "look, but don't touch."

Jake nudged his partner and winked. He rushed over with his hand extended. "Hello my little chick-*a*-dee!"

Cassandra wasn't quite expecting that response and suddenly laughed out loud. "I'm Cassandra Molyneux, the club's majordomo. Everyone around here calls me Archer. And you are?"

"Jake Brendan and this here's my partner, Dag Musenda. We're with the Blonde Nightingale," Jake beamed in reply.

Archer smiled. "Pleased to meet you gentlemen." When she finished shaking Jake's hand, she walked over to shake Dag's while giving him a warm smile. She turned back to Jake whom she surmised was the leader of this duo and gave him a slight frown. "I thought that Ms Sainte Clair and Mister Zephyr would be here by now. All we were told is that they'd let us know when they'd arrive."

Jake shook his head. "Had to unexpectedly take a detour to Earth and told us to just mosey on along without them. They'll be here tomorrow..." he stopped when he noted the concerned look on Archer's face. "Don't worry, darlin'," he began, reaching over to pat her hand. "Bobby's a good boy, he'll let you know in plenty of time to have the media boys lined up *and* he won't be late either."

Archer nodded, having temporarily been mollified. It would have been a total disaster if their headliner didn't show up on time but the owner assured her that she was one of those rare singers that wasn't too much of a Prima Dona and would act as the consummate professional. At least, that's what Boffin's gambling friends had told him when he had asked around for suggestions for his premier act. While *Nexus* did appear to be located in the ass-end of nowhere, they were already starting to receive a lot of media coverage because of Jasmine's appearance. Besides, she was booked to give a performance on Galena and Archer doubted that Jasmine would want to be part of a diplomatic firestorm if she canceled out at the last moment.

"Have you checked into your rooms yet, if not, let me--" she began.

"Later for that, darlin'," Jake interrupted. "We're here for a job. Let's meet the orchestra leader and get familiar with the place. We always check out the joint ahead of time for Bobby."

Archer looked to Dag who remained mute but nodded his head in agreement. "Fine by me," Archer continued, "let me introduce you to our orchestra leader, Du--" Before she could finish, she was unexpectedly interrupted.

"Jake Brendan! Is that you, you old devil?" the bartender shouted as he rushed over.

"Gash Tucker, you old so-and-so. Good to see you, Daddy-O!" Jake exclaimed.

"Last time I saw your skinny dark ass, you were running from the cops." Gash smiled through his large mustache as he grabbed Jake's offered hand. Gash looked over to Archer and indicated to her that he'd take over. Archer smiled and left the men alone.

"Woman trouble. Man, women ain't nothing but trouble!" Jake retorted as both men continued to shake hands. "So what brings an old space dog like you here?"

Gash stood up straight and puffed his chest out. "I'm head barkeep."

"No joke, Daddy-O! Out of the service then?"

"Retired years ago," Dash informed him

"Dag old man, meet the brother who saved my bacon on more than one occasion," he began to his partner who'd been patiently waiting to be introduced.

"Greets," Dag rumbled.

"So what brings you here, Jake-O?" Gash asked as they moved out of the way towards the bar lest they be trampled by the workcrew adding the finishing touches to the club.

"Side boys for the Blonde Nightingale," Jake replied. He and Dag took seats in front of the main bar and made themselves comfortable. "Man-o-Man, these are some damned nice chairs, Gash." Jake ran his hands up and down the comfortable leather chairs, nodding in appreciation.

"Mister G only uses the best around here. By the way, sorry I can't offer you anything because we don't have our liquor license activated yet."

Jake held up his hand "Not a worry, Gash-man, you know that Jake is always prepared!"

He leaned over to his small case and took out a flask and small glasses. He poured the two gentlemen a drink then gave his familiar toast. "I'll drink to that!" he exclaimed before bringing the glass to his lips. He never got past a sip before his attention suddenly went from that of the serious subject of drinking to a woman standing near the door talking to Archer. Jake stared at her several seconds and smacked his lips. "Who is this paragon of pulchritude that appears before me?" he mumbled. He thumped the glass on the bar and stood up.

"Sit down, Jake." Gash patiently reached over and pushed Jake back into the chair.

Jake whipped his head towards Gash and noted that he'd meant business. He tossed his hands up in wonderment and wailed. "What's the problemo, Daddy-O?"

"That's *the* Captain's wife -- the Station Commander's Wife," Gash began in a tolerant voice, knowing that unless he told his old friend the whole story, he'd be out of his seat and making a play for her before Bob was his uncle.

Jake shrugged his shoulders and started to get up again when Gash thought he'd better add this small tidbit of useful information. "And she's Vaegan."

"Man-*oh*-Man, Daddy-O. No way," Jake began, shaking his head as he sat back down with a thump. "Nope, not going there. No more Vaegans for me, them women have claws to beat the band. Uh-uh..... never again. By the time that woman was finished with me, I looked like shredded buckwheat." Jake waived his hand and grimaced. "I've sworn off of women," he declared.

"Until the next one," Dag rumbled. Gash looked at Dag, their eyes met before they easily broke into a mutual laugh.

Jake looked askance at his 'so-called' friends. "Laugh away, boys. But I'm telling you, I've *sworn* off of women! Yep... No more skirts for me!" Jake emphasized his proclamation by folding his arms in defiance.

"Give it a rest, Jake," Dag rumbled again.

Jake hopped out of his seat. "I'll leave you two jive-assed turkeys to gobble on while I go and do some work!" He stalked off in search of the bandleader, leaving Dag at the bar with Gash.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" Gash shook his head then grinned at Dag. "How long you give him?"

Dag carefully turned his chair around to look at Jake talking to what Dag assumed was the bandleader. Dag noticed that Jake was also keeping a watchful eye on the Vaegan woman talking to Archer. "Twenty four hours."

"That long?"

"Yup," Dag rumbled as he finished his drink. "slowin' down in his old age."

* * *

Tuesday Late Afternoon

"*God dammit all!*"

LtCdr Kavindra "Avalanche" Courage, Wing Commander of the 206th frowned and threw aside the datapadd she was working on. She pitched it so hard that it bounced off her desk and on to the deck.

She picked up the second padd and briefly scanned the qualifications for entries for this year's Rigel Cup. The Cup was the annual competition between various civilian and military fighter pilots. One could conclude that the real reason for the event was to provide something tangible for the gamblers to wager on, but the competitors knew better than that -- they were there to win.

To her mind, the proposed submission to the Rigel Cup Board of Directors from her best squadron was less than adequate. In fact, she expected more, demanded more from the 93rd because they were her best. Dammit, she expected more from her people and now she wondered whether or not she'd made a mistake. No one had ever given her a break on her way up -- and yet she had proven all her detractors wrong. Twenty years of being expected to fail and yet ultimately prevailing had taught Kavindra a good lesson -- failure simply was not an option. Her Mother, her brothers, her instructors -- she had shown them that contrary to their belief, she could achieve.

But that's water under the bridge as her grandmother often told her. She had the present and the future to work with...

And what she had to work with beginning with that silver spoon nugget Nakamura and his insolent friends didn't please her at all. Besides, she finally decided, one way or the other, she would take care of him. If he wasn't going to be an asset to the team, she would ensure that he wouldn't stay a detriment for long.

Ultimately, this was just another setback. She had had them before and she would have them again in the future. But if there had been one constant in her life it was simply this: *Courage will always prevail.*

* * *

Wednesday Morning

"I'm Boffin Gateway," he began in his smooth baritone as he walked up to the new comers. "Welcome to *Space Station Nexus.*"

"Thank you," smiled the stunningly beautiful, tall woman with short blonde hair who took the offered hand and shook it warmly. She turned to her companion and renewed her smile.

"My accompanist and arranger, Bobby Zephyr, Mister Gateway," she replied while Bobby also shook Boffin's hand.

"Boffin, please," he began congenially and added under his breath, "I've arranged it so that you only have to say a few words to the waiting media."

"That's quite all right... Boffin," the Blonde Nightingale replied with a smile. She kept the smile on her face as they walked in to join the waiting media. "After all," she continued, grinning brightly in Boffin's direction, "this is the grand opening of what I've heard is the nicest club this side of Regency Station."

Boffin found himself staring at his premier act as she purposefully took the podium. She took her time to make herself comfortable before the questions started.

Finally regaining his composure, he wanted to get this business on the road as quickly as possible. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I won't waste your time with a few inane preliminary statements, so I shall get right to it. I am pleased to introduce the lovely woman who will open my new nightclub, *Serenade in Blue*, the Blonde Nightingale herself, Jasmine Sainte Clair."

Jasmine flashed Boffin a warm smile before she gave a few opening remarks to the press. Boffin had ensured that there would be "organized chaos." Each reporter had each taken a number and patiently waited their turn to ask their question.

"Ms Sainte Clair," began the first reporter, "can you tell your fans anything about any upcoming projects. Hologids...?" he added hopefully.

Jasmine tolerantly waited until the laughter died down. "Actually I'm working on a new holoivid." She turned to Boffin and smiled, "the theme is blue and I hope to have it finished within the next few months."

Jasmine's announcement received an appreciative murmur from the reporters before the next one asked his question. "Ms Sainte Clair," the next reporter piped up, "you're best known for the song *Angel Eyes*, can you tell us how you came to record it?"

Jasmine flicked her hand over her hair to smooth it out. "I believe that Bobby here," she paused and tossed a hand in her accompanists' direction, "was the one that picked it out for me. Neither one of us expected it to be such a big hit."

"Will you be singing it here?" the reporter asked.

Jasmine looked at Bobby who nodded. "I believe so," she replied, flashing him a warm smile that didn't go unnoticed by the rest of the attendees, both male and female.

"Most big stars travel with a mess o'people, how is it that you travel so light?"

"I have an office at my holoivid company but when I'm on the road, I find that we're always taken care of when we're out on gigs, so having a staff tends to get in the way. Besides," she flashed a smile in Bobby's direction, "we've been together so long, that he knows my needs leaving me to concentrate on my singing."

The next reporter audibly cleared her throat before she asked her question. "Ms Sainte Clair, how did you come by the nickname The Blonde Nightingale?"

Jasmine turned to Bobby and he answered the question. "Actually, I named her that. I remembering seeing her one evening and being captivated by her voice...." he smiled, adding a shy, "and her hair."

She waited a discreet amount of time, allowing the laughter to subside. "And I remember him coming by and talking to me and one of the first things out of his mouth was that he thought I sounded like a Blonde Nightingale. A reporter overheard him and history was made that day."

The reporters chuckled before they one by one continued to ask questions. When their time was up, Boffin took over again to end the session. He thanked the reporters for coming and watched the crowd quickly disperse. He then suggested that he escort Jasmine and Bobby to their quarters.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Jasmine begun, flopping on the couch in the luxurious visitor's suite after Boffin had finally left them.

"It went as well as could be expected," he replied, walking in from his bedroom into the suite proper. He opted to also sit down but on the couch across from her

"Oh, Bobby..." Jasmine crooned, "don't worry, everything will work out." She capped her comment with a toothy smile.

Bobby unceremoniously rejected her attempt to mollify him. "Just keep your mind on the business."

"You are no fun," Jasmine replied. She quickly stood up and crossed the room to pour a glass of champagne, which she found had been chilled to perfection. "Our host has left nothing to chance." She paused and picked up the bottle again taking a good look at the label. "He's *definitely* left nothing to chance. My favorite." She punctuated her comment by smacking her lips.

Bobby didn't answer right away, instead taking a good look at her. Jasmine Sainte Clair was a singer of some renown. She'd made a good living selling a few holovids as well as having a loyal following who were more than happy to see her performing in smaller venues. Jasmine was a natural blonde, six feet tall -- all legs Bobby mused -- and could be described as drop-dead gorgeous, who enjoyed life to the fullest. However, the difference between himself and Jasmine was that he understood that when there was business to be conducted, he would keep his mind on it at all times. Jasmine, on the other hand, could be less than dedicated at times.

"Don't give me that look," she glared, her voice tinged with a deadly edge. She walked over and stood in front of him.

He looked up and glared at her. "You know why--"

"I know why I'm here," she began in a harsh voice. She decided that this wasn't a good time to get him upset and changed her demeanor. "How about you tell me what our schedule looks like."

Bobby shrugged. He stood and walked over to the desk to query the comlink for their schedule. "We don't have anything today. Thursday we rehearse and in the evening, Gateway will have an informal party at the club to welcome you and presumably," he smirked, "to show off the club and work the bugs out."

"When do I perform?"

"I'm getting to that, Jasmine. Your first is on Friday night and another on Saturday night. You're free on Sunday. Monday we leave for Galena and do two shows there." Bobby paused to catch his breath. "We're back here on Wednesday morning. You do one more show on Thursday night and we're outta here on Friday. Our next gig isn't for another two weeks, so if you want to stay here longer..." He allowed his voice to trail off as he pointedly looked at her.

"That *won't* be necessary," she spat back.

Bobby rose from the chair and walked over to Jasmine who was now seated back on the couch. "Just remember to keep your mind on the work."

"Don't worry," she quietly replied.

"I do," he declared before he stomped out of their suite.

* * *

Wednesday Morning

Tactical Officer Ensign Brett "RoughRider" Dallenbach had just finished knocking back his first beer when he spotted Scott Nakamura and the other new kid on the block saunter into the lounge. Feeling charitable and in need some decent company, Brett decided to invite them over for a drink or two.

"Scott, Virgil! Plenty of room here," Brett pointed out.

Virgil looked over and nodded. "Sure."

"As usual," Lt. Jacob "Dutch" van der Weege started in a surly voice, "I don't even rate an invitation anymore."

"Hey, I have to get along with pilots, Dutch. I don't have to take shit from you, bud," Brett retorted to his fellow tactical officer. "After all, what have you done for me lately?"

"Buy you another?" Dutch drolly offered.

In one smooth move, RoughRider kicked back a chair from the table, extended his arms, and beamed his broadest smile. "Dutch, Pal'o'mine, have a seat!"

"And by the way, when Ravyn sees me, she also gives me a kiss. How about you?" Dutch asked sweetly.

Brett cringed slightly at the comment but quickly recovered. "Naw.... But I do have something of mine you can kiss."

"Careful... If Viking hears you," Virgil began, referring to their Deputy Director of Flight Ops, "he might think of it as sexual harassment."

Dutch rolled his eyes upward while Brett merely snorted. "Ouch! Looks like you got another live one there, Dutch."

"Yeah," Dutch began, carefully eyeing his pilot, "the kid's all right except for having to tuck him in and giving him his milk and cookies, he's coming along nicely."

"And remember," Virgil began with a twinkle in his eye, "it's double chocolate chip, mommy."

Brett Dallenbach chuckled. "Speaking of milk beards, where did you leave RoadRunner, Scott? Thought you guys would be hanging together."

When Scott was slow to answer, Brett took a good look at the bedraggled man that was Scott "Sunfire" Nakamura, complete with deep-set rings under his eyes and features that were more ashen than his usual light Asian complexion. The culmination was like a pale shadow of his erstwhile self.

"The nutrient reservoir on our craft tanked midway through our last patrol. We were able to get most of the functionality back, but for whatever reason, one of the valves jammed and we couldn't pump any liquids into the shotgun seat. He passed out from dehydration nearly two hours before we reached home. We were lucky that the merchantman we were escorting had a Mark II transporter. They were able to beam him over and pump liquids into him."

"You do realize," Dutch began with an angry tone to his voice, "that any critical malfunction that can impair the performance or the life of another crewman should result in the immediate abort of the ongoing mission."

"*Hell yes I do!*" Scott exclaimed, slamming his fist hard the table. "The moment we realized I wasn't going to be able to get any liquids to him, I called for an immediately abort. We could have docked with the merchantman and done an EVA and tried to fix up the valve. But the Queen of Mean wouldn't let me. So RoadRunner's down checked for a week. My ground crew has been promised a massive reprimand and I'm off flight status for twenty-four hours. Which to be honest, I welcome."

"*God dammit!*" Brett exclaimed. "If she's really pulling shit like what you're saying, she's liable to get someone killed!"

"I don't know about you guys," Virgil pointed out, "but the way she's been treating Scott hasn't been anything like what I expect from a senior flight

officer. Payat," Virgil continued, referring to his senior wingman, "and I have a good working relationship and he hasn't given me half the shit that Scott's gotten."

"Ours is but to do or die--" Scott droned.

"The problem is," Jacob interrupted, "that someone almost did."

Brett nodded. "Agreed. It's not right for a pilot to willfully endanger their tac officer like that. Who's the Senior TACO over in the ninety-third anyway?"

"RoadRunner's the senior tactical officer," Jacob grumbled.

"After him?" Brett prompted.

Jacob rolled his eyes. "Avalanche's cabin boy, Hawk."

"Neville Takagi? Oh, terrific," Brett muttered.

"Who did protest her actions quite vociferously," Scott pointed out. "But she rolled right over him and said that if he didn't shut up, she'd put him on report too."

"Just typical. That's how she got her call sign. Always rolling right over everyone like the proverbial landslide. Well, if he doesn't do something," Jacob grumbled, "I sure as shit will."

"Easy Dutchman," Virgil started quietly. "You don't want to create bad blood between us and the ninety-third."

"Better a few ounces of bad blood than a very dead tactical officer. Don't you agree?" Lt. Jacob "Dutch" van der Weege capped his comment by eyeing each of them and was eventually rewarded by a round of nodding heads.

* * *

Wednesday Evening

"*Daddy-O!*" Jake shouted to his boss while the leader of the Bobby Zephyr Trio walked into the club and down the elegant staircase. Bobby stopped part way and took a good look at his surroundings. As he continued his way down the stairs, it was his opinion he'd not seen anything quite so opulent outside a royal residence or dictatorship.

"Jake!" Bobby sauntered down the rest of the stairs and ambled over to his sideman. "Where's Dag?"

"Dag-man is sleeping... as usual," Jake added then stepped back to give Bobby a once over. "You just got here, shouldn't you be taking a nap or something?"

"Naw, I'm fine."

"Should I ask how the lady is or should we just get on to business?"

"Actually," Bobby began as he and Jake walked around dance floor allowing Bobby to take in the place, "she's doing fine."

Jake stopped and looked at his boss. "Really?"

"I wouldn't lie to you. The side trip to Earth was on personal business," noting the unspoken question, he quickly added. "And it wasn't medical."

Jake breathed a sigh of relief. "That's true, bossman." Jake decided that this was a good time to change the subject. "I gave the orchestra leader, Duke Basie, our standard list and told him that you'd give him the final roster the morning of the performance. Duke was impressed with the selections."

"Good and how do they sound?"

"Sweet as silk, boss."

Bobby nodded. "That's one less thing to worry about," he mumbled loud enough that Jake overheard him.

Jake cast a concerned look in Bobby's direction and frowned. "But you said..."

"*I know what I said!*" Bobby shouted, and then realized that he needed to calm down. "I'm sorry Jake, I guess I am tired. Look, Jasmine's fine, she's in good voice and really wants to do her best. She figures that she can parlay this gig into several more."

"You know her better than anyone, boss," Jake began, giving Bobby his best toothy grin. "Now, did you and Jasmine decide on any additions?" Jake thought it would be a good idea to get back on track.

Bobby walked over to the piano, pulled out a datapadd before he sat down and began to idly pluck at the keys. "As a matter of fact, we did."

"Groovy man! Play on, Daddy-O!" Jake exclaimed, clearly in his element as Bobby ran through a couple of new tunes. They were briefly interrupted by the surprise arrival of Dag who gladly joined in. Their biggest interruption came

when the last member of their cadre unexpectedly but pleasantly interrupted them.

Jasmine Sainte Clair had strolled down the club's elegant staircase and joined her band as they were leisurely jamming to an old tune.

"*Night'gale, honey-chile!* I thought you'd still be resting, baby and we wouldn't see you until tomorrow!" Jake brightly greeted her as she walked over and gave him a peck on his right cheek while rearranging his signature black beret.

"Always good to see you, Jake," she smiled. She turned around and walked over to Dag, planting a sloppy wet kiss on his forehead.

"Greets, Jasmine," Dag rumbled.

She saved the best for last. She grabbed Bobby and gave him a passionate kiss.

"This is a surprise!" Bobby began as soon as he caught his breath. "Are you feeling up to running through a few numbers?"

"That's why I'm here!" she replied before she sat down on the chair near the piano that had been provided for her.

Bobby nodded though he wondered why Jasmine was really here and not resting after the long journey and the press event. "Let's discuss the show's format. I thought we'd just stick with the tried and true, two sets of nine with a break in between for you to rest and change. In fact, if Jake's not up to doing his usual," Bobby winked in Jake's direction, "we can just let the orchestra do a number or two while we take a break."

Jake put his hands on his skinny hips and glared at Bobby. "Now, son, when have I *ever* not been in the mood to do my rendition of 'Mack, the Knife'?"

"Never..." Jasmine mumbled under her breath. Only Bobby heard her rejoinder. He quickly frowned at her. Jasmine merely sweetly smiled back.

Noting that an awkward silence had grown around them, Bobby decided to get the discussion back to their performance.

"Now then," he pointedly began keeping a steady eye on Jasmine, "if we're all agreed with the two sets of nine songs with an intermission, let's decide which ones we want to do."

"Sounds fine to me," Jasmine replied, now resigned to actually having to work.

"Your end song for the first half should be 'Angel Eyes' as usual," Bobby began.

"As usual," Jasmine monotoned.

Bobby didn't move his datapadd but looked over it to glare at Jasmine. "I thought it would be nice if the first set of three was blue themed. Also goes with your new vid you'll cut."

Jasmine nodded. "Sounds good. I assume 'Serenade in Blue' to start with."

"Right. I thought the orchestra would do a long lead in with you walking in and singing, then, perhaps doing 'It's a Blue World,' 'When Sunny Gets Blue,' 'Blue Skies,' 'Blue Velvet,' or 'Am I Blue?' -- we have a few to pick from."

"Anything new we need to go through, Bobby?"

"Just one or two. Me and the boys did a run through. Why don't you join in and see how it lays, Jasmine?"

Bobby turned away from her and began to play "I've Got the World on a String" with Dag on the guitar and Jake on the bass joining in. He nodded appreciatively as Jasmine took a stab at the new song. After a few run throughs, they all decided to add it to their list.

Bobby was pleased with the way that their rehearsal progressed. His sideboys, as usual, were terrific and Bobby was really pleased when he spotted the orchestra leader listening, giving Bobby a nod of appreciation. Even Jasmine was behaving herself. She didn't fuss when changes were made and she even offered a few suggestions on her own.

Yes, life was good at this point and Bobby Zephyr had great hopes that it would just get better and better.

* * *

Thursday Afternoon

"Mind if I join you?" Scott Nakamura asked as he walked up to his fellow rookie pilot who was sitting on the floor of the hangar deck. Scott had spent twenty-four hours off flight status, which to him was a welcome relief. No patrols and no "Queen of Mean" to deal with for a full day.

"Sure, pull up a chair," Virgil Taylor responded before he went back to working on his datapadd.

Scott did as any pilot on standby would do by dropping his emergency gear, which unfolded creating a nice seating area.

Noting the smile on Scott's face, Virgil added, "Damned comfy, aren't they?"

"Beats the cold hard floor any day," Scott nodded, peering over at what Virgil was working on. "Going over your maintenance specs? Y'know, I always wondered how you got the call sign Merlin until I saw some of your engineering magic."

Virgil laughed, quickly dismissing the comment. "Yeah, we had a matter intake manifold malfunction and we're trying to make sure that it's not systemic."

Scott shrugged. "If you ask me, these Shadowhawks still have a few bugs to work out."

"To be honest, I don't exactly know why. The ones we had two years ago at the Rigel Cup had a lot higher grade parts than these production models."

Scott chuckled. "Well... gee.... did you honestly think that those production prototypes that they let you guys play with were anything like the spec models?"

"Oh, I understand that some parts might be a bit more experimental than others but..."

"Look, honest. When they field top-flight teams who are designed to showcase new technology, believe you me, they are flying extensively upgraded and revised spacecraft. Most of them tend to be more like works of art than functional spacecraft. That's why it was such a shocker when Dad took the championship last year."

Virgil smiled. "I think it was Captain Argent who said that your Dad was the last best pure pilot who was still flying. The Captain didn't seem too surprised when he took the Cup."

Scott laughed. "Personally, I thought it was ironic that I got assigned to the Captain's command. Him and Dad have had a friendly rivalry for a couple of decades now."

"From what I can tell and what I heard through the grapevine, the Captain seems to get first crack at a great deal of top line pilots and resources. So, it's not all together surprising that you wound up here with the scores you had," Virgil pointed out.

"Yeah, well..." Scott stammered, still somewhat embarrassed with all the fuss over his achievement.

"Problems?" Virgil asked.

"You might say..."

"Gentlemen..." a female voice began in a tone reminiscent of a Venus flytrap about to close her leaves, "so very nice to see you both." She turned and bore down on her wingman. "Did you finish that Level I system diagnostic I ordered, Sunfire?"

"Yes, ma'am," Scott replied with no sense of enthusiasm.

"Very well then," Avalanche smiled, "proceed with the Level III."

"But... ma'am..." he stammered, "that'll be at least three hours. I'm scheduled to rotate off in ninety."

"Your personal comfort," she began with a deadly tinge to her voice, "should never be put in front of your duty. Is that understood, Ensign?"

Virgil had silently watched this exchange and at Avalanche's last pronouncement and simply rolled his eyes in disgust.

His reaction hadn't gone unnoticed on Avalanche who quickly turned her attention to the other rookie. "Well, if it isn't our little resident Rigel Cup Winner. It must have felt good sitting back and collecting the accolades while others did all the work."

The fact that the maintenance officer working on the nearby Nighthawk dropped his tuning wrench in disgust after overhearing the exchange was not lost on Virgil. At this rate, Avalanche would most likely alienate half the Station before nightfall.

"I suppose so," Virgil glibly tossed off, pointedly polishing his Rigel Cup ring on his flight suit, "but at least I have the something to show for it."

Avalanche felt her face flush. "Some day... Some day..."

"And on that day," Virgil smoothly added, "I hope your ground crew and your fellow pilots do as well as we did for Captain Wyndham and Captain Argent."

A lone chuckle from afar interrupted Avalanche's boiling fury. However, she quickly regained her composure by audibly sniffing around the two junior officers. "What's that smell?" she asked.

Virgil and Scott looked at each other then back to Avalanche towering over them.

"Smell?" they echoed.

"Yes smell... Something *stinks* here," she replied. "It smells like... like..."

They looked at each other before they chorused. "Yes?"

She zeroed in on the two junior officers sitting on the floor. "Rookies," she replied with triumph in her voice. "Yes, the unmistakable scent of fear and incompetence that only rookies emit. So how about you two rookies vacate this here hangar before you smell up the whole place for the rest of us free breathers?"

Scott and Virgil kept still as they stared at each other in amazement. Virgil mulled over the fact that this was the lamest attempt at hazing he'd ever experienced while Scott seized the initiative by tossing up his arms and declaring, "Fine by me! I'll be in my quarters!"

Much to her horror, Avalanche realized the impact of her statement and quickly amended her order. "Not so fast, Mister Nakamura. About that Level III diagnostic on your craft..." she turned her attention from Scott to Virgil, "perhaps you can get some of Mister Taylor's 'friends' to give you a hand. "

"Begging the Commander's pardon, but some of the Lieutenant's 'little friends,' and for that matter, the pilots at hand would very much like it if the Commander would just plain drop her current line of reasoning all together."

Avalanche spun around and noticed that SPO Franklyn Williams the Senior Grounds Tech was standing behind her with a frown on his wrinkled face that indicated that he was less than amused right now. Though he technically ranked lower than the three of them, everyone on the Flight Deck knew that Pops really ran the show and it wasn't a good idea to get on his bad side.

"Very well," she coolly replied to Pops before she turned back to face Scott. "Mister Nakamura, you have your orders." She was about to leave when she tossed over to Scott as he stood up, "Smell you later. But don't worry, I'll be able to remove the stench before the *big* party tonight."

Pops and Virgil watched as Avalanche and Scott went their separate ways. Pops echoed Scott's sigh before Virgil blurted out, "Stupid Fucking Bitch."

Pops chuckled and pointed to his cheek that now visibly twitched. "You said, it son."

*

Space Station Nexus Years: Year 2, 2339

Next: *Manhunt!: You Bait the Line*

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