

Manhunt!

Two: You Bait the Line

Thursday Night

Archer was clearly a woman with something on her mind. She was in Roscoe's office, not saying a word, just pacing up and down, putting a noticeable rut in his rug. While they were a few hours from the beginning of their boss's big night, Roscoe had never seen Archer so preoccupied before. And he'd seen her when enemy fighter planes were just itching to shoot them out of the sky.

"Would *some* body -- *any* body -- please tell me," the club's majordomo started with an icy tinge her to voice, "why all the fuss over this woman. After all, she's *just* a singer."

"Archer..." Roscoe idly tossed out while he double-checked the guest list one last time, "I do believe you're jealous, that or..." Roscoe dropped the datapadd and looked at her. "You're upset because you don't stand a chance."

Archer whipped her head around to stare at the club's chief of security. "Is there a problem?" she growled through clenched teeth.

Roscoe was surprised by her reaction and quickly stood up from his desk. "Archer," he began quietly, placing his hands on her shoulders, "what's wrong?"

Archer shook her head, pursing her lips. "Gut feeling, Roscoe."

He relaxed by taking his hands off of her shoulders. "I remember when we flew together. Your gut saved us on more than one occasion."

Archer smiled. "True," she agreed, casting her thoughts back to the time when she was his tac officer and he was the pilot but quickly went back to the matter at hand. "But this time..." She looked up at Roscoe. "I can't put my finger on it, but there's something not quite right about all this."

"Well," Roscoe began while putting on his dinner jacket, "I'll keep an extra eye on things. I'm not about to dismiss your feelings but until we have something more concrete, all we can do is be more vigilant. As Lichtenberg, the German physicist once said: '*Doubt must be no more than vigilance, otherwise it can become dangerous.*' However," he paused as he consulted his chronometer, "the guests are going to be arriving soon and unless we want Boffin to have chewed his nails to the quick, it might be a good idea if we went out and held his hand."

Archer nodded as they began walking out of the door of his office. "Thanks, Roscoe."

"Any time, kiddo."

They walked in silence until they reached Boffin who was, indeed, making a complete pest of himself.

"Look, Bof," Roscoe began genially, "let everyone do their jobs. We're just in the way."

"*But!*"

"But nothing. Look, let's stand out in the foyer, the first guests will be arriving soon, in fact, Arcadia said she'd be here early." Roscoe paused, adding with a wink. "She told us that she knew how you'd be right before the big event."

"*Mam'selle said that!*" Boffin wailed.

"No, but it sounded good, didn't it?" Roscoe teased as he and Archer led Boffin into the club's foyer and sat him down on the ornate bench.

Boffin looked up and scowled at him, allowing his nervousness to get to him yet again. "Is everything ready?"

"You'll have to trust me when I say this, but everything *is* ready. After all," Archer concluded smoothly, "that's why you pay me the proverbial big bucks, Mister G."

"Humour me," Boffin all but pleaded.

"My pleasure, sir!" Archer began with a flourish. "The media will be kept a respectful distance away but will be allowed in for a shoot after at least an hour into the party. They'll only be here for fifteen minutes. Chef Wong told me that everything is under control and he would guarantee that your company would enjoy the cuisine tonight. I've also double checked with all the guests and they will be here on time."

Boffin stared at her in total panic.

"This dinner party -- our first formal event of your club, Mister Gateway, is under control." Archer paused as she leaned over and adjusted his blue bow tie. "And we all have a stake in how well this evening goes off and I assure you that all the staff will do our best to make you proud."

Boffin nodded. "I know," he whispered.

"*Incoming!*" Roscoe joked as he watched Arcadia walk into the club.

"Why Boffin..." Arcadia joked to her former yeoman, "you can't tell me that you're nervous. With what you've been through with me while on the *Stellar Wind?*"

"Mam'selle?" he squeaked.

"Boffin," she added quietly, "I have every confidence that I shall have a splendid time. You've never, ever let me down and I don't think your people will either."

He looked up at her and smiled. "Thank you, Arcadia."

Arcadia caught Archer's eye before she sat next to him. Archer acknowledged her before she and Roscoe took off to take care of last minute details now that Arcadia was babysitting Boffin.

"Boffin," Arcadia began, making herself comfortable. She carefully arranged her red dress so it wouldn't crinkle too much as she tried to come up with a topic that would occupy Boffin, "you look handsome. I love this shade of blue."

"It's not just blue, Mam'selle... it's cobalt blue. We call it Serenade in Blue, of course."

"Of course." Arcadia had to smile to herself at Boffin's insistence. Knowing when to declare defeat, she decided to change the topic of discussion. "Tell me something. Why did you choose Jasmine?"

"Oh," he began, clearly becoming relaxed now that he was in his element, "well... actually, it was my old gambling partner that suggested that I book her."

"Lawrence?"

"The same," he nodded. "Apparently, he'd seen her perform a number of times and thought she was just the ticket. She's not a *major* name but has a loyal following. I asked a number of my other gambling acquaintances and they agreed. I honestly didn't think I'd be able to book her but when I talked to her people, they told me that she'd had a cancellation and was available."

"Kyle told me that he'd known her in the old days, presumably before she'd made her name."

"She's been around for a while but only has hit it in the big time these last few years. In fact, she'll be doing a couple of shows on Galena."

"Galena? I'm impressed," Arcadia nodded.

"On the other hand," Boffin continued with a smirk, "*Nexus* isn't exactly what I'd call on the circuit so any name that comes here *will* be big news."

Arcadia chuckled. "I noticed that. When ten performances of an *extremely* obscure Klingon opera are sold out, you know that outside entertainment around here is few and far between."

"I'm wondering though," he mused aloud with a twinkle in his eye, "but I can't help but think that the idea of audience participation wasn't lost on some."

"True," Arcadia mused, "but when one of the singers jumped into the audience, it did take a few of them by surprise. It was at that point that I appreciated the Station Commander's private and secluded box."

"Agreed, but I wish I could have had a closer look at the face of that woman when the singer accidentally ripped her clothes off."

Arcadia shook her head. "We treated her for shock and one of her husbands, according to Kyle, filed a formal complaint. Of course, since this was a cultural exchange, there wasn't much he could do but Kyle did have a rather strong word with the manager about having no further such incidents."

"Didn't know it caused such a fuss," Boffin laughed, shaking his head with amusement.

"At least you won't have to worry about anything like this," Arcadia suggested.

"True..." Boffin replied, mentally noting to cancel any thought of booking a Klingon Repertory company, "it's not that I'm second guessing myself, but after I engaged Jasmine, I heard all kinds of.... well... tales about her. Mostly that she acted like a Prima Dona, but since she's been here, she's been nothing but the best."

"Probably just stories, Boffin. You know how people like to talk, especially when it's bad news. But it's good that she's living up to your expectations. Less for you to worry about."

"Worry?" he squeaked.

"I am sorry, Boffin," she chuckled, desperately trying to put the conversation back on track. She was about to try and cheer him up again when she noticed that the guests were arriving. "Buck up. Look your best, now," she ordered, using her best commanding officer's voice prompting a chuckle from Boffin.

"Yes, sir!" he replied, standing up to receive the first of his guests. "Glad you could make it!" he beamed as he shook everyone's hands before leading them into the club.

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Ike Ivanan and his steady companion, Lars Lysander presented their invitations to the doorman and walked into the club. The invitation had requested formal clothing. Lars immediately checked with the club to ensure they meant civilian and not uniforms. When informed that civilian was the order of the evening, both he and Ike decided to dress alike in 20th century black tuxedos, black silk shirts and black bow ties. Lars looked over to Ike and adjusted his tie.

"Would you look at this?" Ike began.

Lars didn't say anything; he just gave an appreciative whistle.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Arcadia remarked as she joined the pair walking into the bar area where the reception was being held.

"I was just thinking that someone should pinch me, Madame," Lars began, with a sense of awe in his voice. "I just want to make sure that-- *ouch!*" Lars suddenly stopped and glared at his companion.

Ike gave him an innocent look as he tossed up his hands. "What?"

"What the hell did you pinch me on the ass for?" Lars exclaimed.

"Darce," Ike addressed his old friend Arcadia who happened to be his boss, using the nickname that only he ever used for her. "Did not Mister Lysander here say that someone should pinch him?"

"You beat me to it," Arcadia drolly responded.

Lars simply laughed. "Next time, I'll be careful what I wish for."

"That's always a good idea, especially around this one," Arcadia tossed off in Ike's direction.

Ike put his hands over his chest. "I'm wounded, Darce."

Arcadia picked up his left hand and took his pulse. "You'll live, Lieutenant."

Before Ike could respond, a familiar voice interrupted him.

"Have I come at a bad time?" Kyle Argent joked. He leaned over and kissed his wife.

Ike had moved back to Lars and smiled. "Of course not, Kyle. Besides, my heart is already taken tonight."

"Oh?" Kyle replied as he took two glasses of champagne off the tray. He gave one to his wife while the others fended for themselves.

Ike displayed one of the biggest smiles that Arcadia had ever seen on him. "I've been in love with Jasmine Sainte Clair ever since I saw her playing dives back on Kelbat."

Kyle flinched slightly at the mention of Jasmine's name. He realized that she was the reason for this soirée tonight and that he really needed to calm down. Fortunately, Kyle's hesitation went unnoticed because his wife had laughed at her Chief of Staff's last comment.

"You're in love with a *woman*?" she retorted.

Lars looked at Ike. "Oh?"

"Jealous?" Ike tossed back.

Lars shook his head. "Not at all. Besides, I know where your secret stash of Jasmine Sainte Clair's vids are located."

"I didn't know you were that big a fan, Ike," Arcadia commented between sips of her champagne.

"I've kept up with her career for years and, in fact, as soon as her premier show is over, I have to write up a critique for the newsletter."

"Newsletter?" Arcadia blurted out.

"Yep, *Bird Song*. I've been getting it for years," Ike responded with a wistful tinge to his voice.

"He's a really *big* fan, Madame Argent," Lars finally told her, casting a smirk in Ike's direction. "Obsessive, if you ask me."

Arcadia smiled and shook her head. "So I see. I've known Ike for years and I just never knew."

"You," Ike retorted, "never asked me, Darce!" He capped off his comment by knocking back his glass of champagne.

"True," she laughed, then thought for a moment. "First show, did you say?" When Ike nodded, she continued. "Kyle and I will be there too."

"That's not unexpected, Darce, after all, he's the Station Commander and goes to all the big functions. You don't get much bigger than this."

"What about that Klingon Opera?" Lars wickedly tossed out.

Ike gave him a dirty look. "How can you compare a bunch of Klingons hooting and hollering to the Blonde Nightingale?" he wailed.

Lars shrugged. "I enjoyed it."

"Lars," began Ike, ever the consummate snob as he gave his companion a pointedly dirty look, "all your taste is in your mouth."

Arcadia snorted and even Kyle found himself with a slight smile on his face but it quickly melted into a frown. This didn't go unnoticed by Arcadia who turned to him and gently stroked his arm. "Is there anything wrong, love?"

Kyle shook his head while he unconsciously adjusted his bow tie, which resulted in it becoming crooked. Arcadia put her glass down and straightened it out for him. "If you want, we can make it a short night," she whispered.

He looked down at his wife adjusting his tie. "Not necessary. This isn't exactly a social engagement despite the civilian clothing. I'm here as the Station Commander and will act accordingly."

Arcadia stepped back to check that his tie was straight. She concluded that despite what he had just said, they'd try to leave early so he could get some rest. He obviously wasn't getting enough sleep.

"Now that you've made him look presentable -- nice tuxedo Kyle though you would have been more stylish with a black shirt like ours," Ike handed Arcadia another glass. "Here, have another champagne for a job well done!"

"Thank you Ike. Now, will you and Lars excuse us?" She pointedly hooked her arm into her husband's. "Kyle reminded me that this isn't a social occasion for him so we need to do the Station Commander and Spouse routine."

Kyle looked at his wife and smiled slightly as they started to mingle with the crowd that was anxiously waiting for Jasmine to make her appearance.

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"Ms Sainte Clair," Archer began in her usual professional demeanor, tinged with an ever so slight hint of displeasure, "everyone is here and anxiously awaiting your appearance."

Bobby glanced at Jasmine and decided he'd better intercept this conversation before Jasmine said something they'd both regret. "Jasmine decided to spend an extra few minutes with the media."

Archer nodded, attempting to keep herself from overtly frowning at Jasmine. "If you'll follow me...."

Bobby smiled, purposely hooking his arm into Jasmine's. He squirmed her into the club to join the rest of the guests of the ultra-exclusive party the owner was throwing in her honor.

"So sorry..." Jasmine began, all smiles and apparently genuinely glad to be there as the applause that greeted her finally died down. She casually walked into the bar where everyone had gathered for pre-dinner cocktails, "but I gave the media just a few more publicity shots. One can never have enough publicity shots," she purred. She proceeded to personally meet and greet each of the guests, purposely leaving the two in the corner for last. Having met everyone, she quickly made a beeline to where Kyle and Arcadia were standing, displaying her most beautiful smile in Kyle's direction.

"Kyle!" she beamed as she grabbed and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek, "It's been too long."

Kyle seemed ill at ease with Jasmine's outburst of affection, but eventually reciprocated the embrace. "It's been a few years," he replied noncommittally.

"It has," she smiled at Kyle one more time before she turned towards Arcadia. "I'm Jasmine Sainte Clair and you must be Arcadia."

Arcadia had watched this little scene unfold in front of her and could sense Kyle's discomfort. Of course she wasn't thrilled with this whole business, however, in the interest of not causing a scene, she took the offered hand and was quite surprised with Jasmine's reaction.

"I'd heard all about you, Arcadia," she began, still beaming a warm smile in her direction. "When we appeared on Pezun, one of your former patients showed me your good work. He never stopped talking about you, your skill, and your kindness."

Again, Arcadia was surprised by Jasmine and found herself actually warming up to her. "I'm quite surprised," she began, also displaying a warm smile in her direction. "Most surgeons labour in obscurity. It's comforting to know that former patients think so highly of one."

Archer came over and quietly interrupted them. "Sorry to intrude, but dinner is being served."

All conversation ceased as everyone gulped back their remaining drink and started to follow the majordomo from the bar area to the dining area on the dance floor below. Now that they had stopped chatting, most of the guests finally noticed the live orchestra playing soft music in the background.

Kyle grimly glanced at Arcadia as he offered his elbow. They started to walk down the staircase when she was lightly tapped on the shoulder.

"Arcadia, I was wondering if you'd be good enough to sit with me during dinner," Jasmine requested.

Arcadia considered this a curious request. "I'd enjoy that," she opted to reply.

"Mister Gateway," Jasmine began, "I hope this won't cause you too much of a problem, but do you think that Doctor Argent and I can sit together..." She capped off her request with one of her most winning smiles, which wasn't lost on Boffin.

"I'll talk to Archer and see what we can do." Boffin scurried off to find Archer. When she learned what she had to do, she displayed body language that indicated that she wasn't thrilled with the request but would comply the best of her abilities. Boffin watched his majordomo deftly rearrange the seating at the table and nodded to her boss.

"This way, ladies... and... gentlemen," he began quickly acknowledging the men as an afterthought. "Everything is ready."

"Thank you Mister Gateway," Jasmine replied and Arcadia chimed in. "Thank you Boffin."

"My pleasure, ladies," Boffin grinned before he took off to take care of other business.

"What a nice man," she mentioned to Arcadia while they both sat down. "Has he always been this way, I wonder?"

"I should say so," Arcadia began, unexpectedly giving Jasmine her total attention. "Boffin was my yeoman when I was a starship captain on--"

"*You* were a starship captain?" Jasmine exclaimed with total astonishment in her voice, giving Kyle a sly wink of appreciation.

"Indeed, on the *USS Stellar Wind*," Arcadia began while a bowl of soup was placed before her.

"And now you're a surgeon?" Jasmine asked.

"Actually, I'm the Chief Medical Officer for the Station."

"Impressive," Bobby tossed out.

Jasmine glanced at Bobby, giving him a frosty look. "*Very* impressive," she agreed, casting a sly eye towards Kyle, who she noted was purposely avoiding the conversation.

"And Kyle here is the Station Commander. How do you separate business and pleasure? It must be difficult," Jasmine asked with genuine concern in her voice that didn't go unnoticed by Arcadia.

"It is difficult but we manage. I imagine," Arcadia took a sip of white wine before she continued, "that it's difficult for any couple that work with each other."

Jasmine gave Arcadia an appreciative smile before she turned and gave an equally appreciative glance in Bobby's direction. "It is very much the case."

Arcadia leaned back in her chair and allowed herself a chance to expel the breath she'd been holding ever since Jasmine had arrived. Kyle had mentioned -- reluctantly she had recalled -- that he had known Jasmine years ago. But Jasmine's personal greeting and Kyle's reaction to such had indicated to Arcadia that perhaps there was a bit more to all of this. She realized that she shouldn't be too surprised at an old girlfriend or two popping up. Kyle never said he had led a monastic life after his first wife's death -- just an empty one. Arcadia took one last look at Jasmine and finally relaxed.

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Kavindra Courage still wasn't sure how she ended up on the guest list, but she had checked with the club and found out that all the senior flight operations personnel had been invited. While she finished up the cream of asparagus soup,

she again cautiously glimpsed around at her tablemates and decided she was definitely out of her league.

It was bad enough she was dining with all these civilians but she was also wearing a civilian evening dress that tugged and chafed in the all the wrong places and made her feel downright miserable. She also noticed how lovely all the women looked and immediately felt inferior by far. Even officers junior to her looked much better than she felt she appeared.

"That is a lovely gown, Kavindra," fellow pilot, Ayesha Deveraux began in hopes to distracting the Wing Commander from tugging at the collar of her dress one more time.

"Umm.... thank you Ayesha... and.... err... you look nice also," she stammered glad for the interruption of having the first course served, saving her from any further feeble attempts at making conversation.

"I do believe that this is the best soup I have ever eaten." Ayesha bravely attempted once again to draw her into conversation noting that her other dinner companions weren't even going to try, not even her own tactical officer sitting next to her.

"I agree.... even though I can't say that I'm fond of vegetables as a rule."

"No?" Ayesha continued, happy that she'd finally gotten the Wing Commander to open up. "I have to remember that not everyone enjoys vegetables as much as I do, especially asparagus."

"That's a fact, dollface," Ayesha's companion Roscoe chimed in.

Ayesha put her spoon down and looked all around her, noting that all the guests were either eating or waiting to be served. "I do not believe that you have much to do tonight, Roscoe. It appears that Boffin was careful not to invite any of *your* old friends here tonight," she chided. "Like... what was her name?" Ayesha smirked at Roscoe. "That friend of yours who was draped all across you when I... err... rescued you out at that dive of a bar not too long ago."

Roscoe glared at her. "Any...way... I'm still the bouncer and I still have a job to do."

"Bouncer?" Kavindra asked.

"Yeah, technically known as the Chief of Security... Bof thought that bouncer sounded too low-life. Anything to oblige Mister G..." Roscoe allowed his voice to trail off before he savagely attacked the fresh baked bread on the table.

Kavindra suddenly felt the need to get away for a while. The pressure of work and the pressure of being on her best behavior (anybody who was anybody was present, including the Station Commander *and* the Director of Flight Operations) were too much. She finally concluded that a short trip to use the facilities was in order.

"If you would excuse me..."

With this being a formal evening, once Roscoe stood up, all the rest of the men stood and watched Kavindra leave the table. "Who's idea was it," one man grumbled as he retook his seat, "that when a woman stands up, all we men have to stand. It's not as if we're going with her, dammit!"

Kavindra didn't hear that last comment because she was well on her way to the bathroom. She walked in and was astounded. Though, on second thought, she should have expected that if the nightclub was the most luxurious place she'd ever been in, the bathroom would live up to the rest of the establishment.

It was huge.

It appeared to be larger than one of the hangar decks. Mirrors on the walls, lights in the ceiling, and a black plush carpet lined the entry way to a sitting area, well stocked with black and silver chairs and couches so plush, she suspected that if she sat down, she'd be swallowed whole. Off to one side was a series of private dressing rooms that held a commode, sink, and shower. She passed a number of private stalls that held commodes and a cordoned off section that held the urinals. Frances and Manuel, the bathroom attendants remained discreetly out of her way though she imagined that if she needed their assistance, they would be there in a flash. Two dressing tables with makeup, hair spray, and other accouterments completed the room. She also noted that all noise was absorbed either by the plush carpet or the dampeners so it gave the appearance of an area that afforded complete privacy. She finally concluded that anyone who came in here would find the area comfortable and inviting.

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"I can't say that I'm one for vegetable soup," Jasmine said, "but this is quite extraordinary."

Arcadia nodded. "I agree, this is quite good." Arcadia briefly flicked her eyes in Kyle's direction and noticed that he had decided to keep himself focused on the task at hand and not join in on the conversation. *Oh, well*, she considered, *his loss*.

Jasmine also noticed how silent Kyle was, not at all like the Kyle she knew. Well, that's not true. Kyle had always been quiet, but not this quiet. Luckily for her, she and Arcadia were happily chatting away, leaving everyone else in the dust.

"That was very, very good," Jasmine declared while the server deftly took her bowl away. She looked over at the other tables and noticed that the salad was about to be served and he would be there soon with their salad. She'd kept a steady watch on those using the facilities and thought that this was a good time to duck in.

Even though she knew that this guest list was hand picked, she still preferred to exercise some caution. While she'd gotten used to being the center of attention, she knew that the loo was one place where she could easily be trapped. Therefore, she either arranged for a private place or carefully watched the more public one for a chance when it wasn't too full. She could have asked Arcadia to accompany her but decided against it.

And this was her chance.

"If you would excuse me," she began loud enough for the rest of her table companions could hear her. "As they said in the old days, I need to powder my nose."

She quickly stood up, not even staying long enough to note that the gentlemen had politely risen. This time, no one, not even the men grumbled. Everyone just covertly watched her quickly walking to the bathroom before they turned their attention back to eating or talking.

Bobby on the other hand openly watched her progress as she made her way from the table before a waiter handing him a datapadd briefly interrupted him. He scanned it then stood up, quickly making his excuses to his tablemates.

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Archer decided that it was safe for her to take a break and the one place she needed to go -- and quickly -- was the bathroom. While she could have hiked back to her office, she had waited just a bit too long for that. Expediency became the order of the day rather than privacy. She entered the club's rest room through the employee entrance. Both the guests and employees shared the same facilities but there was plenty of space between allowing both the employees and guests some privacy from each other.

She had just taken out her datapadd to check a note or two when it slipped through her fingers and dropped it to the floor. The plush carpet dampened the

noise but not the loud whispers coming from the corner of the guest section. While she believed in privacy, she also knew that she had a job to do and if there was going to be any trouble, she wanted to be the first person to know.

"God dammit, you're pushing to hard!" a man strongly whispered.

"Funny, wasn't too long ago you thought I wasn't pushing hard enough," a woman retorted in an equally strong whisper.

"Things have gotten a bit more complicated. All this is likely to blow up in our faces and cause some real trouble. Do you really want that?"

"No," she replied. *"But I'm confident of my abilities. And I'm secure in the my believe that this is not going to come to pass."*

"I'm not. I've really had enough of your petty bullshit. Either get with the program now, or you're on your own!" he declared.

"You know that either way just suits me just fine," she retorted. *"Let's get one thing straight. There's one leader and one follower. I'm very secure in the knowledge of who is what around here. If you are not, then rest assured that I can convince you otherwise."*

"Fuck you!"

"You wish..."

Archer quietly listened as the heated discussion finally came to a climax. Not wishing to be caught eavesdropping, she quickly ducked into an open stall and closed the door after her. She didn't hear anything further, so she waited a discreet amount of time then quickly rushed out. Unfortunately, between the whispering and the distorted acoustics of the room, she couldn't figure out who was talking, thought it was obvious to her that it was a man and a woman. She quickly looked around and finally came upon Jasmine Sainte Claire and Kavindra Courage busily fussing with their hair and makeup at one counter. There were a few men at the other counter also attending to their appearance. She tried to figure out who they were but their hands or other objects obscured their faces.

Both women looked up at her with a questioning gaze. Realizing that there was no reason to alarm the guests, Archer merely gave them a relaxed smile before she walked away. She spotted the bathroom attendant Manuel and called him over.

"Manuel," she began quietly, not wishing to be overheard, "did you notice any other women here within the last few moments?"

Manuel paused for a moment while he twirled his long mustache, deep in thought. "No, *senorita*. Just these two lovely *senoritas* and the *senors* over here."

Archer cast a covert glance at the ladies sitting at the table and frowned. "Thank you Manuel," she absently replied, mulling over what she had heard and what she was going to do about it as that gnawing feeling in her gut had just intensified.

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Once Kavindra had left the table for the bathroom, Ayesha noticed that the table conversation took a turn for the better. In fact, she had engaged Neville Takagi in a rather interesting discussion of strategy when he was interrupted by one of the waiters. He had tossed her a hasty apology and quickly left the table for parts unknown. Ayesha watched the passing parade before she turned to her companion who was busy attacking the second course.

"Is there a convention being held in the loo?" Ayesha asked Roscoe who was busily chomping on a salad leaf.

Roscoe put down his fork and glared at his companion. "Ayesha, when you gotta go, you gotta go. Besides," Roscoe paused and looked around the room noticing that a few other guests had also taken advantage of the facilities, "I'm sure that those who indulged in an extra drink or two during the cocktail hour are now feeling the effects of same."

Ayesha nodded. "That is quite true though," she gave him a wicked smile while she whispered, "it has been quite pleasant *without* the Wing Commander."

Roscoe continued chewing. "That's a fact. I don't know what her problem is, but I'd wish she'd just lose her attitude and pronto."

"Scuttlebutt indicates that she has been riding the rookies pretty hard." She paused to choose her words *very* carefully. "Including Virgil who has weathered this storm much better than the other new comer."

Roscoe tossed down his fork in disgust as he mulled over what Ayesha had just told him. He watched Kavindra cautiously slink back towards their table. "I know what you are thinking, 'sha," he turned from watching the pitiful sight in pink sitting down again and faced Ayesha. "And I assure you that I won't interfere."

However, I'd best not hear that Kavindra here has done anything dumb. Hazing is one thing, being stupid is another," he whispered angrily.

Ayesha nodded and finally noticed that Kavindra had retaken her seat. "Kavindra," Ayesha began, "since you did not indicate a preference for your salad, I took the liberty of requesting that they leave the different dressings for you to choose from."

Kavindra sat down and stared blankly at the bare salad surrounded by various carafes. She suddenly shook herself as if she just now realized that someone had spoken to her. She looked up and noticed that Ayesha was staring at her.

"Oh, yes... thank you," she stammered. She looked up and noticed that her tactical officer was just retaking his seat. "Salad dressing," she pointed out to Neville.

"So I see," he grumbled, grabbing the blue cheese and liberally dunking it on. He shoveled a wad of lettuce into his mouth while pointedly ignoring her.

Ayesha sighed to herself and decided that any further attempts of conversation with that pair was a total waste of her time.

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Jasmine hurried back to the table and quickly sat down.

"It did seem," Arcadia ventured between bites of salad, "that after you left for the loo, a number of people decided to join you. I'm not sure if it was coincidence or not."

Jasmine gave Arcadia a feeble grin. "Oh, I'm sure there wasn't any conspiracy or anything of that nature. Everyone here," she continued as she toyed around with her salad, "has given me nothing but respect." She put down her fork and laughed. "I was keeping a careful watch and when I noted that the traffic had died down, I thought it would have been a good opportunity to have some privacy. But then the restroom is one place where my fans can get a close up and personal look at me. I've rather gotten used to causing a small commotion," she smiled, finally becoming relaxed. "But then, it's never been in a bathroom quite that large or luxurious and I've traveled around this galaxy for quite a few years."

"Really?" Arcadia replied, "I'll definitely have to have a look."

"Check out what?" Bobby Zephyr asked as he retook his seat and dove into his salad.

"The bathroom facilities," she replied.

"Oh..." he stammered, then quickly recovered. "Really?"

"So Jasmine has told me," Arcadia responded, noting the concern on Bobby's face. "Is there a problem, Bobby? You look distressed."

He shook his head. "Just a few loose ends to take care of for the performance tomorrow." He looked over at Jasmine who was staring at him.

"I've taken care of it, Jasmine." He reached over and took her hand. "Nothing for you to worry about."

Arcadia took a good look at the couple. While there was obviously some genuine affection between the two, more than just a working relationship, there was obviously some friction there now. Arcadia chalked it up to a combination of artistic temperament and working closely with someone she cares for deeply. As someone in the same situation, she knew that it would pass soon enough.

* * *

Captain Kyle Argent caught the signal from Boffin out of the corner of his eye indicating that dessert was ready to be served. The Station Commander stood up and used a spoon to tap his champagne glass. The room immediately fell silent as everyone looked towards him, champagne glasses in hand.

"Please join me in toasting our honored guests tonight." Kyle raised his glass in Jasmine's direction, taking a small sip. The men stood, holding their glasses in her direction while the women did the same but stayed in their chairs. Now all Kyle had to do was wait for his second and last official duty for the night. He retook his chair and waited for dessert to be served while silently listening to Jasmine and Arcadia continue to gab the night away.

Once everyone was finished eating and the tables were cleared of the dessert dishes, Kyle noticed that the orchestra had moved from background music to dance music. That was his cue. He skillfully led Arcadia to the dance floor while Boffin escorted Jasmine to join them in the first dance. Part way through the song, a number of other couples joined in.

"Are you having a good time," Kyle ventured as he twirled Arcadia around the dance floor.

"Very much so, I never met someone so interesting, Kyle. I can understand how you two became... err.... close," she replied, carefully listening to the beat of the

music as they continued to dance. While she enjoyed dancing very much, Vaegans are tone deaf and she has to pay close attention to the rhythm lest she lost her place.

Kyle didn't respond immediately, instead he drew her closer, swaying to the music, deftly missing bumping into Jasmine and Boffin.

"Boffin," Jasmine began as they danced around the floor, "this has been one of the nicest parties I've ever attended."

"Thank you, madam, but you understand, I didn't do it alone. I have an excellent staff," he replied.

"And an *excellent* cook. I don't think I've ever had such outstanding food before."

"I'll be sure to let everyone know of your pleasure this evening, Jasmine," Boffin replied, his words stumbling over themselves.

Jasmine didn't reply, she simply smiled as they continued to dance, keeping a wary eye on one couple in particular.

* * *

Lars Lysander sat at his table patiently watching the dancers turn about the dance floor before he let out a deep sigh.

"I heard that," Ike retorted as he finished up his dessert. "Look, you know I can't dance worth a shit. Why don't you ask someone?" Ike paused and looked around the room. "Look over there. What's her name...Landslide? She's sitting there all alone."

"Landslide?" Lars was very confused before he glanced over to where Ike was looking. "Oh, Avalanche. She's alone for a damned good reason," he disgustedly tossed off. "I have to work with Kavindra Courage, the Queen of All Meanness, I don't have to interact with her socially."

"If you aspire to be the Director of Flight Ops, you gotta kiss a lot of toads, my boy."

Lars rolled his eyes upward. "I know you're right," he began, his eyes still fixed on the ornate ceiling, "but even the princess knew that eventually she'd find a prince. All I'm going to find out is that I had a miserable time dancing with that toad."

While Ike had a great deal of sympathy with his plight, he could only offer up a couple of words of wisdom. "Pucker up, Lars."

* * *

"Say Kyle?"

Kyle looked up and noticed Terrence Blair hovering over him. "Want to have a chair so you can talk to our Blonde Nightingale," Kyle finally muttered.

Terrence snorted. "I take it you've had a long evening?"

"Long enough," he retorted. "What's on your mind?"

The Director of Flight Operations tiredly sat down and stretched. A waiter quickly came over and asked him if he wanted anything. Terrence waived him off. "I see you don't lack for service around here."

"Yeah, well..." Kyle mumbled.

Terrence looked at his long time friend and figured that if Kyle wanted to talk, he would, so Terrence just plunged on. "I wondered if we could talk shop for a moment. There was a situation of sorts on the Flightline the other day and I thought I might get some additional insight on how to best handle it..."

Kyle dutifully listened and periodically showed his attentiveness with a well placed "hmmm" while Terrence prattled on about his wayward Wing Commander. As much as Kyle wanted to give this matter his full attention, he had other pressing items on his personal agenda.

"Sounds like I finally have a plan," Terrence began, standing up to leave. "I appreciate the time, Kyle."

"No problem," he responded, wondering how he solved Terrence's problem by not saying a word... Amazing how smart one can appear by remaining mute and allowing people to solve their own problems.

Kyle watched Terrence leave his table and mingle with the crowd. Not in a mingling mood -- besides, people tended to come to him so it wasn't necessary for him to leave the table -- he sat back in his chair and nursed his iced tea. He watched the crowd dancing or talking amongst themselves. He was actually stating to relax when he noticed that Bobby had come back to the table to sit. Kyle had mulled over asking a favor and decided that this was as good a time as any.

"I was wondering if I could ask you a question," Kyle began congenially.

"Yes, Captain?" Bobby replied, flashing his trademark boyish grin.

"Does Jasmine do requests?"

Bobby considered for a moment as he finished up his Brandy. "Normally not, but I'm sure she'd consider it coming from you."

Kyle momentarily paused wondering if he should or not. Finally, he decided to press on. "Even though Arcadia is tone-deaf..." Noting Bobby's look of concern, he added. "It's a congenital condition. All Vaegans are born that way."

"I didn't realize that."

"What I'd like to request is for Jasmine to sing 'Our Love is Here to Stay' during her last performance."

Bobby leaned back and considered. "I think we can put that one in. I'll ask her during rehearsal tomorrow. I can't make any promises but I'm pretty sure she'll agree. After all, it's not as if you're asking for an aria from a Klingon Opera."

Kyle had to chuckle. "Too true."

Before Bobby could answer, he was called away. He made his excuses and left the table leaving Kyle alone again with his thoughts.

Kyle went back to drinking his tea and observing the other guests. He paid careful notice of Jasmine smoothly going from table to table taking the time to talk with each guest or dancing when she wasn't chatting amiably with Arcadia. He considered himself lucky that his wife was getting along famously with his ex-girlfriend.

Even though she had promised him that they'd make it an early night, a brief glance at his chronometer showed that his wife was enjoying herself so much that she had completely lost track of the time. Not wanting to interrupt her fun, Kyle simply bided his time until Jasmine was called away again.

Kyle took the opportunity to lean over and whisper to Arcadia. "We should be going."

She frowned at him. "Must we?"

"You know that protocol demands that no one leave until I leave," the Station Commander patiently whispered under his breath.

Arcadia gave him a sad sigh. "True enough."

"Let's go," he told her. He stood up then held her chair so she could stand as well.

Jasmine noticed that the Argents appeared to be leaving. She rushed over to intercept them but by the time she'd arrived, Kyle had been called off.

"Arcadia," Jasmine began, "I hope I'm not being too forward but I don't know anyone here and my free day is Sunday. I was wondering if you wouldn't mind accompanying me on a shopping trip. I don't know about you but it's much more fun to shop with someone than alone."

"Indeed!" Arcadia beamed while she and Jasmine walked towards the staircase. "And I happen to be off as well."

"A day of shopping and dinner perhaps?"

Arcadia nodded. "Lunch or dinner?"

Jasmine considered for a moment. "Dinner would be better since I work at nights and I'm not up before noon."

"I'll make reservations at Club Ninety-Four, it's very elegant and--"

"Please don't," Jasmine began, shaking her head. "I get wined and dined and what I'd dearly love would be some old fashioned food. Some *real* food."

"I know just the place and it's in the mall. We can shop for a few hours and then have the lads meet us at the Nexalodeon. You won't have to worry about being bothered. Kyle and I dine there often and the staff is quite used to taking care of anyone who dares to intrude on us. How does that sound?"

"Just wonderful and thank you for giving up your afternoon, Arcadia. I really appreciate it."

Arcadia looked over and noticed that Kyle was waiting for her. She reached over and took Jasmine's hand. "I truly enjoyed this evening and look forward to our girls day out."

Jasmine smiled as she and Arcadia walked towards where Kyle was patiently standing. She looked up at Kyle and smiled at him, then turned her attentions back to Arcadia. "So tell me, Arcadia. You can tell me..." she loudly whispered with a wicked grin. "Is he still a good kisser?"

Arcadia glanced at Kyle then turned to Jasmine, also displaying an equally wicked grin. "Excellent. He's an *excellent* kisser."

Jasmine winked in appreciation before both women giggled. Jasmine reached over and gave Arcadia a small hug. "See you on Sunday!"

"I'm looking forward to it!" Arcadia replied before she and Kyle made their way up the stairway.

Jasmine's radiant smile became thoughtful as she turned back to find Bobby.

"How did it go?" he asked her.

"Better than expected," she replied.

"I agree," he replied. "You'd better attend to the departing guests."

Bobby watched her bid goodbye to the other guests as they started to depart the club *en masse* while he went to attend to other matters.

* * *

Thursday Late Night

Lieutenant Commander Kavindra Courage, Wing Commander of the 206th was extraordinarily pleased to be back in familiar territory -- the sanctity of her Fighter Country. This was a much more comfortable setting for her. Formal events such as the dinner at *Serenade in Blue* were an entertaining way to pass time, but for the life of her, she couldn't see herself doing it on a regular basis. She tugged at the collar again. Wearing this infernally uncomfortable gown simply was not something she was interested in whatsoever. But that was not the worst of it. If she lived another 1000 years, she sniffed, Kavindra doubted she would ever encounter a collection of people more shallow than those who had assembled tonight.

Even people like Argent, Blair, and Lysander seemed to have nothing better to do than just shoot the breeze and mug for the vids. Perhaps their reputations were too exaggerated after all. Regardless of what those would-be-socialites were up to, she considered smugly, Avalanche Courage was *always* on the job. So, it was only natural for her to check the current ready-log to see who was on standby. Her eyes lit up while she scanned the log -- it was none other than the "Lucky" 13th and the newest flying goldbricker, Lt Virgil Taylor. Perhaps a little surprise inspection was in order...

She quickly queried the Station Computer to ascertain their current location. Not surprisingly, it was neither on the flight deck nor in the simulators -- which were where *she* would have mandated *her* boys and girls to be -- but in the pilot lounge. Well, their late-night reveling was about to be rudely interrupted.

"*Attention!*" Kavindra boomed as she entered the pilot lounge. "*Officer on deck!*" She herself stood at attention and carefully watched the younger troops comply with her surprise order.

Almost immediately, the pilots and tactical officers fell in. It wasn't as swift as she would have expected for a flightdeck parade, but she considered herself a kind leader. Besides, a modicum of tolerance would *surely* endear her to her troops. She noted that the personnel seemed to have been busy playing chess (of all things!) and she hoped that all the pads that were scattered around the various tables were tactical reviews or other such flight business. It became obvious to her as they finished coming to attention that these flying misfits needed all the help that *she* could give them.

Avalanche could give no further thought to the scenario before her because the silence that had befallen the room was punctured by a sound that was unmistakable in its nature -- someone was snoring. And that meant they were asleep while on duty! She could *not* believe her ears.

The shock on the Wing Commander's face was clear for all to see.

Suddenly, a decidedly female voice penetrated the noise. "*Flyer, wake up!*"

She gave no further thought to the source of the snoring while she scanned the back row to ascertain who had dared to speak out of turn. By the time she had refocused her attention on "sleeping beauty," she noticed that Ensign Rusty "Flyer" Shepherd had almost magically appeared in the lineup. He displayed no signs of having been asleep not even drowsiness. Avalanche found herself frowning. *What was going on here?*

Gathering her wits, she turned to the group and evenly stated, "What is the meaning of this?" She pointedly zeroed in on Rusty. "Ensign, you were asleep while on duty! Do you know the penalty for such an offense?"

"Yes, ma'am?" Rusty replied with a tone of voice that barely masked his surprise.

Avalanche gave a smile of triumph. "And that penalty is Ensign?"

Rusty looked at the senior officer and shrugged his shoulders. "Why nothing, ma'am."

"*What?*" Avalanche shouted in disbelief. Of all the insolent things to say! Why that little...

They all held their collective breath while they watched Rusty gather what few wits they knew he had. Before Rusty could answer, he was interrupted.

"Order three-one-four, subsection b: Any officer on flight duty is expected to maintain maximum flight readiness status and is not allowed to partake of any activities or substances designed to impede the proper execution of their duties."

Avalanche furiously whipped her head around to give attention to her newest victim -- someone who had so *brazenly* spoken out of term. To her everlasting pleasure, it was none other than Virgil Taylor.

"Lieutenant Taylor, was *I* talking to you?" She bore down on him with an icy fury. "How *dare* you interrupt me? Didn't they teach *you* Flight School Nuggets to keep your insolent little mouths shut unless you are spoken to when in the presence of a *superior* officer?"

This outburst caused several of them to flinch. Such Boot Camp nonsense simply was not the norm in the Fighter Corps. Officers from the top to the bottom were encouraged to speak their mind and help one another out. Of course, a certain amount of discipline was always enforced, but she wasn't even in their Wing. What gave her the right to dress them down like this?

Lieutenant Jacob "Dutch" Van der Weege decided to forego any semblance of civility. "They must have replaced that one with a lesson on how to best kill a tactical officer, I suppose," he stated just loud enough for all to hear.

Avalanche took a step back and she began to blush. It took her several tries just to get a word out as everything seemed to be stuck in her throat. "Is... is... there something you have to say, Lieutenant?" she finally spat out with a tone so full of ice, it left little to the imagination. Everyone knew that she was seething.

For a fraction of a second Dutch considered his options before deciding to just simply press ahead. "As a matter of fact, there is," he began with a distinct smile on his face. "I personally do not consider it worthwhile to stand here and receive a dressing down from an officer who is neither familiar with our unit nor has in the past shown any regard for the safety of her own personnel. Anyone that reckless is bound to have a sense of judgment that is at best questionable."

If it had been Dutch's intention to deflect all the heat away from Rusty and onto himself, he had succeeded -- and then some.

"*How dare you...*" Avalanche began, all but spitting out each and every word while she edged closer to where Dutch stood. "How *dare* you use that tone with me! If you have an accusation to make -- *any* accusation to make, then by all means file a formal complaint! But until then, be advised, *Lieutenant*," she paused and emphasized his rank just so that he wouldn't forget who was the superior officer this night, "that *I* am initiating a formal disciplinary procedure against you and..."

Dutch's only reply was to smirk. He knew he was in rare form this night. He decided to step in front of Avalanche and get in her face.

As he edged towards her, she suddenly took a good look at him. She noticed that he was very muscular and was almost a foot taller. She realized that she had just threatened to cashier him out of the service, which more than likely meant he felt like he had nothing left to lose.

"Just go ahead and try," he calmly replied between clenched teeth, standing so close to her she could feel his warm breath on her face, "but if you do, keep in mind that it means putting your record on trial also and--"

"Lieutenant Van der Weege, back in line. *Now!*" Virgil bellowed.

The momentary interruption allowed her to regain her wits and the upper hand. She looked up at Dutch. "*You are finished!*" Avalanche bellowed, wagging her finger at him, clearly having lost all her cool. "I will have your commission for this!"

Virgil sighed inwardly. It was time for him to become his call sign Merlin and to work some magic here.

"Lieutenant Commander Courage," he cautiously began, "if you would indulge me for a second, ma'am."

She turned away from Dutch and reluctantly towards her other nemesis.

"In the matter of Ensign Shepherd," he gamely continued, "you need to understand that for whatever reason, Flyer is able to fall asleep at what seems a moments notice and wake up just as fast -- if told to do so, that is. Please allow me to demonstrate." Virgil turned to Rusty. "Flyer, go to sleep."

The lanky tactical officer gamely shrugged and walked over to the wall, leaned against it and within a few seconds began emitting familiar noise indicating he was, indeed, fast asleep.

Avalanche scowled. "It's a trick," she spat out, still consumed by her fury. She smiled slightly. "After all, he could be faking it."

"Oh, he's asleep alright, Commander," Ravyn McRae chimed in. "We used to tip him over for a laugh or two," she paused and became sober, "until he banged his head against one of the chairs..."

"Oh, let me guess," Avalanche defiantly shot back, "he was never the same since?" she mocked.

Ravyn shrugged. "No... he's still quite the same. He just started sitting down to rest rather than let us and I quote, 'damnfool crazies tip him over again'."

The round of guffaws and giggles Ravyn's comment elicited indicated to Kavindra that this was indeed no put on. He really *could* drop dead away and fall asleep in at a moment's notice. *Remarkable*. She stopped all contemplation when she realized there was a serious question to be asked here. "But what if he does this during a mission? He's a danger to anyone he flies with!"

This brought a round of loud laughter from the assembled members of the 13th.

"Flyer here holds the station record for consecutive hours of uptime, Commander," Ravyn smugly replied. "He once went ninety-seven hours without sleep all the while maintaining *perfect* readiness status."

Virgil decided it was time to end the little demonstration. "He makes it up by catching short naps whenever his full attention is not needed elsewhere. He does however rely on others to wake him up if need be. Either by a light tap or by calling his name."

"So why, pray tell," Kavindra began, realizing that her chances of black-marking Shepherd were diminishing by the second, "why didn't he rise when I called the rest of you to attention?"

Virgil's mind reacted with a sense of mental agility that made his quick reply sound convincing. "Because, Commander, he doesn't respond to voices he doesn't know. You are not part of the thirteenth and so he didn't react to it instantly. But we're working on that..."

Still not quite convinced, she otherwise decided to allow them to continue the demonstration. "If that is the case, then by all means wake him up."

Virgil paused for a moment. He felt his body stiffen while he considered the fact that only Ravyn, Dallenbach, or Petillo had ever gotten him to wake up. He prayed that Rusty would hear him now.

"Flyer," he started quietly, mentally crossing all appendages, "time to wake up."

"OK." As if on cue, the remarkable Ensign Shepherd immediately opened his eyes, fluttered them once or twice to adjust to the ambient lighting and immediately retook his place back in the line.

Avalanche felt her jaw hang open and immediately shut it all the while remaining at a loss for words. Either this was one of the most ingenious con jobs she had ever seen performed or he really was a human consciousness switch. But no matter, she had bigger fish to fry. She had badly wanted a piece of Van der Weege ever since that whole "twitch" business Monday Night -- not that she believed that nonsense even for one moment. *Well*, she considered smugly, *my time has come!*

"Very well," she began with a growing sense of contentment, "your actions are excused, Ensign Shepherd." She paused, turning her attentions to Dutch. "However, Mister Van der Weege, your remarks were *way* out of line. Please confine yourself to quarters until such time as I can file proper charges and..."

"Begging the Lieutenant Commander's pardon," Virgil quietly interjected.

Avalanche whipped her head around to face the interloper...Dammit! Just as she was about to deliver the knockout blow. "Yes, what is it, Lieutenant?" she growled.

"Are you familiar with Order Thirty-Seven?"

She frowned and looked down to the deck in thought. "Thirty-Seven," she repeated, not knowing what it was. "How about the Lieutenant refreshing my memory?" She stared up at him expecting an answer.

"Any officer found wearing non-approved apparel during duty hours," Virgil intoned as he inwardly thanked his lucky stars for being subjected to the rebuke for wearing his gym shorts to a tactics lesson, "is subject to disciplinary sanctions at the discretion of the Director of Flight Operations."

Avalanche paled. She quickly looked down at what she was wearing. She was still in her pink evening gown, which under the best of circumstances was

hardly a regulation uniform. She looked back to Virgil who was patiently waiting to continue.

"I am reasonably certain that your current attire is...err..." Virgil paused with what his fellow officers presumed was a false sense of modesty, "anything but regulation, I would assume that in the end..." Virgil smiled as he allowed his voice to purposely trail off.

"...I was never here to begin with," she grumbled. She had been so close! She had Van der Weege by the short hairs and they knew it! But the intent of Taylor's words, though extremely subtle, was quite explicit: if she tried writing Dutch up, he would hit her with a "37" complaint, which most likely would be twisted into a "impersonating a Duty Officer charge" by the space lawyers. Dutch would most likely still get what would be coming to him, but she could kiss her career out the airlock in the process. She had been given a choice -- no choice at all. Actually, that's not true, she could turn around and try to pretend that this didn't happen. She ultimately decided to leave, quietly seething in her latest humiliation.

"You can be assured, Commander, that we will all take turns communicating with Lieutenant Van der Weege," Virgil assured her before she reached the exit out of the Lounge, "in regards to his lack of tact with those identifying themselves as superior officers."

Avalanche stopped dead in her tracks and turned briefly to hiss something to them that sounded much like "very commendable" before she made an extremely hasty retreat. She couldn't wait to throw this raggedy piece of cloth into the incinerator. It had cost her more than enough tonight. And as for that upstart Taylor -- well, he was just as bad as Nakamura. Something would need to be done about both. "I will take care of the both of you. You have my promise of that," she spat under her breath.

Virgil let out a deep breath before he fell into the comfort of the nearest chair once the Queen of Mean was out of sight. His tactical officer, Dutch Van der Weege pressed a cup of hot coffee into his hand. "It's on me, kid," he began with a grin. "You earned it."

Dutch smiled as he sat down next to Ravyn Mac Rae. She took his hand into hers and began smacking it lightly, "*Bad Dutch!* Bad. Bad. Bad. Don't you ever talk to evil and stupid superior officers like that again!"

"Yes, Mommy," Dutch retorted meekly, properly rebuked. "But can I still call her a stupid fucking bitch? Pretty please?" He emphasized his plea by batting his eyes in her direction.

Ravyn gently smacked him before wagging her finger at him. "Now, what did we tell you, junior? Always tell the truth! So of course you can call her that!"

Her comment brought a round of laughter from everyone trying to slowly unwind.

Virgil looked over to Rusty who was sharing in the post-confrontation entertainment. "Geez, Flyer, you had me worried there for a bit. If you hadn't woken up when I told you to, we would have been up the creek without a paddle..."

"Why?" Flyer asked incredulously.

"What the hell do you mean, why Flyer! She would have rolled right over us, that's why you idiot!" Ravyn shot back. "Rusty, you can be so slow sometimes!"

Flyer gave her a look of disgust as he shook his head. "No she wouldn't have."

Instantly intrigued, Virgil asked, "How so?" Virgil hadn't been here that long but he knew that Flyer wasn't the sharpest tack in the bunch.

Flyer rolled his eyes. "I heard the cow moo for attention the first time. I opened my eyes and saw she was out of uniform. I knew she was in violation of Thirty-Seven and just went back to sleep," he shrugged. "There never was a problem."

Instead of any sort of reply, everyone simply stared at him.

Dutch shook his head in amazement. "Who would have thunk Flyer had that much sense?" he muttered.

They all laughed in unison before going back to what they were doing before they had been so *rudely* interrupted.

* * *

Friday Evening

The blank station holoscreens suddenly came to life.

"Welcome to the gala opening of Serenade in Blue. I'm Kimberly Flowers and I'll be your host tonight."

The wide shot of the supper club pulled tight and showed Kimberly wearing an off the shoulder, full-length black gown, adorned with white jewels. Kim walked over to stand underneath the holopicture of Jasmine Sainte Clair.

"Jasmine Sainte Clair accompanied by the Bobby Zephyr Trio will be the opening act at Space Station Nexus' newest attraction."

She stopped and looked up at the marquis that displayed *Serenade in Blue* in ornate script.

"Those of you not able to procure tickets to tonight's event will still be able to be a part of it. We'll take you from the arrival of the guests to the performance."

The shot moved from the marquis to track several patrons strolling up to the club. They stopped to show the doorman their ticket before the heavy silver ornate doors opened to let them in. The shot followed the patrons before it turned around to watch Kimberly walk into the club. She continued into the club proper and paused before the grand staircase

"As you can see the owner has spared no expense. While the guests continue to arrive, we'll show you a short piece we did earlier that takes you through a virtual tour of the nightclub."

* * *

"This place is still just short of amazing!" exclaimed Arcadia Argent.

"I agree. Boffin has spared no expense." Kyle allowed his eyes to take in his surroundings before he spoke. "And while he's certainly spent a parcel of money, he's spent it well."

"Indeed he has," she agreed. Arcadia immediately turned back to looking about her.

The Argents were sitting in the VIP section along with the other movers and shakers of the Station. This section was in a U-shape, sandwiched between the bar floor above them and the dance floor below them. Because of the location and privacy, these were the best seats in the house. Under normal circumstances, each table would have more space between it as well as a forcefield for those who wished total privacy. But for this opening night, a few more tables were jammed in and the forcefield was nowhere to be seen. On occasions such as this, most in attendance were there to be seen and therefore didn't mind the occasional gawking from the other patrons.

Arcadia peered over the rail to take a good look at the orchestra area below them. Each member would sit in their own chair, their instrument beside them. Shielding them from the audience was a placard with the initials "SiB" in

decorative script. She assumed that was Bobby's piano front and center along with three chairs presumably for the rest of his trio and Jasmine.

Between the orchestra and the audience lay the dance floor. On the other side sat several tables seating groups of two or four. They were crammed in fairly tight, allowing just enough room for the waiters to serve dinner and not much else.

Arcadia leaned back in her seat just as a waiter rushed over take their drink orders. Once he was gone, Arcadia returned to looking about the room quietly taking inventory. She was attempting to match names to faces when she was caught short.

"Kyle, love," she began as she poked Kyle in the ribs.

"Hmmm?"

"Who's that sitting with Melody?"

Kyle looked around the room in an attempt to find his yeoman. "I can't find her."

Arcadia stopped staring at the young woman and whipped her eyes around to settle on her husband. "Kyle, you are *not* blind. The woman over there." She discreetly pointed towards where Melody was sharing a table with an impeccably well-dressed man. "The young lady almost falling out of her dress."

"Oh...." he finally responded as he finally found his target. He paused to think while carefully eyeing Melody. "That would be Niles Orumoff."

"Niles Orumoff?" she carefully repeated, mulling the name over. She finally shook her head. "I don't believe I know who he is."

"Sure you do," Kyle casually replied. "He's the one that endowed the hospital's new orthopedic wing."

"Oh?... But I still don't know who he is, Kyle."

Kyle swirled his drink before answering her. "He's head of Orumoff Universal Trading. They're the biggest privately held business on the Station."

Arcadia leaned back in her chair while sipping her wine. "Oh... I see. The money for that new wing was appropriated before our time. He must be the one donating art for the courtyard on the top floor."

"Very interesting."

"It is. It's quite unusual to have money fall into one's proverbial lap."

"Well..." Kyle began, peering over the balcony towards the dance floor, "let's just say that some of his dealings could be considered, well--"

"Say no more," Arcadia interrupted. She paused to savor her drink while covertly taking in the couple diagonally across from them. It was obvious to Arcadia that Melody was being shown off as a trophy but if it didn't bother Melody, why should it bother her. "I usually don't approve of such people but I don't make it habit to refuse such gifts. Besides," she added with a wicked grin, "Melody seems to be enjoying herself."

As if on cue and much to her horror, she started to wonder on whether or not Niles could read minds, because he and Melody had started walking towards their table.

"Good evening, Captain Argent," Niles began smoothly, immediately reaching for Arcadia's hand to give it a kiss. "And good evening to you, Madame Argent." He brushed her hand lightly against his lips.

Once he was finished, he turned to Kyle and extended his hand. "Captain Argent."

Kyle had stood to shake Niles' offered hand. "Mister Orumoff," Kyle replied, keeping any emotion out of his voice. He then turned to Melody and greeted her, "Ms Marlowe."

Melody shook hands with both Argents but remained mute and carefully in the background.

"Good to see you both here," Niles genially continued. "And I expect that we'll be in for an excellent show tonight."

"I don't doubt it, Mister Orumoff," Arcadia cordially replied while Kyle remained standing and hovering over her. She knew he wouldn't sit down or be happy until Orumoff and Melody had left them in peace.

"I just thought myself and Ms Marlowe would come by and pay our respects to you both. Have a good evening, Captain..." Niles looked at Kyle and nodded before he looked down to Arcadia, gently taking her hand again. "I do hope to see you again, Madame." He capped off his response with a smile before escorting Melody back to their table.

Arcadia noticed that Kyle remained mute while he retook his seat. She'd been married to him long enough to know that he was less than amused. She thought that she would have to be the one to break the ice that had quickly surrounded them.

"Nice man...." she began, "that is, if you like that sort."

"And I don't like that sort!" he snapped. He knocked back the rest of his drink and slammed the empty glass back on the table.

Realizing that he'd overreacted, he decided it would be a good idea to get back to the reason for the evening. "What does the program say?" He decided nip any further discussion of Orumoff in the bud.

Knowing she was being railroaded off the subject, she nonetheless answered his question with gusto. "Let's see, we're to drink away until they come to take our dinner order."

As if on cue, their waiter magically appeared. They gave the waiter their order and he quickly scurried away. Arcadia continued. "Where was I? Oh, yes, we are to continue to imbibe away until they bring us dinner. At that time, the orchestra will play appropriate dining music. The show starts after we are served our desserts."

"Boffin provided quite a dinner selection."

"I'm so glad," Arcadia began, still glaring at him, "that you opted for a steak rather than the hamburger you first requested. You do realize that they would have fixed you one."

Kyle responded with a toothy grin.

All Arcadia could do was shake her head and smile as she absently stroked her emerald necklace. The one that media mogul Thomas Thompson had presented to her the night that Kyle asked her to marry him. Along with the jewels, she wore the same dress she had been wearing that wonderful night. She knew that it was no coincidence that the jewels matched her dress and by now, she felt naked wearing one without the other. Kyle on the other hand, opted for his standard formal wear of black tuxedo, black tie, and white shirt. His one concession for this evening was the fact that the outfit was handmade rather than the best that a replicator could churn out. Arcadia reached over and straightened his tie out.

"I do wonder if this going to be the regular cuisine?"

"Probably. He's charging enough," Kyle replied.

"That's only for this section Kyle, the prices are quite reasonable if you don't mind being jammed together next to the dance floor."

"True enough."

Arcadia barely heard his reply because she'd gone back to her favourite past time of seeing who else was in attendance tonight. "Is that Ike down there?"

Kyle frowned and leaned over. "That's him with Lars," he replied before he sat back again to peacefully enjoy his surroundings.

She nodded and went back to searching the floor below them. "And how about this--"

He let out an extremely audible sigh that stopped her in mid sentence. He turned and looked directly at his wife. "Why don't you just point everyone out to me at one time. It would save me from constantly having to bend over and look."

"Kyle Argent, you are definitely no fun!" she mocked before she leaned over grabbed him for a kiss.

"I'm always fun," he murmured when he finally caught his breath.

"Dinner is served," their waiter cautiously interrupted while containing the smile that threatened to break out all over his face.

* * *

By the time their empty dinner dishes were removed and their dessert served -- cheesecake for Kyle and chocolate mousse for Arcadia -- the dinner show was about to begin.

Arcadia watched as the Bobby Zephyr Trio took their places amongst the ripple of clapping that he acknowledged with a smile towards the audience.

"What are they playing, Kyle? I obviously can't tell, " Arcadia whispered as the orchestra began a long introduction.

Kyle gave her an easy smile while secretly wishing that his wife could enjoy music as much as he did. "What else, '*Serenade in Blue*'."

Arcadia chuckled. "That would be a natural now, wouldn't it?"

* * *

Jasmine Sainte Clair nervously waited backstage for her cue. While she'd been a singer for many years now, she still had the opening night jitters and for whatever reason, tonight it was more intense. Once again, she unconsciously smoothed out her sparkling tight blue gown and rearranged the straps on her shoulders. She walked towards the edge of the floor listening to the orchestra skillfully playing the bridge, leading up to her entrance.

"When I hear that serenade in blue," Jasmine began to sing as she entered onto the dance floor and walked to her customary place near the piano. *"I'm somewhere in another world, alone with you..."*

A tremendous roar of approval from the audience greeted Jasmine. She smiled her acknowledgment as she continued singing. Once she was finished, the audience clamored in appreciation. She bowed to the audience and to her accompanist, Bobby Zephyr.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I don't recall ever being greeted so warmly." The audience clapped again while she smiled and nodded. "It is a great pleasure," she continued once the clapping faded, "to be asked to open this lovely nightclub, *Serenade in Blue*. And I wish to thank Mister Gateway for inviting me."

Jasmine smiled directly at Boffin before she turned her attention back to the general audience.

"Tonight, we'd like to present you with a combination of something old, something new, something borrowed, and of course... even more blue."

Jasmine and the trio effortlessly continued the first half of the show until she came to the piece that the audience -- especially her fans -- was waiting for, her famous rendition of "Angel Eyes."

"I try to think that love's not around, but it's uncomfortably near," she began in a sultry manner.

Jasmine smiled when she noticed that she held the audience in the palm of her hands. She felt them collectively hold their breaths until she arrived at the last line.

"scuse me, while I disappear."

Right on cue, all the lights snapped to black for a few moments and when they came back up, Jasmine and the trio were gone. The audience broke out in loud applause as the orchestra began an interlude allowing Jasmine and the trio a break.

* * *

"Wasn't she just great!" Ike Ivanan whispered reverently. He quickly turned his attention finishing up the notes he was making for his fellow Blonde Nightingale fans during the intermission. "That was the best rendition of 'Angel Eyes' I'd ever heard!"

Lars nodded his head and whispered back. "She was pretty good."

Ike turned away from his padd and stared at his partner. "Pretty good?" he emphasized each syllable. "Son, you just have no taste!"

"Seeing as who I am currently dating, I'd say that much is obvious," Lars sighed with mock dejection.

"*Ha!*" Ike looked over at Lars and laughed. "I resemble that. But stick with me and I'll have you cultured in no time."

Lars sat back in his chair and rolled his eyes skyward. "I was afraid of that."

"Hey," Ike smiled. "Besides," he added with a smirk, "think of it as foreplay for the soul."

Lars smiled before turning his attentions back to the stage.

* * *

The Bobby Zephyr Trio retook the stage with Jake and his bass fiddle moving up to center stage for Jake's solo. Jasmine stood backstage refreshed from her short break listening to Jake's jazzy upbeat rendition of "Mack the Knife." She rearranged her green flowing dress that fell above her knee displaying what Jasmine considered to be her *best* assets. Jasmine felt her anger rise as Jake finished and the audience begged him for an encore -- something that had never happened before. Finally, she heard the familiar riff of "Gloria" and she started to walk on stage, once again, to a burst of applause.

As she continued the second act, she could tell that everything was going well. Bobby and the trio were smiling. That's not quite true, Dag never smiled, but it was obvious to Jasmine that he was having a good time. Before she knew it, it was time to wrap up.

"Thank you ladies and gentlemen for such a lovely evening. I want to thank Bobby Zephyr, my accompanist and arranger." Jasmine paused and blew a kiss to Bobby. He acknowledged it by grinning back at her. "I'd also like to thank Jake Brendan on bass and Dag Musenda on guitar." Both men nodded in acknowledgment as they continued to play quietly underneath her patter. "And a special thank you to Duke Basie and the *Serenade in Blue* Orchestra." She watched Duke give her a slight bow before she continued her exit.

She slowly began to sing her finale, "Yesterday," and found herself personally connecting with each member of the audience. When she was finished, she bowed to the audience and gave them a wave before walking off stage with the trio behind her.

However, no one in the audience stirred as they realized that she and her trio were going off only for a breather and would be back. After a few moments, Jasmine emerged, once again acknowledging the accolades from her listeners.

"Thank you again for being such a wonderful audience," she beamed at the audience before launching into her encore.

"*The way you wear your hat....*" she began softly and she kept that softness until the end, finally arriving to the last line that, in her mind, capped another fine performance.

"*No.... They can't take that away from me.*"

* * *

"Wow!" Ravyn McCrea exclaimed to her date, Brett Dallenbach.

"I'm surprised that I enjoyed it as much as I did," Brett admitted while he and Ravyn made their way from their table up the grand staircase to leave.

"Hi Ravyn!" Ike shouted. He and Lars were also making their way out of the club. Both of them had an early day tomorrow and didn't stay for the post-concert dancing

"Great show wasn't it?" she bubbled with enthusiasm.

"It was great! This was the best one that I've seen," Ike responded with equal fanaticism.

"You've seen... her before?" she stammered. "In person?"

"Many times, Ravyn," Ike smiled.

"Wow!... I mean... I've always wanted to see her in person and this was my first time."

Ike considered for a moment as they all walked over to the side of the staircase so they wouldn't be in the way of the departing patrons. "I think I've seen her at least ten times."

"Ten? I guess I have a lot of catching up to do. In fact, I read in *Bird Songs*--"

"*You read that too!*" Ike exclaimed.

"Never miss an issue."

While the two of them continued their enthusiastic conversation, their partners simply stood off to the side and shook their heads.

"I don't understand any of this, Commander," Brett began to his superior.

"Neither do I, Brett," he replied. "But I guess when you love someone, you just learn to put up with all kinds of stuff."

Brett thought for a moment before he replied. "Quite true, sir. I guess it could be worse. Ravyn could love Klingon Opera."

Lars narrowed his eyes until they were mere slits before coolly interjecting, "I *like* Klingon Opera."

Brett considered his options for a moment. Sucking up to his nominal superior officer seemed to be out of the question now. Reasoning that he had nothing else to lose, he softly replied, "My condolences, sir."

Lars realized that this was one battle he simply was not going to win. He opted to swallow the reply that had begun to formulate itself, since it was bad for unit morale to call one of your junior officers a barbaric cretin. Instead, he simply sighed and once more looked over at the pair continuing their animated conversation.

"Since you've seen her live before, how did this performance differ from the others, Ike?" Ravyn breathlessly asked.

"It's pretty much her standard set - a smattering of old and new stuff. She likes to group her songs and swap the groups around for each performance. That's

so she can work with unfamiliar orchestras. Of course, traveling around with her own trio helps too."

"I always wondered about that but I can see how that would be a help."

"Yeah, Bobby and the boys going ahead of time to work with the orchestra can really cut down on rehearsal time."

"I'll bet!" Ravyn beamed.

"Yep and by the time Jasmine comes in, she's ready to dig in having already worked on the blocks of songs before." Ike paused as he frowned. "You can help me with something. I wrote down her complete repertoire tonight. Do you know if "Regulan Sunset" is a new one?"

Ravyn considered for a moment before she nodded. "I think so. I remember someone on the comchan mentioning that she'd recently added that one. I do know that "Dark Side of the Sun" is definitely a new one. I've been so busy lately, I just have time to read *Bird Song* and don't have time to keep up with the com channel anymore."

Ike took out his datapadd and furiously made notes. Once he was done, he put it back in his jacket and faced Ravyn. "With any luck, I'll have my notes written up and submitted for the next newsletter. It's been so long since I'd contributed. Y'know," he addressed Ravyn, "you should write something up."

"You think so?"

"Sure, especially since this your first experience."

Ravyn considered for a moment. "Yeah, I am a Nightingale Virgin. I'm not one for writing but I'll see what I can do. Do you mind taking a look at it before I send it up?"

"Sure thing..." he replied. He finally noticed both their dates displaying a look that indicated that they were getting annoyed and really wanted to leave. "Ravyn, let's do lunch one day. I think our boys here are getting bored."

She moved her eyes away from Ike and towards her date. "I see what you mean." Ravyn laughed before she continued. "Maybe next time we should leave those wet rags at home and go together."

"I'm going to be here on Thursday for her last performance. Still mad I couldn't get them for her Saturday show. If you're free, come join me. I'm sure that Lars wouldn't mind."

Ravyn sighed. "I'm on duty that evening. But let me see what I can do."

"Let me know!" Ike responded before he walked over to collect Lars.

"Sure will!" Ravyn responded.

* * *

"Thank you for joining us this evening. This concludes our special on the gala opening of Serenade in Blue featuring Jasmine Sainte Clair and the Bobby Zephyr Trio. This is your host Kimberly Flowers signing off. Have a good evening."

* * *

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Kyle asked as he held his wife's chair. They had decided to allow the crowd to disperse before departing. Besides, they wanted to personally give their congratulations to Boffin for a job well done.

"I did indeed. Despite the fact that I'm totally tone deaf and missed a good portion of the performance, Jasmine is very, very good. The emotion she puts in her performance was something that even I couldn't miss." She paused to look at her husband as she grabbed his arm. "I'm really looking forward to having a girl's day out with Jasmine on Sunday."

Before Kyle could answer her, their waiter interrupted.

"Sorry to disturb you Captain, but this datapadd was left with explicit instructions that it be delivered to you after the performance was over."

Kyle's features immediately hardened as he took the padd. "Did anyone see who delivered it?"

The waiter shook his head. "No sir. It was left at the cloakroom. All the clerk noticed was a padd sitting on the counter with the note."

"Thank you," Kyle replied, taking the padd and putting it in his pocket.

Having performed his final task of the evening, the waiter quickly departed.

Arcadia eyed her husband suspiciously. "Aren't you even going to read it?"

"If it was that important," he began as they walked down the staircase to the dance floor below, "I would have received it straight away. If they wanted it

delivered after the performance, I'll have plenty of time to read it when I get home."

"True enough, love," she answered.

They spotted Boffin's table and walked over where he was surrounded by well-wishers.

"I do hope you have time to spare for your old commanding officer, Mister Gateway," Arcadia began, giving him a kiss.

"I always have time for you, Mam'selle," Boffin quipped.

"Excellent show, Boffin," Kyle began, offering his hand for Boffin to shake.

"Thank you guv'nor. It did go well, didn't it?"

Arcadia nodded. "Very well indeed, Boffin."

Many of the well-wishers moved onto the dance floor now that Bobby's piano and the other instruments were moved off to the side with the orchestra was playing dance music.

"I'm personally looking forward to watching another performance," Boffin announced, still basking in the glow of a successful opening night.

"We'll be here for the last performance on Thursday," Arcadia told him then looked to her husband, expecting Kyle to add a comment or two.

She finally noticed how tired he looked and decided it was time for them to get home. "Boffin, I think it's time for us to leave." She paused and looked over at the crowded dance floor. "Besides, I don't think we'll be missed."

"I'll miss you, Mam'selle," he began, "but I understand. I'll see you both on Thursday if not sooner."

"Good night, Boffin," Arcadia replied before she and Kyle made their way up the elegant staircase and out the door.

"Is there something wrong, love?" she asked.

"Nothing, Arcadia. Just tired. It's been a long few days," he replied.

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While Arcadia wasn't entirely satisfied with his answer, she decided that he wasn't in the mood to talk and they spent the rest of the time going back home in complete silence.

*

Next: Manhunt!: *You Slowly Spread the Net*

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