

Manhunt!

Three: You Slowly Spread The Net

Sunday Noon

With his wife and ex-girl friend (of all things -- what an unholy combination this was) doing what women like doing best and men hate with a passion, shopping, Kyle found himself alone this Sunday afternoon. He decided to take a box lunch and dine on his private perch overlooking the hangar deck. It had been far too long since he had witnessed the fighters comings and goings. Eventually a pair of fighters landed and, while the tactical officers went off to file their after action reports, the wing leader had decided to herd her wingman over to a secluded corner near where Kyle was quietly sitting above.

"*Ensign Nakamura, just what the hell were you thinking!*" she angrily began. "It's bad enough that your inability to keep your mission specialist functional has confined us to localized patrols only. Now you can't even perform something as routine as an emergency warp calculation without functional computer input. Don't they teach you anything in the Academy anymore? Quite frankly Mister, I don't think you're fit for my squadron!"

"Excuse me, ma'am," pilot Scott Nakamura grumbled defiantly. "But I *was* able to enter the trajectory and complete a warp out...."

"In fifteen seconds! I told you that you had ten! Which part of that instruction did you *not* understand?" Avalanche stated through clenched teeth.

"The navigation computer usually takes eight or nine seconds," he pointed out. "How exactly am I supposed to compete with that?"

Lieutenant Commander Kavindra "Avalanche" Courage didn't take her eyes off of him while she slowly put her hands on her hips. "You don't have to rely on a bunch of communication relays. That's not an excuse. If it were up to me, I would revoke your flight status. Quite frankly, I don't think you're fit to fly a fighter craft within the Starfleet Fighter Corps."

Scott stared at the smug look on his flight leader's face. He tried very hard to contain his feelings of rage but he felt himself give over to them and snap back at her.

"Considering it was you who endangered the life of my tactical officer, I sincerely have to question who is more fit to serve in the Fighter Corps."

Instead of lacing into him, Avalanche carefully folded her arms, rocking back on her heels. She gave him a quiet, "Oh... you forget yourself, *Ensign*. After all, you

are addressing a superior officer." She paused and gave him a wicked smile before she put her arms behind her back. "I think I will put you on report for gross insolence, insubordination, and failure to do your duty," she told him in an overly calm voice. *There*, she thought, *that ought to break him*.

Scott's eyes narrowed and at the same time, he felt himself harden for the storm that was about to commence. If she wanted a war, then by God, it was time to give it to her. "Sir, I--"

"*Belay that, Ensign!*" a new voice reverberated through the flight deck. Both parties quickly turned around to see the figure of the Station Commander rapidly approaching them.

"Commander, just what the hell is going on here?" Captain Kyle Argent asked in a forceful tone indicating just how upset he really was. "You're not requiring your wingman to perform calculations that are just plain impossible?" He walked over and stood between them. "So tell me, Commander, are you yourself capable of performing such calculations in that time frame?"

Avalanche was stunned by the unexpected intrusion of the Station's CO. She found that when she tried to speak, no words came forth. Finally, she issued a feeble, "I... I... don't think so, Captain."

"Then what in three-hells name," Argent rolled on, "were you thinking when you required someone else to do this? Just tell me were you planning to slack off and let your wingman do your work for you?" He paused and turned towards Scott, pointing at him. "As far as I know, *this* pilot is finished with basic flight school. Otherwise, he would not be here." Argent turned back to Avalanche. "It is *not* your responsibility to make sure that he receives the same basic instruction twice. He's supposed to learn more from you, not go over the same things he's already been taught. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," she replied meekly.

"Now Ensign," the Station Commander focused his complete attention on the young officer. "What's this about the endangering of a tactical officer?"

Scott's eyes darted between that of his Wing Commander and that of the Station Commander, mulling over his possible answers. Finally, he spoke up. "Sir, it is not my place to comment on the actions of or lack thereof of my superiors. However, if you want to consult with the DFO I'm certain that flight log recordings of all our missions are on file."

"I see," Argent replied before moving his eyes to Avalanche, allowing them to bore into her soul. "What did you do, Commander?" he asked with a deadly edge to his voice.

"Excuse me," she blurted out, then quickly added, "Sir? I've done nothing to warrant your suspicion and yet you address me in an accusatory tone."

He narrowed his eyes before he spoke. "It's rather simple, Commander. If the Ensign had done something wrong and knew it, he would go out of his way to plead his case with me. That's fairly standard with anyone in his position. The fact that he is not doing so and, for that matter and is willing to cover up for you tells me that his intentions are honorable. And believe me, I've been around fighter pilots long enough to know when one is telling the truth and one is bullshitting." He stepped even closer to her to emphasize his point. "Or are you calling into question my expertise in this matter?"

Avalanche looked up at the Station Commander who towered over her like a condor. "No... no... sir," she quietly responded.

"So again," he quietly re-stated before taking a step back from her, "what did you do?"

She swallowed hard several times before she answered his question. "Valve in his tac officer's nutritional supplement pump jammed," she stammered. "And I refused to compromise the mission by letting him turn back. And his tac officer suffered a case of dehydration."

"I see," Kyle replied, folding his arms tightly in front of his chest. "So it is you that I've heard about. Hasn't anyone made it clear to you that missions don't matter, people do?"

"But.... Our perfect mission record!" she blurted out.

"Means absolutely *nothing*," he thundered before leveling his index finger at her like a phaser. "You have personnel attached to your squadron in the hospital and all you can think of is some stupid, irrelevant record? Commander, I've heard enough. It is my opinion that it isn't Ensign Nakamura who is unfit for duty, but it is in fact you who should be grounded. Please report to Commander Lysander's office with my compliments and explain to him why *you* have been given three days disciplinary leave."

"You... can't... you... aren't..." she stammered before regaining some composure and taking a defiant stance. "I'm taking this up with the Director of Flight Ops!" she declared.

"That won't necessary," another voice rang out. All eyes suddenly looked over to see who the intruder was. Scott smiled, Kyle nodded, and Avalanche was mortified. The Director of Flight Operations strode over and pointedly ignored his junior officers to zero in on his superior. "Though I would appreciate it if certain Station Commanders no matter how extensive their fighter background is would keep their noses out of the internal affairs of *my* department."

"Fair enough," Kyle shrugged his shoulders, "but I can't help calling them as I see them."

"Generally, I prefer if you called *me* first after you see them," Terrence Blair retorted.

Kyle arched an eyebrow in Terrence's direction before a smirk covered his face.

"But regardless," Terrence began, his attention now turned to his Wing Commander, "your actions towards Ensign Nakamura have been at best reprehensible, Commander Courage. At worse, they were close to being court martial offenses. I think the Captain here was more than generous with three days disciplinary leave to allow you to rethink your approach in these matters. Rest assured that unless I see some remarkable improvement over the next few weeks, the position you currently occupy will not be yours for much longer. That is all...." The DFO suddenly looked to Station Commander. "Unless you have anything else to add?"

Captain Argent shook his head.

"Sirs..." Ensign Scott Nakamura bravely piped up. "If I may?"

All eyes turned to the Ensign who'd wisely remained silence during this latest exchange. "Yes, son, what is it?" Terrence asked.

With eyes as black as flint Scott used them to size up Avalanche and spoke to her directly. "To answer your previous comment, Commander, no I am not addressing a superior officer, just merely a higher ranking one."

Avalanche gasped in outrage while her eyes danced between her Director of Flight Operations and the Station Commander for their input.

Kyle merely cocked at eyebrow and couldn't stop his face from displaying a smirk. Terrence on the other hand, glared at Kyle before turning to Scott. "Careful, Ensign," he began in a businesslike voice, "you are close to being insubordinate." Terrence paused and bored into both officers. "You are both dismissed."

Both Kyle and Terrence watched while the two young officers scurried out of area -- one with a confident stride and the other oozing away in dejection.

"What do you think?" Terrence asked once the pair had vacated the hangar deck.

Kyle thought for a moment before he nodded. "I think the kid's OK."

"Remind you of anyone, Captain Argent?" Terrence asked with a smirk.

"I was *never* that young, Captain Blair..."

"Nor that handsome," Terrence deadpanned.

"Why Captain Blair," Kyle began with a twinkle in his eye, "that's positively insubordinate of you."

"I know, Captain Argent," Terrence chuckled, "I know."

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Sunday Late Afternoon

"I'm surprised..."

Jasmine suddenly stopped talking because she had peered into yet another shop on *Nexus*' vast mall area.

"Surprised at what?" her shopping companion asked.

Jasmine looked up at Arcadia and smiled. "I'm surprised that there's anything left here to purchase. We've made a quite a dent this afternoon. Good thing I had all the packages sent to the suite, otherwise, we would have had to hire several young men to carry them."

"Not that this would have been bad, you realize," Arcadia mused before she laughed with Jasmine. Arcadia paused and looked at her chronometer. "Now, what time did you tell the lads to meet us?"

"Eighteen hundred for Kyle, six o'clock for Bobby. I'm afraid that I've never really gotten used to being on a 24-hour clock. I know that most places use them but..."

"I understand," Arcadia chuckled. "As it is," she continued, consulting her chronometer, "we only have thirty minutes to wait. And--"

<beep!>

Arcadia gave Jasmine an apologetic look as she consulted her datapadd and frowned. "I'm sorry, I need to dash over to the hospital."

Jasmine matched Arcadia's look of concern. "Something wrong?"

Arcadia shook her head. "I'm not sure but it's nothing for you to be concerned about. I won't be a minute, but..." she suddenly realized, "do you mind waiting for the lads yourself?"

Jasmine reached over and gave Arcadia's arm a gentle squeeze. "I'll be fine, I'll just sit here and enjoy the passing parade. Besides, it's only five-thirty so I'll only have to wait a half-hour or so and as I recall," she added with a twinkle in her eye, "Kyle is *never* late."

"Too true," Arcadia laughed before she made her way to the hospital.

Jasmine watched Arcadia rush around the corner. Once she was out of sight, Jasmine allowed herself a small smile. *So far, so good*, she mused, sitting down on the bench to await his arrival. And that should be, she paused to double check her chronometer, in less than 15 minutes.

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Sunday Late Afternoon

God damn them all! thought Avalanche as she wandered into the Cockpit Lounge, the flight personnel's drinking establishment of choice. Since she was on report and now had nothing to do, she really felt in the need of some friendly company. She walked over to the bar and grabbed a drink then searched the tables for a friendly face. Not finding anyone, she found an empty table and sat down, returning her thoughts to this afternoon.

One way or the other, she would make them pay! That insolent whelp Nakamura, that self-righteous jerk, Blair and especially that pompous ass Argent!

The very nerve of them revoking her flight status! It still seemed inconceivable to her. If everyone was doing their job like she was, then the Federation would have conquered all many years ago, but instead things were given over to these reckless paper pushers and politicians. But their reward was coming...

Avalanche's reverie was briefly interrupted with the arrival of a pilot from her wing.

"Hey, care to pull up a seat and hear the latest?" she asked the young officer.

He paused and gave her an odd look. "Ah... no, that's all right. I'm just... err... passing through." He began to leave but not before displaying an odd facial tic she'd never noticed in him before.

Avalanche went back to drinking her beer, scarcely giving the incident any further attention. However, this scene repeated itself several times with her pilots, tactical officers, and ground crew. Regardless of her willingness to talk to them and the fact that she even stooped so low as to offer a free drink, they all begged off displaying an odd facial tic in the process.

She couldn't quite figure out what this was all about but it became pretty obvious that the brunt of this action was directed squarely at her. With each and every rejection, the level of her fury and frustration escalated. Finally, her tactical officer, Neville Takagi walked by her table.

"*Hawk!*" she brightly greeted him expecting him to join her for their usual late afternoon libation.

"Sorry I can't stay, Avalanche, but I need someone from the flight surgeon's office look after 'this'." He pointed to his suddenly twitching face.

A number of people who were covertly observing her suddenly laughed in unison making it very obvious to Avalanche who the target of all this amusement was.

She looked around the room at their cheerful faces deciding that they would all pay. Every single one of them! She was not about to take this lying down, *God dammit!* But it was obvious that her presence was not welcome here.

Finally, she got up to address the revelers still chuckling over Hawk's rather expressive facial tic. "I see the lot of you are having a lot of fun at *my* expense."

Quickly a retort issued forth from an anonymous voice in the back, "*Damned straight!*"

Avalanche winced. However, she was not about to let them have the last word. "Well, you all will be happy to know that until such time as I'm told that I'm welcome here once more, I will not bother you with my presence."

The faint "yipee" that circulated the room gave Avalanche the impression that this day would not be soon forthcoming.

"But until such time," she barreled on attempting to contain the fury she felt within, "I at least can take comfort in the fact that I still am a better pilot than the lot of you put together."

"That's OK," Lt. Jacob "Dutch" van der Weege bravely ventured, "since there are at least two better pilots than you on this station and they have the rings to prove it."

This last comment brought uproarious laughter from the masses before Avalanche finally turned and made her hasty exit.

She suddenly stopped and looked back at the door to the lounge. "*They will all pay for this!*" she mumbled under her breath.

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Sunday Late Afternoon

"Where's Arcadia?" Kyle asked, spotting Jasmine sitting alone on a bench drinking a mocha coffee.

Jasmine decided to finish her drink before giving him an answer. "She was called off. Some medical emergency," she calmly responded before she sensuously licked her lips, ensuring that none of the luscious chocolate went to waste.

Kyle gave a casual glance around the immediate area. "I take it Bobby isn't here either?" He pulled up his chronometer and checked the time. "It's five forty-five, so I'm not late."

She didn't answer him directly; instead, she slowly stood up and flicked the empty cup in the recycle receptacle. Once that task was completed, she turned to face him. She edged closer and suddenly, she reached out to take his hand. Kyle flinched and took one step backwards.

"*Don't!*" he whispered, narrowing his eyes while he kept his voice devoid of feeling or emotion.

"Don't what?" she coyly responded, once again going for his hand, only this time, she grabbed it and started to stroke it with her other.

Kyle didn't respond; he merely took in a sharp breath while glaring at her. "You know what I mean, Jasmine."

"Missed me, lover?" she purred.

Kyle violently disengaged his hand from hers, shooting daggers in her direction. "You can't win this one," he hissed.

Rather than accept obvious defeat, Jasmine pressed on and edged ever so much closer to her man. "But I can try," she purred again while bringing up her right hand to lightly stroke his cheek, using her left to stroke his arm. "I remember," she began breathlessly, "how much you used to like this."

Jasmine was close enough so that Kyle could smell her perfume. She'd left nothing to chance; she was wearing the scent she wore when they were lovers. It was the fragrance he had found so intoxicating on her.

She felt a smile slowly form when she noticed that Kyle had relaxed slightly. He had briefly closed his eyes, only to quickly flick them open, allowing his eyes to bore deep into her soul.

"I can tell that you," she purred seductively, "remember those times, don't you, lover?"

"Jazz," he started to reply, before quickly catching himself. He once again became immobile, securing those emotions that had threatened to escape back under his control.

"Jazz..." she dreamily sighed. "You're the *only* one who ever called me by that name." She slowly closed her eyes and purred. "It seems you *haven't* forgotten me, have you?" she whispered.

"I shall never forget you," he began, once again yanking her hands off of his body, "but you were in the past and *I am married now.*" He paused to glare at her. "You spent the other night talking to and shopping today with... my *wife*, remember?" he spat at her through clenched teeth.

"Oh... yes," she mocked. "Your wife. Your former Starship Captain, now Chief Medical Officer wife. Is that the one?" she teased. Jasmine looked up to Kyle who remained as rigid as a rock. "Oh, I don't doubt she has a lot of accomplishments. Besides, we *know* how hard it is to make Captain, don't we?" she continued to ridicule.

Jasmine turned away and swept her arm over the mall area. "And here you are... Nice comfortable job... Nice comfortable wife... No surprises... No adventures..."

It's a *wonderful* life..." She faced him then purposely turned her eyes away and focused them off into the distance. "Of course... You wouldn't miss the old days at all..." she purposely let her voice to trail off.

"*I am very happy*," he finally replied, emphasizing each syllable in a voice tinged with steel.

"I don't doubt it," she turned back to him, noting in the corner of her eye that Arcadia had returned. "But I know that deep, down inside, part of you yearns for the old days, doesn't it?" she whispered. She suddenly turned away from Kyle and smile at the new arrival.

"*Arcadia!*"

The two women hugged each other like long lost friends while Jasmine tossed a wicked smile in Kyle's direction.

"I don't know what happened but by the time I'd arrived, all was secure. I couldn't even find a hangnail to take care of," Arcadia laughed.

Before Jasmine had a chance to respond, Bobby rushed over to join them.

"Sorry I'm late," he panted, his face displaying a sheepish grin. "I got lost."

"Not a worry, Bobby," Arcadia genially began, "I was called away on an emergency and I also just arrived."

Arcadia watched Bobby walk over and give Jasmine a kiss. She looked around and noted that Kyle was standing off to the side. She walked over and gave him a kiss. Suddenly, she detected some discomfort on his part.

"What's wrong, Pilot?" she whispered.

Kyle glanced at her, drawing a sharp breath that Arcadia could overhear. "Nothing."

Kyle flinched when Arcadia ran her hands down his arms. "What is wrong, Kyle? You've been so tense lately. Do relax, love and try to enjoy this evening."

"I'll try."

His response didn't go unnoticed by Arcadia but she merely chalked it up to him being overly tired. After all, he'd been working late hours these past few days.

"Shall we?" Arcadia announced, grabbing Kyle's arm and led everyone into the Nexalodeon for dinner.

"Doctor Argent, Captain Argent!" their regular waitress, Angel greeted them. Arcadia had called ahead to reserve their table and everything was waiting for them, including privacy.

Angel patiently for the couples to make themselves comfortable before proceeding to tell them about the specials for the night. Before she left them to take care of their drink order, she turned to Jasmine.

"I hope I'm not intruding, Ms Sainte Clair," she nervously began, "but my dad named me after the song *Angel Eyes*."

"Really?" Jasmine replied with enthusiasm.

"Yes, it was his favorite and after you recorded it, yours became his version of choice," Angel beamed.

"You tell your father thank you for me."

"Will do, Ms Sainte Clair! Let me go and get your drinks!"

Angel turned away and scurried towards the beverage area, still walking on air having just talked to the Blonde Nightingale in the flesh.

* * *

Sunday Evening

Kavindra slunk her way into the Nexalodeon Restaurant with hopes that none of her flight crew would be there. Unexpectedly one of them was, and just the person she didn't want to see.

"Thought you were amusing back there?" she snarled. She didn't even wait for a response before she sat uninvited across from her tactical officer, Neville Takagi.

Neville looked up at the intruder and snorted. "Y'know what your problem is..." he began in a slightly slurred voice. "You don't know how to take a fucking joke."

"I didn't think it was very funny."

"And that's your problem, Kavindra. You don't know when to let loose and admit defeat."

Avalanche bolted out of her chair. "*Never!*"

Neville looked back to his drink and swirled it before replying. "Suit y'rself."

She shook in fury, resisting the urge to smack the junior officer across his chops. Finally, she regained her composure and was about to speak but was interrupted.

"Is there a problem?" Angel Fontaine quietly asked, her eyes dancing between the two players.

"I don't believe so, Angel. The Commander here was just going...." Neville smirked before he downed the rest of his drink.

"Commander?" Angel began hesitantly. "Are you leaving or can I get you something?"

"As my tactical officer just said," Avalanche hissed between clenched teeth, "I was just on my way out."

Avalanche spun on her heels and bolted out the door.

"Let me have another one," Neville demanded, holding up his empty glass and wagging it in Angel's face.

"Lieutenant," she began in a measured and controlled voice while she pushed his hand and glass away from her face, "I believe you've had enough for the evening."

Neville raised his eyes and met hers through a drunken haze. He slammed the glass down, cracking it. "You'll be sorry..." he grumbled. He stood and kicked the chair back under the table before he hastily left the café.

Angel watched him leave then began to clean up the mess he'd left. For one second, she looked back towards the door wondering what had gotten into him.

"*Ouch!*" she mumbled. She had failed to notice the sharp edge of the broken glass. She looked at her finger and noticed a slight cut.

Angel grimaced. She quickly grabbing a towel to wipe off the excess blood and stem the tide. She quickly returned to cleaning up the mess when she noticed that Doctor Argent was quietly eyeing her every move.

Arcadia had watched the exchange with great interest. She couldn't hear what had gone on and Angel's back was blocking her view, but it was obvious that a great deal of tension had emanated from that corner of the restaurant. However, she could pay no more attention to the situation because Jasmine had asked a question.

"And what do you suggest for dessert?"

Arcadia considered for a moment and grinned. "Do you like chocolate?"

Jasmine's answer was to look at Bobby and repeated, "Do I like chocolate?"

Bobby laughed. "Oh, yeah!"

Arcadia noticed the look on Bobby's face and nodded. "Excellent, my dear. I know just the ticket." She turned back to their waiter who was still cleaning up the mess. Arcadia finally caught her eye and waived her over.

"Two chocolate sinfallicious and hurry. We chocolate lovers don't want to wait!"

"No double-chocolate whammy tonight, Doctor?" Angel asked with a smile.

"Oh, I just thought it was time for a change, Angel," Arcadia winked conspiratorially.

Angel laughed before she turned her attentions to the men. "Gentlemen?"

"Coffee for me," Bobby stated. Kyle looked up to her and shook his head. "I'll pass."

"I'll be right back!" Angel replied before she bounded off to get their desserts.

Arcadia watched Angel trot off before she cast a weary eye in Kyle's direction concluding that perhaps he wasn't well. Though, upon reflection, what she detected from him wasn't sickness per se, but what, she wasn't sure. She just knew that he was uncomfortable being there tonight. Before she could lean over and ask him again what was wrong, a commotion across the room attracted her attention.

"Someone call a doctor!"

Arcadia quickly grabbed her bag and bounded from the table. She sped across the room to see what she could do. Upon her arrival, she found Angel, lying on the floor, writhing in pain, then suddenly becoming still. She crouched down,

performed a quick manual check and determined Angel was in *serious* trouble. She looked up and ordered, "*Get the EMTs here stat!*" She then deftly flicked her medical scanner open and ran an analysis. She took the readings twice, just to make sure. She looked around and yelled. "Give me something to put over her; she's going into shock."

As the tablecloth was draped over Angel, another one was crumpled into a ball and put under her feet.

"Hopefully," Arcadia began, re-checking her readings, "this will help."

Before she could say anything further, her Emergency Medical Team arrived and she quickly briefed them. "Terran female, mid-twenties, sudden collapse. Exhibited all the signs of a cerebral accident. Patient was covered and her feet elevated. No medication was given."

The senior EMT nodded at their boss and quickly stabilized the patient, calling for a point-to-point beam out directly into the Emergency Room.

"I'll be over as soon as I can," she told the EMTs.

"Aye, ma'am," the senior technician replied before they were lost in a shimmer of the transporter.

Arcadia watched them fade away before she turned and noticed Kyle hovering in the corner being handed a datapadd by one of the waiters. As she walked over to him to give him a formal though preliminary report, she noticed a perceptible change in his appearance, one that most wouldn't notice but one that she did. She was going to ask him what the problem was but realized that she was going over to him as the CMO, not his wife.

"Captain, Angel has a possible brain hemorrhage."

Kyle tucked the datapadd into his pocket and frowned. "Stroke?"

"I know... she was rather young but it can happen. I do want to talk to the staff here before I go over to Emergency. Is there anything else you need to know, sir?"

Kyle shook his head. "Not that I can think of." He paused to look at her and was about to add something but abruptly changed his mind. "Carry on, Doctor."

Arcadia stared at her husband for a few moments before she replied, "Aye, Captain." She watched him move off to the side leaving her to attend to her

official business. She searched the crowd, finally spotting the duty manager and walked towards her.

"I realize that this is still all a shock. It looks like a stroke and I'm just doing a bit of checking before I leave. Did Angel complain of any recent illness? How about today? I especially want to know about any headaches or other discomfort."

Melonie Howard, as usual, remained calm under the most difficult of circumstances. "She was fine, Doctor. She was very excited about meeting Jasmine Sainte Clair."

"No complaints?" Arcadia gently probed, knowing that Melonie might be in shock.

Melonie thought for a moment. "Oh, she fussed about a scratch on her neck. I offered to get the med kit but she begged off, saying it was nothing."

"Now that you mention it, I did notice her reaching behind and scratching it a few times," Arcadia agreed. She paused for a moment realizing that this line of questioning was becoming a dead end. "No sign of headache or other discomfort?" Arcadia asked again.

"No Doctor, honestly. From what I saw, she just gave a startled 'oh' and suddenly, she fell into a heap." Melonie took a deep breath before she continued. "I knew that she was taking medication for a blood condition and sometimes, that would upset her stomach, but honestly, she was fine."

"Thank you Melonie. I'll make sure you're kept informed. In the meantime," she cast an eye towards the restaurant staff, "it looks like your people could use a few comforting words."

Melonie flashed a grim smile. "Please let me know."

"I shall, now go and attend to your people."

Arcadia left her and walked over to her guests. "I am sorry about all this."

"What happened?" Jasmine asked with genuine concern.

"Honestly, I'm not sure." Arcadia paused, shaking her head. "Possible stroke," Arcadia replied absently, her attention focused on the matter at hand.

Jasmine looked at Arcadia and realized how distracted she'd gotten. She turned to her dinner companion. "Bobby," she began as she stood up from the table,

"we should be going. Thank you for the lovely evening, Arcadia," she started with a nervous edge. Jasmine stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say. "I hope she'll be OK."

"I think she'll recover," Arcadia responded absently before she suddenly realized that Jasmine was leaving. "Do take care, Jasmine." They hugged before Jasmine and Bobby left the restaurant, leaving Arcadia to get back to work.

Arcadia walked over and noticed that things were slowly getting back to normal. She cast a glance over to Kyle who was still standing alone in the corner.

Station Commander Kyle Argent glanced back at the dinner table, noticed that their guests were leaving and his wife staring questioningly at him. He attempted to keep his emotions under check while keeping his face immobile. Since he rarely displayed any emotion in public, any lack wouldn't bring him undue attention.

And right now, undue attention was the *last* thing he needed.

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Sunday Evening

Chief Medical Officer Arcadia Argent hurried over to the Emergency Room where she was unexpectedly met by her Chief of Staff.

"Ike?" Arcadia began in a very surprised voice, "isn't this your day off?"

"Yup, but I just happened to be here when I heard about Angel." He looked over at the doctors working on her and shook his head. "Poor kid. It's bad enough having Sein's Syndrome..."

Arcadia turned her attention away from Angel and towards Ike. "Oh, that's what Melonie was referring to then..."

Ike nodded. "Comes in for regular vascular scans. I've run into her a few times."

"Interesting..." Arcadia mulled. "What's she taking for it?"

"I'm not sure, let me check." Ike went over to the diagnostic bed and requested a datapadd. He walked back and looked to Arcadia. "The standard treatment, hemodyalomin."

Arcadia nodded. "Highly effective but the patient needs to be closely monitored for any signs of vascular weakness." She stopped when she saw that Angel was being moved out of the Emergency Room.

"Harvey," Arcadia began to her Senior Surgeon, "can you tell me anything?"

"Definitely a bleed, not a stroke. We're taking her up to relieve the intracranial pressure. I don't expect any complications."

Arcadia let out a sigh of relief. "That's good. While a bleed can be serious, it isn't as serious as a clot."

Doctor Harvey Cushing nodded. "True..." he looked down at his padd. "Right now, we can't determine the cause of the bleed just that she has one. We've stabilized her and as far as we can tell, the bleeding has stopped." Harvey Cushing paused and consulted his notes before making an annotation. "She's on hemodialysis. That can cause cerebral vascular weakness, but according to her records she was just in for a scan last month and passed it with flying colors." Harvey paused again as the frustration boiled within him. "We may have missed something on the scan, she may have missed or doubled a dose -- who knows!"

Arcadia could sense his frustration. "I understand Harvey, but we won't know until we do a few more tests. I don't know if the EMTs told you that I was at the Nexalodeon having dinner and Angel was our server. The stroke came on suddenly and in fact, I spoke to the duty manager and she said that Angel had no complaints."

Harvey thought for a moment. "Oh? That's pretty unusual unless Angel just didn't care to mention it."

The CMO nodded. "I agree. When are you going to do a deep vascular scan?"

"As soon as we relieve the pressure, Doctor."

"Harvey, do keep me informed. Have a report on my desk as soon as possible."

"Aye, ma'am," he replied before he dashed off to the imaging section of the hospital.

Arcadia walked back to where Ike was deep in a conversation with a few of the duty nurses. She waited until he was finished.

"Well?" he asked, turning his attention back to Arcadia.

"We just need to wait for the tests to be completed." She paused to look at her chronometer. "Since I'm on duty at eight-hundred hours tomorrow morning, I'm going back home to catch some sleep."

"See you in the morning, Darce," Ike replied before he walked towards his office.

* * *

Sunday Evening

The Station Commander took the long way back to his quarters. He tightly squeezed the datapadd in his hand and grimly realizing that things had definitely taken a sinister turn.

He stopped and opened the padd to view the message again.

*<I told you I meant business, Boy Scout.
Next time you feel like going Cowboy,
Someone close to you dies.>*

He shut the padd off and put it back in his pocket.

Captain Kyle Descoyne Argent knew that he had a lot of thinking to do tonight.

* * *

Monday Early Morning

Chief Medical Officer Doctor Arcadia Argent arrived at her office bright and early the next day. Normally, she wouldn't be in the office at 0700 but not only was she concerned about Angel and wanted to check on her well being herself, but Kyle was in no mood for their normal morning breakfast chit-chat. Arcadia knew that the best course of action when he got into one of *those* moods was to let him be until he was ready to be one with the universe again.

She grabbed her customary cup of steaming hot English Breakfast tea from her office replicator and allowed herself a long whiff before she sat down at her desk to read the preliminary report on Angel. Last night's scan demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt the cause of Angel's problem. Arcadia pulled up the scan and perused it herself. While she was a noted surgeon, her sub-specialty was radiology. As she explained to Kyle, having a sub-specialty like radiology meant that if she didn't want to work as a surgeon, she could always find work in imaging.

She took her time with the scan, carefully going over each image and magnifying selected areas, including the region in question. There was no doubt that this was the area where the bleed had occurred, so that was no longer in question. But something nagged at her and she couldn't shake this feeling that there was something not quite right here.

Arcadia leaned back and sipped her tea, becoming lost in thought. She sat back up, suddenly deciding that it was time to do some basic research.

"Sparky," she requested of the station computer, "print out a synopsis of Sein's Syndrome and when you're done, I want complete information on the side effects of hemodialomin."

"Right away, honeybunch!" replied the Sparky in his usual irreverent tone.

Arcadia gave brief consideration in berating the station computer yet again -- especially since he had promised to behave -- but became lost in the material that had started to appear on her terminal screen. She read it through and requested additional information. She mulled over everything she'd read this morning before making a decision.

"Sparky, book one of the scanning labs and send a message to the duty nurse that I want patient Angel Fontaine ready for another sub-molecular scan. I'll perform the procedure myself."

"Harvey's gonna be mad...." Sparky offered as he processed the order.

"Probably... but *I* need to be sure..." Arcadia absently replied.

* * *

"Good morning, Captain Argent!" Melody brightly greeted her boss as the Station Commander entered the Command and Control Center.

"Good morning, Ms Marlowe," he acknowledged. "Please see to it that I am not disturbed." Not waiting for her answer, he walked into his office and secured the door behind him.

Melody continued to stare at the door even after it had closed. "Now, how do you like that?" she mumbled.

"Like what, Ms Marlowe?" Executive Officer Sasha Romanova asked.

"The Captain, Commander. He just said hello then breezed by my desk as if I wasn't here."

"Obviously he has something on his mind and it might have to do with the collapse of the waiter at the Nexalodeon."

Melody frowned. "That could be, Commander, but even during the recent Chocolate Crisis, he wasn't *this* occupied. He always asked how I was even if he was just making polite conversation."

Sasha shrugged. "Don't know what to tell you," she began as she walked towards the Station Commander's door.

"*Commander!*" Melody shouted stopping Sasha dead in her tracks. "He doesn't want to be disturbed," she added quietly.

Sasha looked back at the yeoman. "Not even *me?*" she asked in an incredulous voice.

"He said that I was to see to it that he wasn't disturbed, Commander. He seemed pretty definitive... if you know what I mean."

"I do indeed." Sasha simply sighed. "I guess he'll see the report soon enough."

Melody didn't respond she simply nodded and went back to work.

* * *

Monday Morning

Station Commander Kyle Argent spent several moments lost in thought, staring out the window in his office before he sat down at his desk. He gathered the datapadds and spread them out as he now considered how the ante had just been upped by a considerable margin.

It had all started exactly two weeks ago when the first message unexpectedly arrived. Kyle picked up the datapadd and read it again.

*<I'm watching you.
Catch me if you can.>*

The message itself was benign enough. At the time, he had made a quick but unsuccessful search for the perpetrator. He ultimately had dismissed it as the work of someone's overactive imagination and didn't bother to contact Security.

However, as the messages increased in frequency, so their tone had changed. They went from being just a nuisance to downright menacing. At that point, he

decided to test the intent by making an appointment with Security. He quickly found out that someone was keeping very close tabs on him. An hour later, while enjoying lunch in his private perch above the hangar deck, he found a padd. Kyle now switched it on:

*<I told you I was watching your every move.
Your message never got to Security.
Actions have their consequences.
This weekend, someone close to you will pay.>*

He had attempted to trace this one on his own. He had concluded that whoever this was knew how to slice a computer system, masking the trail and the source.

Kyle looked down and picked up the last message that had arrived soon after their Nexalodeon waiter had collapsed. He suddenly tossed it aside unread. He sprang out of his chair and strode over to the small window in his office. He could no longer ignore what had occurred, especially now that the perpetrator had made good on his last promise -- to hurt someone close to him. And Kyle had no doubt that his nemesis meant every word and would kill someone if he tried calling in Security again to investigate these mysterious missives.

He briefly considered calling in a few favors, but ultimately realized that he couldn't afford to put anyone else in danger. It had become obvious to him that these fiends would uncover any one he contacted.

So it was up to him, Kyle grimly concluded, to conduct the investigation on his own and not allow anyone, not even his staff, his wife, or *anyone*, know what he was up against. All he could do was remain a witness though there were a few benign things he could do as the Station Commander that were unlikely to attract any attention.

Kyle quickly walked back to his desk and sat down.

"Sparky!"

"Yes, *Captain?*" the station computer responded.

"I want a list of all known *Nexus* criminals, no matter how minor their offense."

"Yes *Captain*," Sparky answered. "*To your terminal or to padd?*"

"Put it on my padd, Sparky." Kyle considered for a moment before he continued. "I also want a list of all new arrivals to the station."

"Period of time, Captain?"

"Two weeks, Sparky."

"That's gonna be a long list, sir."

Kyle leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I know. Put it on the padd."

"Right away, Captain."

Kyle patiently waited for Sparky to finish delivering the requested material as he considered his other problem.

Jasmine...

He shook his head in anguish. He wondered why she'd make such an obvious move for him while playing nice to his wife. Kyle contemplated telling Arcadia what had happened but ultimately decided that Jasmine would be gone on Friday and out of his life for good, so why bother.

Besides, he had more important things on his mind than the machinations of an ex-girlfriend who just didn't know when to quit.

The datapadd's soft beep drew him back to the matter at hand. He started the painstaking task of going through each and every record. He didn't know what he was looking for but somehow knew that the answer was there.

* * *

Monday Mid-Morning

"Sparky," Archer rolled over and sleepily tapped the link, "put the lights on."

"Right away, babycakes!"

"Arrgh!" she screeched, stuffing the pillow over her eyes. "Dammit! Fifty-percent!"

"Hey! I put the lights on," the Station Computer protested, *"I gave you exactly what you wanted."*

"No you have not!" she pointed out between clenched teeth.

Sparky quickly set the lights down to 50%. *"Here you go!"*

Archer slowly removed the pillow from her face and blinked. She put it under her head and sighed. "What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock or for you military types, ten-hundred hours."

She leaned over and groaned. Archer had just gotten to bed no less than five hours ago and here she was, wide-awake. She finally had some downtime because Jasmine and Bobby were on their Galenan gig and wouldn't be back until late Wednesday. There were no dinner shows until Jasmine's last performance on Thursday.

"Terrific, just terrific!" she mumbled.

"What?" Sparky asked.

"I want to get some shuteye but here I am, wide awake after only a few hours of sleep." Realizing that sleep was obviously *not* in her future and she didn't want to watch holovids, she decided to talk to the station computer. Besides, as she was slowly finding out, he was quite the character.

"Sparky..." Archer began, "talk to me."

"About?"

She sighed. "Oh, I don't know."

"You want the station's incident report?"

"Sure... start with that."

"Matt Rickard lost his stuffed monkey. Joan and Dennis are looking for boxes of gelatin and--"

"Hold it -- *gelatin?*"

"Yeah, the dessert. I understand it's supposed to be good but you know us 'puters don't eat, so I couldn't tell ya."

Archer rolled her eyes. "Gelatin...? Next thing you'll tell me is that someone lost his parrot."

"As a matter of fact, Blair--"

Archer cut him off. "Look, Sparky, no more lost puppies or kitties? Stick with the big stuff..."

"Gotcha.... *The biggest news is still Angel Fontaine.*"

She frowned for a moment. "Who is she?"

"The waitress that collapsed at the Nexalodeon yesterday."

"I hadn't heard. What happened?"

"She had just taken the Captain and Doctor Argent's orders for dessert when she had collapsed."

"Wow... how's she doing?"

"She's doing OK from what I read on the medical reports."

"Anything else you can tell me?" Archer asked.

"Only that Jasmine and Bobby were dining with the Captain and his wife when Angel collapsed."

"They were there?"

"Yup, it's in the initial medical investigation report. And there's something else..." Sparky cautiously began, *"Avalanche was there too. She caused a ruckus with her tactical officer."*

"Avalanche... Who's she?"

"She was at the party. Y'know, Kavindra Courage, Wing Commander of the Two-Oh-Six."

"Oh, her..." Archer suddenly remembered. "Yeah -- mousy type. Skulked around the party as if she wasn't sure whether or not she should be there. She even called ahead of time to find out if she was *supposed* to be on the guest list. As if we'd make that kind of mistake."

"*You never make a mistake,*" Sparky added.

"Why thank you, Sparky..." Archer retorted, and then paused for a moment. "Now why am I interested in the fact that this woman was at the Nexalodeon."

"Because of your suspicions."

"My... what...?" Archer warily asked.

"Y'know, what you put in your personal log. The conversation you overheard in the crapper during the big party. You think that there's something strange going on with either Jasmine or Avalanche."

"You read my personal log?" she asked between clenched teeth.

"I read everyone's log, babycakes.... but I'm not allowed to talk about what I read in 'em."

"I see," she replied skeptically.

"You can trust me, Archer. I can't talk about what I read, it's not allowed in my programming."

While Archer wasn't totally convinced she was interested in what Sparky had to say. "So she caused trouble at the café, what prompted this?"

"She's working her wingman to death and some of the pilots are really sore. They've gotten together and are giving her a hard time. I guess her tactical officer was in on it because that's who she confronted at the café."

"That could be dangerous, especially to one's career," she mused. "So what does this have to do with anything?"

"Well..." Sparky patiently began, *"Figured you'd be interested. Either Avalanche or Jasmine talked with a man. And now Angel Fontaine collapses right after she takes care of both Avalanche and Jasmine. Coincidence or what?"*

Archer nodded. "Hmmm.... Has security been called in?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me, I'm just the Station Computer!" he pointed out.

"That may be," Archer considered, "but you do know everything."

"I know!" Sparky brightly replied.

Archer chuckled at the self-assurance that this computer displayed. "Thank you Sparky, I think I'll just get up now."

"Anytime, babycakes!"

"I do wish," she mumbled as she tossed the covers back, "that he wouldn't call me babycakes." Archer was about to get up when she fell back down to her bed, deep in thought. Sparky was right. Was this a coincidence? She cast her thoughts back to the ominous conversation she had overheard in the bathroom during the reception and dinner.

Initially, she wanted to mention the conversation to the club's bouncer Roscoe but ultimately decided that she didn't want him to think that she had spent her time spying on their guests her first real day on the job.

Besides, she didn't even know who the two people were. All she had were suspicions.

But now, Archer wryly considered, two of the possible suspects had been present when a waiter collapsed.

Archer stretched and stood up.

"Perhaps it's time for me and Roscoe to have a little chat," she murmured.

* * *

Monday late Afternoon

"Sparky, is Lieutenant Ivanan available?"

"*Yep, Ike's in his office. Want me to buzz him?*"

"Have him report to my office as soon as possible, if you please."

The station's computer didn't miss the urgency in her voice. "*He's on his way, Doctor Argent.*"

Arcadia snapped off her link and stood to walk over to her replicator. She ordered up yet another cup of tea while she waited.

"Where's the fire?" Ike Ivanan casually rushed in and stood near his customary seat next to her desk.

Arcadia quietly stirred her tea. She sat down, placing the untasted tea on her desk before giving her full attention to her Chief of Staff.

"Ike, I think we may have a problem."

Ike Ivanan cautiously took his seat. He'd known her for many years and the look she had on her face was one of deep concern.

"It's about Angel Fontaine," she began.

"I know..." Ike sat back in his chair and sighed. "Harvey was quite perturbed that you ordered another scan *and* did it yourself. And let's not talk about the other tests you ordered... You cut a pretty wide swath today, Doctor."

The CMO looked up at her Chief of Staff and could tell right away that he was in all-business mode.

"I take it you'd like an explanation?" Noting that he had nodded in assent, she started. "There was something about all this," she paused to allow her hand to sweep the assembled datapadds, "that didn't sit right with me. When I read the preliminary report and looked at the initial and subsequent scans, I felt there were pieces missing. So I decided to take a look myself."

"Judging from the fact that you've processed no administrative work today," Ike gently pointed out, "it must have been important."

"Sometimes there are more important things than paperwork, Ike."

Ike tossed up his hands in surrender. "Oh, you don't have to convince me of that, but you *do* have to convince me that all this time you've been spending on this little project of yours has been worth it." Ike pulled out a datapadd and scanned it. "You've certainly been busy."

"Quite right, Lieutenant. Let me tell you what I was working on."

Ike sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. "I'm all ears, Darce."

"The initial scan indicated increased cranial pressure from either a bleed in the brain or a cerebral vascular accident. A more detailed examination revealed that the suspected bleed was not a stroke. After I read Harvey's report, I requested that those scans be sent to me and that's when I really started to think about Sein's Syndrome."

"And?"

"The gold standard treatment for Sein's Syndrome is hemodialomin which, as a side effect, can cause vascular weakening. Hence the need for periodic molecular scanning."

"I'm aware of that," Ike pointed out.

"However, are you aware that a bleed in so young a patient is very, very rare?"

Ike shook his head. "No, I didn't. If that's the case, why the periodic scans?"

"Better to be safe than sorry, besides, they don't take long -- less than five minutes and they will detect any vascular weakness before it becomes a problem. She has to come in for blood tests and doing a scan at the same time saves time." Arcadia paused, looking off into the distance. "Angel having a bleed at such a young age bothered me, so I ordered up her previous scans and compared them."

"And you found?"

She looked back to face her Chief of Staff. "Nothing, they were normal. In fact, she had a scan January and a scan in November. In December, we recalibrated all the imaging equipment."

Ike suddenly sat up as he began to see what she was driving at. "So I take it those previous scans were normal?"

"Exactly. At this point, I ruled out a problem with the equipment. I doubled checked everything myself and ran a third scan today. Same results as the one from last night, only we're now seeing signs of healing."

Ike suddenly looked over at his boss. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I, Ike. And if that isn't enough, this will be. I did a sub-molecular scan -- a procedure not normally done. Harvey would have had no reason to do one since the molecular scan was so definitive in pointing to a diagnosis." Arcadia leaned over and flicked on her view screen, moving it to where they could both view it. "Here, take a look."

Ike swung his chair around. To his untrained eye, it was simply a sub-molecular scan but to his boss' trained eye, it was obviously something more.

Arcadia took out a pointer and began circumscribing an area in blue. "See here, the tear in the vessel." She watched as Ike nodded, then continued. "I'd never seen anything like that, so I ordered up from our library sub-molecular scans of bleeds caused by hemodialomin."

Ike pointed to the screen. "And this isn't one of them I take it?"

The Chief Medical Officer nodded. "Exactly, Ike. Hemodialomin didn't cause her bleed but I don't know what did."

"That's why you asked for additional blood and tissue tests."

"Right, all came back within normal parameters."

The Medical Branch Chief of Staff stood from his chair and started to pace. "So she was poisoned?"

Arcadia watched him walk up and down her office. "It would appear that her problem was caused by an unknown substance," she began. "Even so, we have no real proof. And if it was deliberate poisoning, it's likely long gone from her system."

"Do we go to Security?" he ventured.

Arcadia frowned. "They'd just look to us for verification of my suspicions. I could talk to Kyle and ask his opinion but...." Arcadia allowed her voice to trail off before she continued, "he's been so distracted lately, we've barely spoken. This morning was especially unpleasant. I quit trying and left early for work."

"That bad?"

Arcadia looked up at Ike. "Kyle isn't one for talking as it is, but I've barely gotten a grunt out of him these past few days and he's been spending a lot of time at work. I am getting concerned about him."

Ike retook his seat. "You could drag him in for a physical. The CMO can do that."

Arcadia shook her head. "I don't have enough to justify *that* act without causing a major-league fuss around here." She winced, remembering the reaction when she downchecked the 18th Squadron. "Rather than go to Security right now, I'm going to send all this off to another specialist and see what she has to say. That way, if she agrees, I'll have something to fall back on. If she doesn't, well, this way I won't unnecessarily alarm anyone. Especially Kyle who honestly doesn't need the bother right now."

"Who'd you have in mind?"

"One of the best sub-molecular people I know," she replied to her Chief of Staff before she turned on her comlink to place the request.

* * *

Monday late Afternoon

"Busy?"

Roscoe glanced up from the datapadd and waived her in. "Pull up a chair."

Archer casually walked in and took the offered chair. "Are you sure? You seem busy..." she cautiously asked again.

"Naw.... just reading the club's incident report from last night."

"Anything interesting?" Archer asked, now somewhat more relaxed.

Roscoe laughed. "Apparently, one patron decided to get up and sing 'Louie, Louie'."

Archer frowned. "You mean the song where you can't understand the lyrics?"

He nodded. "In fact, that's what caused the problem. Apparently, one of our guests decided that the patron in question was singing the wrong lyrics and proceeded to correct him."

She grinned. "That must have been interesting."

"Oh, it was. The two got into an intense discussion fueled by liberal doses of alcohol. Les had to break it up."

"Any casualties?"

"Naw... Les and Dee escorted the two patrons back to their quarters and that was that." Roscoe put down the datapadd and looked at Archer. "So what's on your mind?"

"There's something I need to tell you..."

"And that is?"

"During our Thursday party, I was in the loo and overheard two of our guests having a rather heated conversation."

Roscoe sat up and squinted at Archer. "You were eavesdropping?"

Archer felt her face flush ever so slightly. "Trust me, not intentionally. On the other hand, I didn't want them to feel that I was, so I ducked into an empty stall and waited them out."

"Overheard what they said?"

"For the most part."

"And?"

"They were going after each other hot and heavy and they implied that something bad would happen to someone else."

"Not much to go on if no names were mentioned. Do you know who it was?"

Archer shook her head. "No.... all I know was that the woman doing the talking was likely either Kavindra Courage or Jasmine Sainte Clair."

Roscoe leaned back to think. "What's the problem? Nothing happened." He sat up and grabbed a datapadd.

"Something has happened, Roscoe."

"Oh?"

Archer took a deep breath. "Heard about Angel Fontaine? Waitress at the Nexalodeon collapsed last night."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Roscoe responded, "but what does that have to do with anything."

"Both Kavindra and Jasmine were at the restaurant when it happened."

Roscoe shrugged. "Your point?"

Archer became angry. "*Something's going on here!*"

"So what the hell do you want *me* to do about it? Look, if you're that upset, go to Security but I can tell you what they are gonna tell you. They'll say--"

"Thank you for the information," Archer finished for him. "We'll get back to you."

"Exactly, Archer. There's nothing we can do based on what you overheard, especially when you don't know who said what to whom. Besides, talking is not a crime."

Archer leaned back in her chair and thought for a moment. "You and Mister G are pals of the Station Commander. Perhaps drop a hint or two..."

Roscoe rolled his eyes. "Trust me when I say this, but I don't think that Kyle would be too receptive -- he's not fond of folks jumping the chain of command..." He looked back to Archer. "But I think I know who would be."

* * *

Tuesday Afternoon

LtCdr Lars Lysander stood in front of the door and hesitated a moment before he announced his arrival. He was the Deputy Director of Flight Operations and he could just consider this as part of his job. But, on the other hand, deep down inside, all Lars could conclude was that this business squarely fit under the category of "kissing toads" and she was an ugly one at that. He rattled off a number of things he'd rather be doing Tuesday afternoon than standing in front of her quarters.

Finally, he could delay the inevitable no longer and announced his presence.

An expressionless voice rang out behind the door. "Enter."

Lars rolled his eyes to the ceiling and prayed to the Great Ultimate before he entered her bog.

He cautiously walked in and immediately noticed that her quarters were the directly opposite her office: clothing was strewn around interspersed with datapadds and other flotsam and jetsam. It looked like it hadn't been picked up in several days.

Lars adopted his official command voice as he walked over to where she lay on her bunk. "Lieutenant Commander Courage, as you know, your suspension officially comes to an end tomorrow at noon. Your request for reinstatement at this time has been granted."

"*Fine*," she spat out, not even rolling over to look at him.

Lars sighed inwardly before he continued still maintaining his friendly tone of voice. "Look, Avalanche, over the last few days we've received complaints from the senior tactical officer, senior grounds personnel, several pilots *and* the Station Commander in regards to your behavior. Make no mistake, record or no record, under most any circumstances, we would have cashiered you right out of the Corps. Instead, we left the decision up to your squadron; if they wanted to continue serving with you then so be it. Unfortunately, none of the veteran officers were even remotely interested in having you as their wingman. That is, until young Scott Nakamura spoke up and stated that he would have you on his

wing anytime. Without his declaration, you would have most likely been off the flight line for good."

Avalanche rolled over and sat up, stunned by what she had heard. She never imaged that she was all that popular with her squadron or her wing but the least those ungrateful sons of bitches could do is be grateful. But no!

Noting that he had her attention, Lars continued. "At first, I thought that Ensign Nakamura was just being polite, after all, as *you* well know, he is a rookie. But I spoke to him later and I was convinced by his sincerity."

She scarcely heard his last comment as she was still seething from the blow she'd just received. She suddenly realized what Lars had just said and looked over to him.

"I see," she finally responded.

Her lack of enthusiasm didn't go unnoticed by Lars. He paused and carefully began weighing his options. The simple thing would be to just get up and leave. He had done his duty and no one would think any worse of him. And yet...

"Kavindra," he began, "just what the hell is your problem?"

She wasn't expecting this line of inquiry. And she definitely wasn't interested in responding to it.

"And what business of yours are my so-called 'problems'?"

Lars fixed his cold Nordic gaze on her and simply gritted out a terse response. "If people on the flight line are endangered by them, then I'll *make* it my business."

She knew there was no escaping it now. Well, to hell with it. If he hadn't read her personnel file by now, then that was just to damn bad.

"With all due respect, *sir*," she spat, "I've had to fight for every chance I've ever gotten in life. No one, not my parents, not my siblings, not my teachers ever thought I'd amount to much, but in the end I showed them all. I've worked my ass off to get where I am today. I've been to the bottom of the barrel before. I know what it's like to be at the receiving end of the hazing, the extra chores. It made me harder, better. And--"

"Stop..." Lars noted sotto voce. "You are not telling me anything new. Yes, you may not be the best pilot working the flight line, but there is no doubt about

the fact that you are one of the hardest working ones -- and one of the most disciplined. If this were not the case, you wouldn't be here at all. Be that as it may," Lars paused before continuing, "just what gives you the right to assume that what worked for you will work for everyone else?"

"I don't follow..." she noted with a tone of defiance in her voice.

"Whether you like it or not, every individual is different. A poor leader ignores this and treats everyone the same. A good leader recognizes this and takes time to deal with their individuality. What do you know of Lieutenant Taylor?"

"A Ground Tech with wings," she began with a distinct hint of anger in her voice. "Got here riding on Argent's--"

"His brother was killed on the line," Lars interjected, not wanting to hear the rest of her response. "To get where he is today, he had to get over burying his brother -- knowing full well that someday he could get his ticket punched just the same. And he did it anyhow. Does that not tell you that maybe, just maybe he has the will to do what needs to be done without others interceding on his behalf?"

Avalanche fell silent. She had never read Virgil's personnel file. She didn't know...

"And let's take Ensign Nakamura," Lars continued without giving her any time to think. "What do you know of him?"

"He's a raw recruit and the son of some Fighter Corps legend."

"Who just happened to leave him and his mother when he was but an infant -- for her to raise him by herself on Ganymede."

This bit brought Avalanche up short. Ganymede redefined the concept of Hellhole. A woman raising a child there would have to be one tough mother. She had glanced over Scott's file before, which gave his residency as Kobe, Japan. She hadn't really bothered to read up on his family background and...

...And if she had taken the time to read up on Nakamura, she would have known this.

"Kavindra," Lars continued after realizing he had finally struck a chord with her, "the boy has never known a paternal role model. A very strong woman raised him and it undoubtedly left a major impression on him. Think about that the next time you feel compelled to make his life miserable."

The concept of Scott seeing her as a new maternal role model almost made her choke. She had known what it was like to be scorned by those you looked up to. The pain was twice as deep and three times as hard and in the end she had turned out to be no better than her own mother. She had been given a chance to undo what was done to her and she had blown it.

Well, not quite. Somehow and in some way, she would now have to make it up to him, even if she did not yet know how. But as always -- in the end, Courage prevails.

* * *

Wednesday Afternoon

Chief Medical Officer Arcadia Argent leaned back in her chair as she waited for the familiar face to fill the screen.

"Doctor Argent!" Doctor Zahur, Dean of the Starfleet Academy of Medicine in Old San Francisco, greeted her former pupil.

"Good to see you too, Doctor Zahur. Has it really been two years?"

"Time flies when you're in my business, my dear. I see my students daily for a period of time then I never see them again, except on rare occasions like this. However," Zahur said, becoming all business, "you didn't consult me so we could chit-chat like a couple of old ladies. Is your terminal in secure mode?"

Arcadia's eyes flicked to the top of her monitor. "Yes."

"Then, let me get to it. Your suspicions are justified."

Space Station Nexus Chief Medical Officer expelled the breath she'd been holding since Sparky told her that she had a high priority call from the Academy. "No doubt in your mind, ma'am?"

"None," Doctor Zahur stated with certainty. "However, what I can't tell you is what it might be. Obviously whoever did this used a highly sophisticated drug that metabolized very quickly, leaving no trace other than the damage it was apparently supposed to have cause."

Arcadia nodded. "Any clues?"

Doctor Zahur shook her head and a long blue hair to fell out of place. "We can take a stab at the type of agent that caused the damage but not the drug itself.

I can't even tell you if your patient will suffer any other damage but we suspect that whatever damage was done that is likely to be all."

"That's good to know."

"I'm sending you the details right now. Let me know if I can be of more service."

"Thank you Doctor Zahur."

"You're welcome, Doctor Argent. Call me anytime you need my assistance. Zahur out."

Arcadia leaned over to close their secure line.

"Sparky, have Lieutenant Ivanan report to my office as soon as he can."

"Right away, Darce!" he responded brightly.

Arcadia used the time waiting for her Chief of Staff to arrive going over the material that Doctor Zahur had sent her.

"You rang?" Ike began as he took a chair next to her desk.

She nodded. "It only took them two days, but I just heard from Doctor Zahur. Angel was poisoned. They couldn't isolate the substance but she sent me a list of similar drugs."

"Any ideas how it was administered?"

Arcadia shook her head. "Not really though I suspect it would have to be odorless and colorless. Tasteless as well since Angel didn't complain about anything of that nature." Arcadia paused for a moment. "In fact, the only complaint she did have was the scratch on her neck."

"Damn!"

"I agree. And if that isn't enough, Roscoe was in here earlier. Seems that the club's majordomo overheard a conversation in the loo last Thursday between a man and a woman implying that someone would get hurt. One of the people was possibly Jasmine or Avalanche."

"She doesn't know for sure?"

"No, they were whispering and she wasn't able to identify the participants."

"So what now?"

"I think it's time that I had a chat with Security," she responded gravely. "But," she added, "I suggested to Roscoe that Archer go to Security directly."

"You could tell Kyle..."

Arcadia stared at her Chief of Staff. "Under normal circumstances, I would. We've barely said a word these days. I wouldn't want to waste what little time I have with him with station business. He'll read the formal report in the morning."

Ike merely nodded and watched his boss leave the office before he began to mull over some of his own ideas on the subject. There were very few outfits that employed such tactics but even then, why they would target a simple waitress in such a public fashion was beyond him. Perhaps there was a greater game being staged here. Ike immediately thought of contacting Kyle directly but quickly dismissed that idea because he knew that Kyle was keeping on top of things by reading branch summaries each morning.

* * *

Wednesday Late Afternoon

Chief Medical Officer Arcadia Argent quickly made her way to the Security Branch Offices. Upon arrival, she was told that the Chief was on Galena but that the Assistant Chief of Security was available.

"Ensign Strontium?" Arcadia began, warmly shook the young woman's hand, "I believe the last time I saw you was during the briefing at o'dark hundred during the chocolate crisis."

"Yes, ma'am it was, come to think of it," Emerald agreed but quickly became all business because it was near closing time, "what can I do for you, Doctor?"

Arcadia took her seat, pulled out several datapadds, and spread them out on the Assistant Chief of Security's desk. "I won't bore you with details because they are in my official report, so let me cut to the chase. Did you hear about the collapse of the Nexalodeon's waiters?"

Emerald nodded. "I read the incident report. We were concerned it was another case of choc poisoning."

"No choc poisoning but it was apparently caused by some unknown substance."

Ensign Strontium stayed mute, taking the top datapadd and quickly scanned it. When she was done, she looked up to the CMO.

"Are you sure, ma'am... I mean, this is pretty serious, Doctor."

"I know that, Ensign, which is why I consulted one of the best sub-molecular specialists and I would think that the word of the Dean of Starfleet Medical should be good enough for *you*," Arcadia replied, perhaps a bit too sternly.

Emerald tossed up her hands in surrender. "Believe me, ma'am, *I* believe you. Whether or not the Chief or Captain Argent do is another story.... Err.... ma'am?"

"I haven't discussed this with the Captain, Ensign. I decided to come to you first," Arcadia declared.

"Err... yes, ma'am. We'll investigate it." She paused while she thought. "Is the victim...." she paused again, scanning the report for her name, "Ms Fontaine available for questioning?"

"The *patient*," emphasized Arcadia, "is on her way to recovery. She should be released in a few days."

Ensign Strontium knew when she'd been admonished and as a consequence, kept her nose buried in her datapadd busily making notes. "Doctor, I believe I have all the information I need to start an investigation. We'll let you know if we need anything else from you."

Doctor Argent cocked her head sideways while giving the Assistant Chief of Security a quizzical look. It had been a long time since she'd been dismissed like that. Emerald suddenly looked up from her padd and noticed the look on the senior officer's face. She quickly decided that a hasty apology was in order.

"Doctor, I--"

Arcadia cut her off as she stood to leave. "No need to apologize. It's late and I'm sure you're going off duty soon."

Emerald gave the departing CMO a feeble smile before she dove into the datapadds to prepare a preliminary report for the Chief of Security.

* * *

Wednesday Late Afternoon

"Easy there, Roadrunner!" Scott Nakamura chuckled over the intercom. "We've got a finite supply of liquids on board and if I have to open up the wastechutes before we land, the grounders will think we hate them!"

In the Fighter Corps, there were several levels of insult that a pilot could bestow on his ground crew. Parking his fighter as far from the maintenance bay as humanly possible was the first. Popping the waste disposal chutes before landing *and* parking as far as away as possible was the last. After mopping up and having to decontaminate the area, most grounders generally put in for a transfer.

"Sorry..." Roadrunner demurely replied. Ever since they had been cleared to launch, he had been sucking on his drink tube. Almost every time Scott had toggled the intercom, he had interrupted his tactical officer taking a sip. Well, coming close to dying due to dehydration would do that to you.

"We're coming up on Waypoint Seven," Scott noted. "On my mark."

"Roger that", Roadrunner replied, "waiting for your mark."

Scott quietly watched as the distance to the checkpoint counted down on his display.

"Mark," he stated flatly, banking his fighter hard to the left. "Coming about to 1-3-4 by 5-7-2."

"Two, this is lead," tactical officer Neville "Hawk" Takagi interjected over the ship-to-ship comlink. "Confirming change of course at 09:23:27 mission-time. One more and it's time to go home, boys!"

"Roger that, lead," Scott dutifully acknowledged. Normally, the confirmations were the responsibility of the lead pilot. But obviously, Avalanche wasn't in a very talkative mood today -- which all things considered -- was fine by Scott. Just because he was willing to fly with Avalanche didn't mean he was about to become fast friends with her. For what it was worth, she had refrained from any of her usual ticky-tacky orders this time and all in all, this had been a very quiet and routine mission. They had escorted two outbound freighters and helped one inbound convoy make it safely to the station. Last on their mission inventory would be the freighters *Skaarj* and *Freyja*, three days out of Niffelheim and bound for Klingon Space, with a stop at Station, probably to trade and get provisions.

Right on cue, the two freighters appeared on their sensors.

"Freighters *Skaarj* and *Freya*, this is Starfleet 4-6-7-0-2," Takagi began the routine identification process, "here to provide you with escort to *Nexus Station*. Please drop to point-four impulse and turn on your S-F-F transponder. 4-6-7-0-2 out."

The two lumbering bulkfreighters obediently throttled down to the requested speed as they simultaneously turned on their Spatial Friend or Foe Transponder.

"Starfleet 4-6-7-0-2, this is Captain Hallstrom of the *Freya*, we are in compliance with your last orders. Glad to have you along. *Freya* out."

Just about every freight hauler who was on the up and up was usually glad to have a pair of fighters along as they began the lengthy descent through the approach corridor to *Nexus Station*. With its central location at the intersection of nearly a dozen interstellar trade routes in and about the Klingon-Federation border, *Nexus* had always seen a fair amount of traffic. Multiple approach corridors were set up to allow the traffic to be routed as efficiently as possible. Most of these corridors, such as this one, were clear out of the Galena system and took quite some time to traverse, but they had the advantage of being completely free of charge. Most freighters took their chances with the unsecured but cost-efficient routes than the time saving toll lanes. After all, what was 2-3 hours more or less?

Scott quickly checked the data he was now receiving from the SFF. They were *Dagmar* Class Freighters, 238 and 241 Megatons respectively, 33 and 34 life forms aboard and 2 Phaser mounts on each freighter. Not exactly useless in a fight, but not something all but the most inexperienced pirate would be afraid of. Of course, most of these tramp freighters carried modifications not listed in the manifest. Some even were outright Q-ships, providing escort for the more valuable cargo found in the other freighter, but those tended to be the exception, not the rule. These two behemoths didn't look like the kind of ships one would mount any advanced and expensive weaponry on.

"Freighter Group 9-4-3-7, this is *Nexus Station* Approach Control. Please respond."

Scott kept the channel open to listen to the familiar approach procedure.

"N-S-A-C, this is Captain Hallstrom of the *Freya* acknowledging your hail."

"Roger, 9-4-3-7. You need not acknowledge any further hails. You are now entering *Nexus* approach path 0-0-3-1. Please come 5-0-3 by 0-3-0 and hold steady at point four impulse."

Scott watched as the massive freighters slowly corrected their course to the proper approach path take them to their docking berths. He leisurely adjusted the course of his craft to match that of the freighters. Once the fighters were within 50 kilo-clicks of the station, they would disengage their escort and boost over to the military approach lane to begin their own landing on the Station. It had been a blessedly uneventful patrol, and with 4 freighters hopefully safely tucked away, he could expect the customary free drinks or meal at just about any of the usual spacer bars, though he generally did not frequent them. Just as long as the job gets done...

"Freighter Group 9-4-3-7, you are now on approach path 0-0-3-1. In exactly 1-1-7 minutes, you will be handed off to the *Nexus* Port Docking Authority for final docking instructions. Please continue your approach to *Nexus Station*. *Nexus Station* Approach Control Over and Out."

Two more hours of this, Scott inwardly groaned. But all in all, it felt good to be back in the saddle again.

* * *

Wednesday Early Evening

"Don't tell me," the Executive Officer began to the closed door before she turned to the Station Commander's yeoman seated at her desk, "he's *still* not seeing anyone?"

Melody shook her head. "Not a one, Commander. For the last few days he's come into the office, shut the door behind him and not come out until he's ready to leave. I've put in so much overtime lately, I'm sure I have a week off coming to me."

Sasha gave her a grim smile. "At least I can go home at a reasonable time. But because you're his yeoman, you have to remain unless he says otherwise."

"And he ain't talking," Melody responded. She glumly waived her hand over the growing pile of work on her desk waiting for the Station Commander's attention.

"And he's not attending to Station business either," Sasha mumbled then quickly added. "I mean, over the last three days, he's obviously keeping up with some stuff, but not with the detail I've come to expect." She paused to look at the datapadd in her hand. "And here I have a report from Security that under normal circumstances, I'm sure he'd want to see it immediately."

"Oh?"

"They're starting a formal investigation on the Angel Fontaine incidence."

"Angel Fontaine?" Melody asked.

"She's the waitress at the Nexalodeon who collapsed on Sunday. The Captain and Doctor Argent were dining with Ms Sainte Clair and Mister Zephyr when it happened. In fact, she was their waitress."

"I heard about that. So what does this have to do with Security?"

"Apparently," Sasha began, "she was poisoned."

Melody dropped the padd she was working on. "*Poisoned?*"

Sasha nodded. "That's what I thought. The CMO did a medical investigation and even sent her suspicions to an expert at Starfleet Medical who agreed with her findings. Doctor Argent alerted Security and they just gave us a head's up."

"Do they think that Jasmine was the actual target?" Melody asked with concern in her voice.

"That's hard to say though she's certainly the big news around here."

"I heard that Jasmine and the Captain were more than just *good* friends back in the old days," Melody began softly.

Sasha stared at the yeoman. "How do you know all these things?"

"You'd be amazed, Commander. People like to tell me things and I like to listen. I can find out a lot by just listening."

"I can imagine." She tapped the padd she was holding. "Considering that the Captain was there when Angel collapsed, he *might* want to know about this."

"You would think so, especially if there was a chance that Jasmine was the target. But..." Melody allowed her voice to trail off as she looked up to the Executive Officer.

"But..." Sasha picked up her thought, "He said he was not to be disturbed, and there's really nothing he can do that Security won't do. Whatever he's working on, he probably doesn't need this distraction."

"He'll read about it in the briefing notes... assuming he's reading them, that is." Melody suddenly realized what she had just said and added a hasty, "Sorry Commander."

Sasha held up her hand. "No need for an apology, Ensign Marlowe because," she began, staring at door that was serving as a barrier, keeping them from their boss, "I was thinking exactly the same thing." She turned her attention back to Melody. "I'll just leave this with you. If he emerges and he's receptive, let him know."

"I will, Commander. Leaving for the day?"

"Nothing more for me to do," Sasha replied, casting an eye on the closed door again. "I hope he makes it a short night."

"You and me both, Commander."

Melody looked longingly after the XO as she departed, hoping against all hopes that this would be a short night.

* * *

Wednesday Night

Arcadia glanced over at the chronometer again. It dutifully reported that exactly five minutes had passed since the last time she had asked. Sparky had also told her that Kyle was still in his office and she wasn't about to doubt the word of the Station Computer.

But still...

Kyle had always been a dedicated officer. Even when he was her Wing Commander on the old *Stellar Wind*, she could always count on him to be consummate officer. And as Station Commander, he had carried forth that tradition.

She just didn't expect him to be spending this much time away from her, at his office doing paperwork or whatever station commanders' do.

Especially now.

No.... she'd been a ship's commanding officer and she knew the kind of work he was likely engaged in and unless he was doing something behind his command staff's back, there was *nothing* going on that warranted the attention he was supposedly giving. Even during the so-called chocolate crisis, he had made an

effort to be home at a reasonable hour. And when he was going to be late, he always let her know.

But lately.... he'd been so distant from her. Leaving early, staying late, and not being very communicative when she *did* see him, it's like they weren't married anymore.

Arcadia leaned back on the couch as she idly stroked her cat's head, wondering if all her self-doubts were now becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. She knew that Kyle loved her she was sure of that. But in the back of her mind, she always wondered about their relationship. Why this forceful and dynamic man would choose to marry her when she felt she had very little in the way to offer him. She again tried to hold back the tears that threatened to fall as she finally forced herself to face some cold hard facts.

It had all started with the arrival of Jasmine Sainte Clair. Yes, she knew that she and Kyle had had a past. Kyle had been open about that... or had he?

Arcadia considered the fact that Kyle had hastily mentioned their past and just as quickly tossed it off as being *in* the past. Arcadia shrugged her shoulders. She could understand that. But every time they'd been in Jasmine's company, Kyle had been desperately uncomfortable.

Especially during the dinner on Sunday. Arcadia was far from stupid. She'd seen Jasmine sneaking a few covert glances in Kyle's direction while he became more and more distressed. If it wasn't for Angel becoming ill, who knows how the evening would have ended?

Ever since that night, Kyle had become downright unreachable, wrapped in an invisible cocoon of secrecy. Knowing she had a special bond with him had become a great source of comfort to her and one that had saved her and her crews life during her *Stellar Wind* days...

But now, it's as if Kyle had erected this fortress around his soul and nothing... not anyone could penetrate it.

Not even his wife.

Perhaps, Arcadia sadly considered, her tears now falling, that someone else had and that person would be leaving after her last show tomorrow -- perhaps with a new man in tow.

Arcadia held her cat close to her chest while she slowly stood up from the couch and walked towards the bedroom. She'd already made one mistake in not having faith in him -- in doubting him.

But this time, she wondered, if she hadn't been wrong and living a lie for all these years.

* * *

Wednesday Night

"*Scott!*" Roadrunner suddenly shouted over the intercom, "I got something on the sensors!"

Scott Nakamura became fully alert at his tactical officer's shout. The approach path should be clear. Either this was a space anomaly, a piece of debris or...

He keyed over to the ship-to-ship com channel. "Lead, this is two. Roadrunner has something on the sensors. Looks like an echo of some sort. Possible cloaked ship?"

"Either that," Avalanche began, now having spoken for the first time in many hours, "or it's the biggest piece of space debris I've seen in a damned long time." She briefly paused before issuing a calm, "Red Alert."

"*Roger, lead!*" Scott replied dutifully as he brought his shields online and began powering up the weapons. "Roadrunner," he ordered his tactical officer, "contact the freighters ASAP."

"I'm on it."

"*Nexus Approach Control, this is Starfleet 4-6-7-0-2,*" Hawk hailed their base, "We have detected an anomaly in space. Possible cloaked ship. We request..."

"*Hawk!*" Avalanche screeched on their private ship's com channel, "*What's going on...?*"

"Our comm signals are being jammed!" he shouted. "*Ambush!*"

Hawk's last word had barely completed when six starships suddenly decloaked in a semi-circular formation, impeding the fighters and freighters progress. Scott quickly assessed the threat. The ships were of unknown design, though they seemed to be of an Orion origin. Like all Orion craft they were small and compact, hardly half the size of Klingon Bird of Prey. Their engine bays would be inset close to the hull, if the craft did indeed follow standard Orion Ship doctrines. They would be overpowered and undergunned, designed either to overwhelm their less numerous enemies or out-run their enemy one-on-one.

"Freighters, stand to and prepare to be boarded," the unknown pirates evenly stated. "Starfleet Fighter craft. You are outgunned. If you power down your shields and weapons, we will let you live."

Many thoughts began racing through Scott's head before he keyed the ship-to-ship.

"Sir, they won't let us live," he said breathlessly, "we're too inconvenient. We've seen them and..."

"Agreed," Avalanche replied as she allowed her ship to idle. "Lock missiles on the lead ship and open fire on my mark."

Avalanche switched her com from ship-to-ship to the general comm channel. "Hostile Forces," Avalanche bravely announced to the hovering enemy, "this is Starfleet flight 4-6-7-0-2. Depart now or suffer the consequences."

Her answer came in the form of a disrupter bolt, aimed right at her craft. The shields of her Shadowhawk flared up for a moment, but held -- and immediately started to charge back up.

"Mark," she calmly ordered via the ship-to-ship comlink.

Instantly, 4 photon missiles detached themselves from the two fighters and began arcing towards the lead craft. Scott had targeted what the computer believed to be their engine housings, which left Avalanche to target what looked like their bridge.

Her missiles struck home with lethal efficiency, but the enemy craft's shields held. As the shield energy cycled from all other sections to compensate for the loss in front shielding, the second set of missiles struck home. The first missile tore the weakened port shield apart in a burst of white-hot energy and left the second missile to impact directly into the suddenly unprotected engine bay. The explosion that followed seemed to threaten to tear the whole ship apart in one cataclysmic eruption. As secondary explosions rocked the vessel, the bridge section suddenly detached itself from the remainder of the craft.

Scott thought it was a lifeboat of some sort. He quickly lined up a new attack vector on the enemy craft nearest to him. "*Roadrunner*," he shouted frantically over the intercom to his tactical officer behind him, "Can you raise the station yet?"

"Dammit!" his tactical officer replied, "they're still jamming us!"

"Track the emissions!" Scott shouted as a pair of disrupters found their mark on his craft. "Track the damned emissions!"

"I'm working on it...I'm..." Roadrunner replied before he shouted. "Three bogeys on your tail! *Break, Break!*"

Scott looked down to his tactical display. Three of the remaining five craft had taken up his pursuit, with the other two trying to intercept Avalanche, who was skillfully evading their attempts to bring her shields down.

"Shields down to forty-six percent," Roadrunner shouted. "We can't take much more of this!"

He saw the three craft bearing in on him. His only choice was to bring them closer into the freighters. Maybe they could distract one of them and...

Another disruptor hit home, causing the first system damage. Auxiliaries kicked in almost at once. It wasn't fair... he considered, this was only his first engagement and--

"What the f..." Roadrunner suddenly exclaimed breathlessly, "Dive! *Dive, Scott, Dive!*"

Scott obeyed almost instantly, though he couldn't understand the significance of his Tactical Officer's order. That is, until he noticed a brief shadow passing over his cockpit. Photon Torpedoes! The freighters had Photon Torpedo launchers!

This realization came far too late for the pursuing craft, one of which flew right into the initial spread of two torpedoes and promptly ceased to exist, leaving the others to break off the engagement in utter bewilderment.

"Took your sweet time bringing them to us, son," Captain Hallstrom noted over the military frequency no less. "If you can bring them in again, we might be able to give you a hand, but those were our only torpedoes..."

"Roger that," Scott noted with grim defiance, banking his fighter around. It was time to turn the tables on these bastards. Suddenly, one of the freighters opened up with their Phaser batteries. The pirate had been pursuing Avalanche at the time and Scott had the satisfaction of seeing the beam literally push the small ship off course. He watched it shake violently, as if it had been subjected to some blunt trauma. Those phasers were at the very least military grade, if not the same spec as a Ship of the Line! This fight was about to get good!

"*Whoa!*" Roadrunner exclaimed. "The jamming field just dropped!"

"Quick, try to get a squirt out to the station," Scott shouted and he locked his missiles onto what was obviously the Electronic Warfare Craft.

"No good, No good..." Roadrunner noted dejectedly. "We're back in the bag."

Fine, Scott grimly considered as the Target Lock Acquired Klaxon sounded. Time to do it the old fashioned way. As the two missiles began trailing the craft, Scott was overcome with a sense of grim satisfaction. The enemy craft was going down...

But then his satisfaction turned to disgust when he saw his missiles turn off course and begin circling aimlessly. The Electronic Warfare Craft had decoyed them.

"*Fuck!*" Scott all but roared before he toggled over to the phasers. One way or the other...

"Incoming! Multiple Warheads!" Roadrunner exclaimed.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! He had let the other craft catch up to him and get a missile lock. He quickly banked the craft hard to port and deployed a decoy. The first missile went right for it and detonated harmlessly, conveniently taking out a second missile in its flight path.

The third missile kept coming on.

"E-C-M is having no effect!" Roadrunner cried. "It's homing in! Impact in five, four, three..."

Scott had only a fraction of a second to make a decision. He could let the missile hit and hope the two of them would be able to bail out, but their shields were in no condition to take a hit this big. Or he could release his second decoy. This close to target, it would cause damage no matter what and it was strictly against all basic fighterschool rules and...

"*Decoy away*," the fighter's computer calmly noted

A horrific explosion punched the craft not two seconds later, seemingly gripping the craft in a fiery hand and tossing it forward. Scott watched with horror as much of the starboard wing was torn or burnt off. The missile had gone for the decoy!

"Fuck me running..." Roadrunner sighed before he somehow managed to exhale. "That was close!"

"We're not out of the woods yet!" Scott replied, finally regaining his composure, "System status?"

"Oh... it's a mess. Starboard engines offline. Starboard weapons offline. Sensors at sixty percent nominal, Shields forward only and at a whopping seven percent but climbing. And... oh... shit..." Roadrunner took a deep breath. "Scott, we're leaking everything -- oxygen, water, coolants -- everything. We're not gonna make it too horribly far, I'm afraid."

Scott looked down onto his sensor display. The Electronic Warfare Craft had gotten the clue and begun to retreat. Avalanche had crippled one of the three remaining fighters and the freighters Phaser Cannons were now pummeling it. The remaining two ships began to converge on Avalanche...

"Status on port missiles?" Scott asked quietly.

"Two left, two nominal," Roadrunner replied, somewhat incredulously.

Scott banked his increasingly sluggish craft around.

"Scott you can't be serious! *NO!*"

"Shut up and get me a lock, Ensign. Engine bays, please!"

"This could ignite one of the leaking tanks, fer gods sake..."

"Don't you think I know this? You've got your orders, damn it," Scott shouted. "Now just do it and stow the chatter!"

Avalanche continued to weave in and out of shots by the opposition, frustrating their attack and denying them any sort of missile lock. She may be the Queen of Mean, Scott thought, but she's about as good a defensive flyer as he had seen in a long time.

"*Target acquired,*" the computer announced.

Scott pickled off both missiles in rapid succession and began to pray. He wasn't a horribly religious man, but he felt this would be as good a time as any to get on the Great Maker's good side.

* * *

Wednesday Late Night

"Warp signature in Approach path 0-0-3-1!"

Duty Traffic Controller SPO Marla Enumclaw looked up from her station. "Sir, we have unauthorized traffic in 0-0-3-1! Orders?"

"Who is in 0-0-3-1 currently?" Senior Traffic Controller Ensign Phelan Vaccarella calmly requested.

"Freighter Group nine-four-three-seven and Flight 4-6-7-0-2. It's a two fighter escort."

"How many signatures?"

"Three, sir. Two rather sizeable ones. Could be the freighters... yeah, looks like their signature. Matches what we got on file... the third is small enough to be fighter..."

Ensign Vaccarella contemplated the situation for a moment. "Go to yellow alert and get the emergency unit ready."

"Sir.... They are in communication range now! We're being hailed!"

"Open the channel," he requested calmly.

"...this is flight 4-6-7-0-2," a female voice began. "We are declaring an emergency. We were ambushed approximately seventy minutes out by unknown craft, possible Orion. I request an immediate S-A-R operation for my missing wingman and..."

The pilot continued to drone on and on about the nature of the attack. She seemed to be in a state of shock.

"Flight 4-6-7-0-2, come to two-seven-zero by one-two-zero. You are being given priority-landing status. We need to get you down for debriefing and..."

"*Negative, Negative!*" Avalanches voice tiredly but forcefully shouted. "Request immediate S-A-R Operation. Do you understand me? Immediately! My wingman is still out there and..." she screeched.

"Commander," a new voice began, one that Phelan recognized as Captain Blair, the Director of Flight Operations. "You are instructed to land immediately. We will discuss the Search and Rescue operation as soon as you've been recovered."

"Roger that..." the pilot answered somewhat dejectedly.

Ensign Vaccarella sadly shook his head. The senior traffic control officer had seen this happen more than once. A pilot, overcome with the loss of their wingman orders a SAR operation, only to find out that their wingmate was truly dead. Their loyalty was commendable. He keyed the handoff to the fighter deck and returned his attention to the docking of the two freighters that had come in with the lone fighter.

* * *

The engines of Kavindra Courage's Shadowhawk were barely extinguished by the time she had popped the canopy of her craft and haphazardly slid down the stairpole.

"*You!*" she shouted at the nearest ground personnel that had moved in to perform their usual post mission service on her fighter. "Refuel. Rearm. Repair if need be. I've got to get back out there... *now!*"

The maintenance technicians looked at each other dumbfounded by this demonstration. It would be another 60 minutes at least before this bird was cleared to fly... besides, where was the second plane anyway?

"*Didn't you hear what I just said?*" Avalanche shouted, now clearly agitated and restless as she paced up and down like a caged animal. "He's still out there!" she stopped and pointed. "I've got to get him, damn it! Rearm! Refuel! Now, now, *now!*"

The maintenance officers looked at the plane then at Avalanche literally foaming at the mouth, then to each other. Neither of them was interested in giving her an argument, no matter how irrational they thought her state of mind was. Finally, one of them ran off to get the ammunitions cart ready.

"Oh, never mind!" she suddenly exclaimed in exasperation. "Where is the nearest craft of ready reserve? *Officer of the Deck!*"

PO1 Watson was all too well aware why Courage's nickname had been 'Avalanche' and this knowledge didn't make the prospect of being rolled over once more by her feel any better.

"*Petty Officer!*" she thundered from fifteen feet away as she continued bearing down on him. "Deck manifest!"

As Officer of the Deck, it was Watson's responsibility to keep a running inventory of every fighter craft currently assigned to this particular hangar and make sure he had the latest information on their status, loadout, and current berth. It was also his responsibility to question any officer who wanted access

to the manifest and dutifully log said reason. However, one glance at Avalanche and the frantic look in her eyes, convinced him that for right now, it would be best to just hand it over and ask questions later -- which is exactly what he did.

"Fighter 243, Berth 167... perfect!" she mumbled as she scanned the current deck inventory. "Officer of the Deck, please note that I'm assuming control of Fighter 243, Berth 167 for a Search and Rescue Operation to..."

"Commander, you will do no such thing," a familiar but calm voice announced from behind them.

Avalanche turned on her heels to face the Deputy Director of Flight Operations. Lars Lysander locked his eyes with hers and came away with the impression that he'd never ever seen such fury in her eyes. It surpassed anything and everything he had ever seen from her.

"*Fuck you!*" she finally spat out at him. "You, Blair, Argent -- fuck the lot of you!" she screeched. "You and your self-righteous, hypocritical lot... you... you make me sick..."

"Kavindra..." Lars began in a calm voice though he felt his face flush by the accusations. "I would suggest that you stop right there before you say something you might truly regret..."

"Regret?" she began to sob before she let lose another volley. "Let me tell you about regrets!" she thundered between tears. "I flogged the shit out of this kid, I really did. And you called me on it," she paused and allowed her eyes to defocus into the distance. "That kid got his ass shot out of space to save *my* ass today...and the only thing I could do is hope he bailed..."

Avalanche took a succession of short breaths, not realizing she had gone without breathing for the last minute or so. She finally looked back at Lars.

"Kavindra," Lars began quietly, "If he's still out there, we're gonna go get him. I'll promise you that..."

"I've got to go back," she all but sobbed as the first tears began rolling down her cheeks. "I owe him... I owe him so much... Missions don't matter. People matter..." she whispered.

"We'll send someone out there just as soon as we've reviewed your mission data," Lars smoothly continued, "but you are in no shape to go back out there again. Let someone else take care of it. We're all a team here and the life of one pilot means the same to *all* of us..."

"People matter...." Avalanche sobbed as she fell to her knees. "The Captain had said so... people matter... and... what did I do?"

Lars quietly helped her back to her feet and led her off the flight deck to the Flight Surgeon's office.

Petty Officer Watson quietly resumed his station and began to key in the request for two fighters equipped with Search and Rescue gear. He had a feeling they would soon be needed.

* * *

Wednesday Late Night

Avalanche quietly placed her mug of coffee on the table and sat down in the nearest chair. She had no particular reason to be in the wardroom right now, but then she couldn't think of any other place she'd rather be at the moment. Besides, it was late into the night and extremely it was quiet here.

The Doctor had given her a mild sedative and ordered her to take a "straight eight" -- 8 hours of rest and no duty whatsoever. So, any chance of her going back out to rescue Scott Nakamura was right out the window.

Scott...

She repeated his name again as she allowed her eyes to focus off into the distance.

She had seen his fighter blow up in the wake of him pickling off his last two missiles and was reasonably sure the sensors in her craft had correctly identified the emergency ejection pods for him and his tac officer. However, she had no way of knowing for certain if they had survived. Her craft lacked a tractor beam and neither of the freighters was able to get close to the debris field without slamming into something.

So she had done the only thing that seemed reasonable to her -- she had dropped a beacon and initiated an emergency warp jump to station space. She had saved the mission and left behind crewmen.

But now, all she wanted to do was get back into a cockpit and get back out there and do what was right. But they wouldn't let her...

"I heard there was an incident out there today."

Her reverie was interrupted by a voice. She turned around to see Virgil Taylor and that pest of a tactical officer, Jacob van der Weege. Both looked like they had just gotten back from their flight assignment -- hair mussed, faces sweaty, flightsuits almost grimy. Obviously, they had nothing better to do than to track her down.

"Yes," she answered absently, fixing her gaze forward once more. "Yes, there was an incident."

"If I find out that you hazed those kids to death," Jacob snarled as he swiftly moved in front of the dejected Avalanche. "The rank and 'fleet be damned, I'll--"

"Jacob," Virgil began sternly. "For once in your life, just shut the fuck up."

The harshness of the last few words told Dutch that there wasn't going to be any room for compromise here. He defiantly lifted his arms, palms upward and stepped away from Avalanche.

Avalanche was duly impressed by this display. Taylor was both junior to Dutch and hardly looked like he'd be able to hold up in a fight -- and yet he had made enough of an impression on the veteran to assert command authority. Most of her people required brute force and substantial bullying to get anywhere near the point Taylor had gotten to by almost doing nothing at all but using his voice and his sheer presence.

She looked down at her coffee mug. "I have failed, haven't I?" she finally noted, to no one in particular.

"According to what we've been told," Virgil began while giving the still glowering Dutch a sidelong glance, "it got rough out there, and Scott had to punch out."

"And I turned and went home without rescuing him. I saved the mission, *not* the person," she whispered remembering the dressing down that Captain Argent had given her on Sunday.

Scott had told Virgil about the little tirade that Captain Argent had subjected her to recently.

"First off, unless you inventoried some SAR gear on your fighter," Virgil began finding it hard to even bring this up to her at all, "and I sincerely doubt you did -- there was nothing you could have personally done. I don't know what the ships you were escorting were capable of, but chances are, if they could have done something, they would have said so..."

"There was also the last fighter," she choked up quietly, not looking at Virgil. "I had crippled it, but we didn't know if it had gotten a message out or not..."

"So you brought the ships home," Jacob chimed in with a voice that indicated the same resigned understanding Virgil had gained. "Did it ever occur to you that in doing so you saved people's lives? There was, what twenty people on one of those ships?"

"Thirty-three and thirty-four," she monotoned.

"Well, there you go," Dutch replied.

Virgil was just about to let Dutch off the hook in terms of the weird game they now had to play when Lars Lysander walked into the lounge and called out his name. He quickly walked over to where the Deputy DFO stood.

Dutch used the opportunity to sit down across from Avalanche and speak *sotto voce*.

"Word is that what you did with the freighters was a good show, but..." he looked around to make sure no one else was listening in, "if I find out that they got punched out because of your negligence, I'll..."

"You'll *what?*" Avalanche snarled, locking her eyes onto his. She was done playing games with this jerk. "Beat me up? Flog me? Have me drummed out of the Corps? Well..." She briefly paused to compose herself, "then go right ahead, and do it now, because quite frankly, *I do not* care anymore."

She paused once more and took in a deep breath before she launched forward with another volley.

"Do your worst, Lieutenant. Go ahead. But rest assured that nothing you or anyone else could do to me will hurt more than what I've been doing to myself this last hour. I left them behind. Don't you understand! After they saved my bacon -- and I left them behind! I couldn't even go out and bring them back in. I've never felt so helpless in my whole damned life. After this, do you even think that anything you or your friends could do to me would have any relevance at all? *Do you?*"

Dutch leaned back in his chair. He had seen her go off on people with almost no reason whatsoever, but this was very different. She had obviously let her guard down. He had been out of line and he knew it.

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Commander."

"I suppose," Avalanche responded with a half-smile. "On some level, I deserved that. I haven't been the most pleasant of persons to be around and I suppose I have been a bit abrasive..."

Dutch simply stared at her not knowing what to say... Actually, he knew what he wanted to say but didn't dare say it and was grateful when Virgil had returned just in time to bail him out. The last time Dutch had gone down this road with a woman, they had been married 3 months later. And boy, was that marriage ever a disaster...

"We're moving out, Dutch," Virgil announced. "Briefing in five."

Dutch nodded. There was little doubt in his mind what the mission would be. After a 7-hour patrol, they weren't likely to send them out on another run, regardless of their ready status. There was only one mission that was likely be on the docket for them. Suddenly, inspiration overcame Dutch. He sniffed audibly, crinkling his nose in the process.

"You smell that?" he asked Avalanche.

"Smell what?" she replied, not quite knowing where this was going.

"It's the smell of the rookie who is gonna bring back your wingman!" Dutch announced with a casual smile as he got up.

All Virgil could do was cover his eyes and shake his head, sorry he had told Dutch what had happened to him and Scott last week. "Would you just get going already?" Virgil noted in exasperation. He didn't want another tirade right about now.

Avalanche looked up at him with a more pronounced smile this time. "I deserved that one, Lieutenant Taylor."

Dutch stood still, seemingly mortified at her response requiring Virgil to grab him by the sleeve, and moved him along towards the door. Virgil looked back at Avalanche and felt that he should say something a little bit more dignified than his tactical officer's last words.

"We'll get him back for you!" he declared.

"I'm counting on you," Avalanche replied. "*Both* of you."

Dutch froze again for a moment, but then bolted out of the lounge, with Virgil right behind him.

*

Next: *Manhunt!: You Catch the Man*

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