

His Majesty Requests

By Allyson M.W. Dyar, Kurt F Roithinger and Chris Wallace

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*His Most Gracious Imperial Majesty
Hakon Ja'Fadey, Regent of Galena,
Requests Your Presence at the Spring Gala
Nerson Palace, Galena*

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"Report?" Captain Kyle Argent all but sighed. He was anticipating bad news and unfortunately, he wasn't going to be disappointed this afternoon.

"Latest losses in grids forty-three to forty-eight, Red Omega sector," Lieutenant Jefferson El Safeer reported in his normal cool and professional demeanor, "are now approaching five million tons. We had another convoy come under attack yesterday and--"

Kyle began to rub his temples. *Uneasy rests the burden of command especially when you are the Station's Commander*, he mused before interrupting his Chief of Staff. "What about our doubling the fighter patrols in that area?"

"Well, Captain..." Jefferson continued uneasily, "we've now lost fully nine Shadowhawks and thirteen Nighthawks in that sector -- which is nearly..."

Kyle grimaced. "...four times the loss or kill ratio for the entire station in a whole year of peacetime operations," he completed the sentence. He had come to loathe these weekly planning meetings of the Station Command Branch. Peacetime seemed to have gradually been displaced by an acute state of undeclared war. And it was still entirely unclear just who the hell had decided to make war on the people trading through the Obsidian System and Nexus Space. With its central location at the intersection of nearly a dozen interstellar trade routes in and about the Klingon-Federation border, the station had always seen a fair amount of traffic.

"How does our commerce stand?" Kyle asked in a detached tone of voice.

The Station Dockmaster carefully consulted his datapadd before issuing even further bad news. "Shipping has dropped off eight... then twelve... then seventeen percent in the last three months..."

Kyle didn't bother listening to the rest as he sat back to consider the bottom line. The net effect was the loss of nearly one-quarter of their regular freight shipments. In turn, the Galenan economy had taken a turn for the worse, surrendering much of the goodwill towards Starfleet in general, and new interest in the station in particular, something that his initiatives had carefully cultivated.

The situation was altogether intolerable, he angrily concluded. He had requisitioned a task force of ships to be assigned to *Nexus* for the expressed purpose of hunting down whoever was out there and eliminating them once and for all. But in the wake of his most recent exploit, he had obviously made some new enemies in very high places -- ones who would never say so in as many words, but who could easily see to it that any of his requests be... "lost." The Fighter Corps Chief of Staff had warned him about this and he had opted to ignore Cordell's warnings. *Look at the last time they tried to harm me*, Kyle had smugly tossed at him, *and look at what happened to them!*

But at this rate, if ruining his career was what they were out to accomplish, then at this juncture, they seemed to be succeeding.

Kyle reluctantly turned his attention back to the planning meeting. It droned on for another two and a half hours, covering almost every aspect of station life -- from necessary repairs, new tenants, and inevitable complaints right up to procurement orders for new fighters to replace the ones lost in action.

When Kyle finally returned to his office, it was nearly 1800. He wanted nothing more than to just go home and have a quiet dinner with his wife. But there were yet more reports to read, to file, to reject, to... He didn't even want to open his "current" folder and instead, opted to search his recent message traffic: Invoice, Advertisement, Advertisement, Receipt... and a note from Starfleet Operations.

Hullo! That was definitely something out of the ordinary. Kyle proceeded to key in his usual authorization codes and at last, the message decrypted.

TO: CPT K. D. ARGENT, CO, SS NEXUS, OBSIDIAN SYSTEM

In accordance with your request filed SD 44267.14, be advised that Starfleet Task Force Gamma 154 departed Sol at SD 44418.06.

Expected Arrival in Obsidian -- SD 44437.67.

ADM R. L. PETTY, SF OPS, SAN FRANCISCO, SOL

He read the contents over twice before it finally sunk in -- he had gotten his task force! And 44437.67 -- he paused to double check the calendar and it was

indeed the day after tomorrow in the morning. Luckily, there were no convoys leaving for another week or so. The task force was arriving just in the nick of time.

He sent a copy of the decrypt to his Station Ops people and shut his terminal down. After giving it some extra thought, he felt that a good meal and rest would be far better to the continued welfare of this station than processing a few dozen extra reports.

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"Doctor Argent, Captain Argent!" Melonie Howard greeted the couple as they walked into the Nexalodeon.

"It has been a while, hasn't it Melonie," Arcadia acknowledged.

Melonie nodded then quickly led them to their usual table in the corner of the restaurant.

"Glad to have you back." Melonie watched her customers take their seats. She paused then looked to Arcadia. "You heard that Angel quit."

Arcadia gave her a grim nod. "Yes, I did. I imagine being the object of a poisoning would have that effect on one."

"Do you know where she went?" Kyle asked.

Melonie shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Captain. She came back to work for a week. Suddenly, she just handed in her notice and took the next transliner out of here. She didn't even ask for references."

"Poor kid was probably scared silly," Arcadia considered then looked up to Melonie. "Since Angel was our regular server, I take it you've found a replacement for us?"

"I did and I'll send her over in a few moments."

Arcadia turned to her husband and found him actually smiling. "Seems that rank does have its privileges."

Still pleased with the news of the impending arrival of Gamma 154, Kyle was content to give in to the exhilaration that came with being able to ask for and receive a handful of starships to deal with life's niggly problems. He demonstrated his enthusiasm by overtly agreeing with his wife. "Yes, it does!" he replied, beaming at her.

Arcadia eyed him suspiciously. "Speaking of privileges..."

Despite his good mood, Kyle instinctively sensed trouble ahead, and indulged her with a simple, "Yes?"

"The Galenan Spring Gala is in a few weeks. If we went, we would be the first Command Staff to actually attend in a long time and..."

Kyle groaned audibly. He had purposely avoided the subject. He was simply not interested in prancing about some fancy ball in his dress uniform during a time of crisis. The picture such an action would paint was entirely at odds with the image he personally sought to project. And yet... with the imminent arrival of the task force, things would be likely be different around here. Perhaps a CO who was unfazed by the very real threat of danger would be just the ticket...

Kyle looked over to Arcadia who returned his gaze in such a fashion that it was clear to him that she would not, as usual, pursue the issue any further having said her piece on the subject. Kyle felt a pang of guilt and decided that he'd been a most disagreeable husband these last few weeks. A penance was most definitely in order.

"Fine."

"Fine?" Arcadia echoed.

"Yes, we'll go. I'll have Ms. Marlowe send out the RSVP tomorrow."

She beamed at him. "You are a good man, Kyle Argent."

"Oh... and why is that?" he replied, giving her a boyish grin.

"Most of the previous Station Commanders just sent their junior officers," Arcadia grinned in return. "Besides, I only had to look pitiful for a few moments."

Kyle arched his eyebrow at his wife. "I take it you really want to go?"

"I wouldn't miss this for the world. Perhaps the Regent will show me his gardens."

Kyle couldn't help but give his wife a warm smile. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind. Besides, he knows how much you love roses. I imagine he'd enjoy giving a private tour to a fellow rose gardener."

Before Arcadia could respond, their new server arrived.

"Good Evening, Captain Argent, Doctor Argent. I'm Teri and Ms. Howard asked me to be your waitress tonight."

The Argents acknowledged their new server and gave her their order.

"I'll be right back," Teri replied before she dashed off to get their drinks.

"If nothing else," Arcadia continued, "I've never seen invitations like this. This is about as official an invitation I've ever seen."

The invitation -- if one can call it an "invitation" since any meeting with the Regent of Galena *wasn't* optional -- was a very ornate and elaborate piece of artwork. It was hand lettered using gold-foil ink on parchment paper, each invitation personally addressed.

"I hope we don't have to actually hand them over," Kyle murmured.

"No love, there's a separate and considerable smaller card that I suspect we have to take with us. We might want to contact the Protocol Office and see exactly what is expected of us, including what we need to wear."

Kyle nodded. "I'll have Ms. Marlowe take care of that as well in the morning."

"Very good," she replied as Teri returned with their drinks. Arcadia began to sip hot tea, obviously lost in thought.

"Something on your mind, Milady?"

She put down her cup and looked at her husband. "It's just that... this place..." she whispered before she became silent again.

Kyle reached over and lightly stroked the back of her hand. "I can understand that. At least you came back here and faced it," he added quietly. "Angel couldn't."

Arcadia became pensive. "Perhaps we could have done more for her...."

Kyle leaned back, his face grave. "It's possible. But it's been my experience that this kind of trauma could take months to come to term with." He paused and stared at his wife.

"I know... Ike's been helpful on that score. In fact," she chuckled, "he's been more like a mother hen."

"So he's told me...."

"My Chief of Staff *told* you?"

"But of course."

"And here I thought our affair was being kept secret."

"Naw... besides, he has eyes for only one man."

"True enough..." she grinned before becoming more serious. "You weren't this concerned when I had the accident on the flight deck you realize."

Kyle's expression matched her own. "That was different. I felt... and still feel partially responsible."

"I understand," she responded, obviously becoming lost in thought again.

"I know this sounds silly," he began softly, "but I've been looking for a replacement necklace... for the one you lost."

"You didn't have to..."

"I want to."

"I know..."

They spent several minutes holding hands and touching minds until Teri interrupted them by asking for their dinner order. Once the order was taken, they returned to verbal communication.

"I meant to mention this to you a few weeks ago," Kyle began, taking a long sip of his iced tea, "but I received an invitation to my Academy reunion next year."

"Really?" she replied, before a frown formed on her face. "They're sending them out rather early, aren't they?"

"I thought so too. Apparently, the last class sent them out too late and a number of graduates didn't show up. I guess they're just being overly cautious."

Arcadia laughed. "I'll say..." she paused as she felt a stray thought peak out from the corner of her consciousness. "Speaking of celebrations, my grandmother is celebrating her one hundredth birthday next year as well."

"One hundred?" Kyle repeated.

Arcadia nodded. "Actually, she's just getting past middle age. I received a note from one of my young cousins who is doing post grad work at Starfleet Medical that they are planning a big party. I haven't been home in a long time and..."

"When's the party?"

"If your alumni bash is held at the usual time, right afterwards."

Kyle smiled. "I don't see why we don't do both, do you."

"No... after all, we do have quite a bit of leave coming to us."

"I don't want to be off the Station for too long, Arcadia," he sternly told her.

"I agree and I don't want to be away from the hospital too long either," she replied, matching his intensity. "Besides, we've been busy lately."

"I know," he began grimly but allowed a thin smile to slowly cross his lips, "but that will change with the addition of the task force that's on the way."

Arcadia put her cup down and took a long look at her husband who also just happened to serve as the Station's Commanding Officer. "Don't expect too much, Kyle. Fate has a way of biting us on the backside when we least expect it."

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Deputy Director Lars Lysander dutifully arrived at the Director of the Flight Branch's office on time and patiently waited for Captain Blair to begin the meeting.

"I've been working on some changes and now it's time to give serious consideration to implementing them."

"What did you have in mind, sir?" Lars asked.

"I don't think we have a chance to make the Rigel Cup team competition this year, Lars, but perhaps next year..."

"You think so?"

"I do, but it would mean a number of changes..."

Lars felt his eyebrows rise in anticipation. "What did you have in mind, Captain?"

"I ran by a couple of preliminary ideas past the Station Commander and he's in agreement. We're not in the position of being able to 'stack' a squadron like some of the others for the Rigel Cup and not affect operational readiness. However, I was looking over the rosters and I think it's time that some changes were made. Captain Argent has also received the go ahead to expand the Flight Branch by adding an additional Flight... but that's still on the drawing board and a ways off."

"But still, Captain Blair," Lars said, his voice full of controlled excitement, "the idea of adding another Flight along side the Grand Masters -- that would be sweet."

"We'd basically double our manpower. But that's for the *far* future. I want to talk about the immediate future."

"Yes, sir..." Lars replied, reluctantly putting his enthusiasm on the back burner.

"Blackie's in the pipeline to be promoted to Commander and when that's done, he'll be transferred over to the 516th as the Wing Commander."

"He deserves that," Lars nodded, making a note in his padd before he suddenly looked up. "The problem with Blackie leaving is that we really don't have anyone from the Thirteenth that can take his place." Lars paused and considered a moment. "I know whom I'd like to take over..."

"And who would that be?"

"Virgil Taylor, sir..."

"I agree. He's shown considerable leadership but I think it's too soon for him."

"He'd be the best. Well..." Lars consulted his padd again. "Payat Petillo would be the next logical choice though he really doesn't have the experience." He paused as he thought for a moment. "What about Commander Deveraux?"

"Ayesha?" Terrence mulled over the idea. "Yes, she would be the best choice though she won't want to take over the squadron permanently. As she told me, she had enough of squadron commander duties when she was a Marine pilot." He paused again. "Since no one else really fits the bill, we might look at bringing in someone new though... The Thirteen has the best chance of getting to the Rigel Cup team competition next year and I'm of the opinion that we have the talent, just not the veteran leadership." Terrence paused for a moment. "Besides, things will be shaken up enough."

"Oh?"

The Director of Flight Operations smiled. "Because of the possible expansion and quite frankly because our administrative duties have increased over the last few years, I'd like to remove you as Wing Commander of the 425th and have your sole job be that of the Deputy Director."

Lars Lysander thought about this idea. This move would literally take him off the front line to riding a desk instead of a fighter. *And* it would put him squarely in line for inheriting the Director's job. "I do believe I'd like that, Captain."

Terrence smiled. "I thought so... Good because that's one less thing for me to worry about. Cordell told me that Bennie is making noises about retiring and wants Cordell to take his place."

"Admiral Davison is thinking of retiring? Seems he's been the Commandant of the Starfleet Fighter Corps since...well, forever."

Terrence nodded. "It does seem that way, doesn't it? Anyway, Cordell told me that he'd like me to consider taking his Chief of Staff job if he's offered Commandant."

"When is this likely to happen?" Lars asked. When he noticed that his body was leaning at least forty-five degrees in anticipation, he slowly moved his torso back to a sharp ninety degrees. He hoped Captain Blair hadn't noticed.

"Probably not for another year or two. That leaves me plenty of time to finish the job here."

"Yes, Captain..." His voice trailed off then he suddenly blurted out, "Who is going to replace me as Wing Commander of the 425th?"

"I'm giving serious consideration into giving Avalanche the 425th and moving Blizzard up to WC of the 206th. He'll get a promotion as well."

While it was expected that Pietro "Blizzard" Lederle would eventually become a Wing Commander, Lars considered Avalanche taking over his old Wing with far less favorable regard.

"I imagine that you have mixed feelings about Avalanche taking your old Wing," Terrence began, obviously noting Lars' look of incredulity, "but I think it will do the Wing and her some good."

"If you say so," muttered Lars under his breath. "I suppose it could work, Captain."

"And it's going to be *your* job to ensure that it does, Commander Lysander," the Director of Flight Ops declared leaving nothing to the imagination.

"Aye, aye, sir," Lars replied through slightly clenched teeth. "When do you propose starting some of the changes?" He decided it was best to bury his anger off to the side for another day.

"I'll drop in on the Station Commander in a few days and run a few last ideas by him. I suspect we might just wait until June when most of the assignments are made."

The Director of Flight Operations and his Deputy discussed other flight business until Lars was dismissed.

Lars walked back to his office mulling over the various subjects that came under discussion. While he was less than thrilled -- actually, he was downright disturbed at the thought of Avalanche taking over *his* Wing -- the idea of him moving up into the Deputy Director's slot did have some appeal. It would take him away from the flight line but the idea of literally being able to instantly step into the Director's slot was something he lusted after. And with the eventual expansion of the Branch, he *really* wanted the job.

Perhaps the kissing of toads was having an effect after all.

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Without lifting his eyes from his datapadd, Station Commander Kyle Argent waived the visitor in.

"Remember I once said that nothing looked as fucked up as you trying to squeeze yourself into the cockpit of a Hornet?" Terence Blair smirked, sitting down in front of his Commanding Officer without as much of a by your leave.

"Yes..." Kyle answered cautiously, having peeled his eyes away from his padd. He and Terence went way back and he was one of the few people Kyle allowed this much levity -- and besides, Terence was senior to him by several years.

"I now *sit* corrected," Terence smirked again. "Look at you. Flying a desk and looking every inch like the Paper Admiral! And is that the beginning of a belly I see? Tsk!"

Kyle was used to Terrence paying him back for nearly 10 years worth of sarcasm when their roles were reversed. Now Terrence was the active Pilot and Kyle was the Paper Pusher. Kyle was flying less and less as of late and it was beginning to grate on him. He opted to change the subject rather than have Terrence cheerfully continue to rub it in.

"What brings you up here this morning?"

"Filing the reorganization of the Flight Branch and... I thought I might stick around and see that task force pull in. I'm kind of curious to see what kind of support we're gonna get."

Kyle gave him a brief grin. Interest in the arrival of Task Force 154 was so high that his Chief of Staff had suggested they sell tickets for the seats in the observation lounge. Just about any senior officer who could find an excuse would most likely take it and hang around C&C this morning.

"I've looked over the preliminary re-organization table you submitted," Kyle began. "Nothing too fancy I see. We're getting a steady influx of new trainees from dirtside and I approve of your plan to first expand the existing squads then spinning off the second division with staff from these units." He leaned back in his chair and looked squarely at his Director of Flight Operations. "But Avalanche and the 425th?"

Terrence was obviously used to this argument by now. His reply was short and direct. "What about it?"

Kyle frowned. "There was that... incident... a couple of months ago and--"

"Let's look at the facts..." Terrence paused and waived his hand around dismissively. "That incident aside, her marks and leadership record are exemplary. Misguided, perhaps -- but exemplary. But in all fairness, these last few months she's done a real number with the 206th. Their stats are up higher than ever, their morale is solid, their execution flawless. They've got the lowest unit casualty rate of *all* our squads. They haven't lost a single bird since Mister Nakamura went missing three months ago. And to be honest, that's what I want more than anything -- someone who gets their people out there and back again, first and foremost."

Kyle couldn't deny that Avalanche had at long last seen the light -- and the stats Terrence cited certainly backed it up. But regardless of that, he was simply not mentally ready to turn over what some thought of as the glamour squadron of *Nexus* to someone who in his opinion was only a few ticks removed from washing out of the Corps altogether. This just seemed like too much, too soon... "I'm just not sure this is the best course of action for all involved..."

"*Hah!*" Terrence shot back. "Will you just look at who's talking? Which one of us almost beached his career more than once for being a hardcase?"

Kyle sighed. *That* was then. *This* is now. He had briefly contemplated overruling Terrence on this matter, but the consequences on every level of the Flight Deck would have been nothing less than disastrous. He would let it go for now -- but the situation *would* receive his close personal attention. Inviting pilots to dine with the Station Commander was about to become a ritual on *Nexus*.

"Speaking of the bad old days..." Kyle began, abruptly changing the course of the conversation, "I read an interesting item this morning about an old friend of ours."

"Oh?"

"Admiral Wynwood, remember him?"

Terrence leaned back and searched his memory. "Old Leadbottom?"

Kyle chuckled. "The very same. Anyway, you know he had it in for me at after our little disagreement. I thought for sure that I would have washed out if he'd had his way."

"Kyle, you broke his jaw in three places! The fact that you didn't wash out was a miracle! But after the way he had bungled the Szatrappi Incursion, Wynwood simply did not have many friends left to back him up."

Kyle nodded gravely. "He almost succeeded."

"You bet," he smiled in return. "So, what happened to him?"

"Apparently..."

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"...he's missing along with Admiral Buckminister Hamilton," Boffin read aloud. Both he and Roscoe were sitting in Boffin's luxurious office in the *Serenade in Blue* administrative complex adjacent to the club proper.

"I remember Wynwood," Roscoe mumbled before he took a long swig of hot chocolate out of his official *Serenade in Blue* mug. "What a hardcase. I just hated his Tactics Class at the Academy." Roscoe shook his head in wonderment before he leaned back in his chair. "So what happened to Old Jellyspine?"

Boffin paused and scanned the report on his terminal. "Doesn't say. They went out in a skimmer and that was the last they saw of them."

"No joke? What a way to go..." Roscoe smirked. "And if they're smart, they won't go looking for him either."

"That bad?"

"Oh, you don't know half of it, Bof. He was an old crusty butthair. I don't think there was anyone at the Academy who liked him, *except* himself."

Boffin smiled. "Gareth, old chap, I'm so glad I managed to skip the Academy."

"I'll bet," Roscoe snorted.

Boffin chuckled and looked to the club's chief bouncer. "Anything to report?"

Roscoe shrugged his shoulders. "Naw... everything is going smoothly. *Serenade in Blue* is turning a serious profit and we haven't had too many problems with the low-life. In fact, things are just hunkey-dorey."

Boffin rubbed his hands in glee. "*Excellent!* I knew this would be a good investment!"

"You always knew a winner when you saw 'em, Bof." Roscoe paused to take a sip of cocoa, contemplating what to do with his spoils.

"Indeed and that's why I think it's time we diversified."

Roscoe put down his cup to stare at his boss and business partner. "Do what?"

"Diversify, Gareth. It's easy. We take our profits and create new businesses that in turn create profit. It's a rather simple concept, actually."

Roscoe slunk back in his chair. He remained mute, allowing Boffin's words to sink in. "What did you have in mind?"

Boffin used his fingers to tick off the ideas as he rolled them out. "Real estate is always a safe bet but rather stuffy. We could invest in the market." He paused for a moment, an idea apparently striking him straight on. "Considering that *Nexus* sits in a prime location, perhaps investing in import-export might not be a bad idea especially now that Starfleet has assigned a task force to protect the space lanes. Besides, it will take more than luck to keep our supply lines going especially if the task force fails us."

"Import-export?" Roscoe echoed. "You want to go up against Orumoff?"

"No, I want to invest in his company," Boffin stated matter of factly.

Roscoe shook his head in disbelief. "Bof, in case you haven't heard, his business practices are kinda, well... questionable..."

"But he's successful."

Roscoe blinked several times. "Can't argue with success."

"I'll leave it in your capable hands to contact the businesses with our proposition," Boffin began as he stood up.

"Me?" Roscoe blurted out.

"Why yes, Gareth. I trust your abilities."

Roscoe stared at his boss then quickly shut his mouth because it was hanging open. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good, in the meantime, I have work to do," Boffin pointed pushed his nose into a datapadd.

Roscoe took the hint and walked out of his office. "So do I, Bof... So do I..." he muttered.

* * *

"Captain Argent?"

"What is it, Sparky?" he replied to the Station's Computer.

"Your Chief of Staff wanted me to tell you that the convoy is warping in."

Argent tossed the padd aside and jumped up and out of his seat to rush over to the Command and Control area to patiently wait for their arrival. Despite projecting an appearance of a man who was calm, cool, and collected, inwardly, he was a man bubbling over with excitement.

"Task Force Gamma 154, this is *Nexus Station* Approach Control. Please respond," the *Nexus* Duty Traffic Control Officer requested.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Sanders, Senior Communication's Officer of the USS Horatio NCC-10532, acknowledging your hail " she sniffed coolly.

The *Nexus* Duty Traffic Control officer seemed unfazed by that subtle snub. "You are now entering *Nexus* approach path 0-0-3-1," she began in a professional voice. "Please come about 5-0-3 by 0-3-0 and hold steady at point four impulse."

"*Acknowledged*," Sanders replied before the link went dead.

The Duty Traffic Control Officer was obviously surprised by the quiet hum indicating that the other party had broken off the link. She turned and looked to the Station Commander.

"Put them on screen," Captain Argent ordered.

"Aye, aye, Captain," the Duty Traffic Controller responded.

Argent watched as the screen filled with the image of the *Horatio*, an *Ambassador* class starship -- simply *the* state of the art in terms of shipbuilding amongst the known spacefaring races. An *Ambassador* was in size and displacement nearly equal to the largest Carriers that Starfleet had in their inventory -- and she was supposed to be *just* a Cruiser! Most privateers who valued their hides would clear out of this sector just knowing an *Ambassador* class Starship was churning the *Nexus* Spacelanes.

"Hail the CO directly," Argent requested quietly.

"*This is Captain Melvin Aloysius Calder of the USS Horatio.*"

Argent detected a slight hint of annoyance at being disturbed, but refused to be deterred. He decided to personally reply and toggled the necessary switches to make that happen. "I'm Captain Kyle Argent, Commanding Officer of *Space Station Nexus*. I can't tell you how glad I am that you and your Task Force finally made it out here."

"*I don't doubt it, Captain Argent,*" Captain Calder smirked.

The vision that greeted Argent didn't give him much to cheer about. The Commanding Officer seemed downright annoyed at being bothered. After exchanging a few more pleasantries -- that were more painful than pleasant -- Argent got down to business.

"About your assignment here," Argent continued. "You'll--"

The CO of the *Horatio* unceremoniously cut him off. "*My assignment,*" he snorted, "*is to escort the perimeter ships here. Unfortunately,*" he began as a

thin smile broke out over his lips, "one of them was involved in a... slight incident and the others are towing it in." He glanced away to apparently another monitor before giving Argent a sarcastic grin. *"In fact, I think you'll find that they've just arrived."*

The Station Commander glanced over to his Duty Traffic Control officer who nodded in assent and pointed to the screen. Suddenly, four ships emerged into view.

At their appearance, Station Commander Captain Kyle Argent managed to keep a gasp of astonishment in check while the four images limped their way across the screen towards his Station.

* * *

"Kyle?"

Arcadia was surprised to find her husband just sitting on the couch in their quarters, seemingly staring off into space. She'd just come from work having taken an early day. Not receiving an acknowledgement, she slowly walked over to him and repeated her question.

"Kyle?"

Finally emerging from his state of contemplation, he looked up at her. "Yes..." he monotoned.

"Well... obviously, you're alive. I was beginning to wonder," she retorted and was about to continue when she finally noticed the look of despair on his face.

"What's wrong, love?" she whispered. She thought she heard him lock his jaw into place before he answered.

"Remember the task force I told you about?"

"Yes," she replied before suddenly jumped to conclusions. "They didn't arrive?"

"Oh... they arrived," he gritted out.

Arcadia was clearly confused. "I thought you'd be pleased?"

He angrily crossed his arms and spoke through clenched teeth. "My new taskforce," he spat with such ferocity that each of his words echoed off of the walls. "The taskforce that was *supposed* to assist us in enforcing the space lanes and kept us being shot out of the skies..." Kyle was now so furious that he

shouted, "*is not much more than a couple of jumped up fighter craft and a crew that was taken either from the old folks home or kindergarten! It's as if someone at HQ is doing this just to spite me! I... I...*" Kyle balled up his fists in frustration then slowly relaxed his hands.

Arcadia sucked up a deep breath and sat down next to him knowing that what he needed was a chance to vent. And there were bloody few that the Station's Commanding Officer could vent to. She gently took his hands and slowly began to massage them.

"And it didn't matter what I did today," Kyle continued his rant. "I tried yelling I tried not yelling. All to no avail. '*Starfleet evaluated the severity of my situation through the intelligence resources provided and made its determination accordingly.*' What bloody rubbish! I should have realized there was a problem when I couldn't access any additional information about TF154. So, I'm stuck with the task force from hell. God help me and God help my Station." He concluded his tirade by suddenly jerking his hands away from his wife's caress to bury his head into them.

Undeterred by his anger, she gave him a small laugh. "The burden of command. I remember it well and I also seem to remember that last year, a green Station Commander asked a veteran Starship Commander if this is what being in command was all about."

Kyle looked at her then suddenly whipped his head away. "*I don't find my situation all that amusing, Arcadia!*"

"Believe it or not," she persisted calmly, "and I hope you believe me, I *do* know what you're going through. After all," Arcadia continued, "my experience here is much like yours was in the past. As the CMO, I'm *very* concerned about my patch of turf and when you were a wing commander, it was the same. It really didn't matter to us who was in the Big Chair... all we had to do was ensure that our piece was running as smoothly as possible."

Arcadia looked to him. "But that's all different now, isn't it? Suddenly, everyone's patch of turf is *your* responsibility and I assure you there were days on the *Stellar Wind* when I wished it wasn't. And I'm sure today, you feel the same way."

While he didn't answer her or turn to face her, she knew from his body language that she had his full attention.

"I've carefully avoided giving you any advice on how to run the Station much less your outlook on life but as your situation is eerily similar to one I found myself in a few years ago, perhaps it's time."

He suddenly turned around and looked at her. "How so?"

"Here I was, going to my new assignment, my first assignment not in the medical field as a Second Officer of a Science Vessel. On route, I was made XO and within a few months of arrival, I was made Commanding Officer of the *Stellar Wind*."

"*What the hell does this have to do with my situation?*" he thundered.

Arcadia smiled at him. "Kyle, be patient. It will all make sense, but let me finish." She took another deep breath before she continued. "Let's just say that not only was I *not* prepared for the job but there were those at SFHQ who weren't thrilled to have me in the Big Chair... I didn't know that until the Admiral of the Fifth Fleet had personally come to court martial me. We not only had a Romulan spy on board but also had been invaded by said Romulans. Fortunately for us we captured a few of the Rommies... unfortunately for them, they were killed by 'fleet undercover agents.'"

"I remember you saying something about that at the wedding. I'd always thought that Peckerwood was the first."

"Well... you realize that this is still somewhat classified so perhaps you'll have to report me..."

For the first time in a long while, Kyle had to chuckle.

"And that *was* fortunate for me," she continued noting that her audience was still very attentive, "as I had no friends at SFHQ and I know I would have been found guilty. But SFHQ decided that it was far more important to quietly get rid of the spies than rid themselves of a green starship captain."

"I'm glad," he whispered.

"I concur," she smirked. "And I had my revenge when just before the Admiral warped out, we beamed over the whole kit and caboodle of Planetian Pocket Mice. I'm sure that's why I was 'chosen' to receive the fighters."

She smiled but became grim. "Kyle, you must understand that I was very, *very* angry about those bloody fighters. SFHQ didn't even have the decency to let me know they were coming. While *I* was busy placating the Station Commander of Hornblower Station because some of my people decided to rip up a saloon, I came back to my ship to find that we now had fighters on board."

She shook her head. "Don't you understand, Kyle? I didn't want *you* or *your* people on my ship. As far as I was concerned, you were yet something else I had to deal with, be concerned about, and be responsible for. And I had no idea what you people were like. You could have been a batch of sad-assed pilots and mission specialists at the end of your time in service, more of a hindrance than an assist. We were under funded and I don't need to tell you, we were under staffed. And the paperwork was incredible! My time for preparing reports literally doubled, never mind making notes, answering questions and..."

She allowed her voice to trail off, gathering her thoughts. "And *you*, Lieutenant Commander Argent, did *not* help when you initially showed up on my ship. *You* had the audacity to terrorize my crew then immediately made demands on my resources. And our first meeting definitely didn't impress me. There and then, I was bound and determined to get *you* off of my ship because *I* didn't want you there."

She gave him a grim smile. "After the training accident, I knew I just had my justification handed to me on a silver platter." Arcadia paused. "But that all changed when I overheard you talking over Skye's unconscious body. That's when I knew that you weren't the enemy. You'd been rolled over just as badly as I was. Only *you* were professional enough not to allow your personal feelings interfere with doing the best job that you could given the circumstances you found yourself in."

She shook her head. "I do often wonder what would have happened had I been successful in the sabotaging of your squadron. That's an easy one, isn't it? I know that the Romulans would have destroyed my ship. Without your fighters, you know bloody well that we would have all died. My pride would have killed us all... had I not finally realized that we were all in the same boat... so to speak."

Arcadia suddenly looked to him and gently took his hand. "Kyle why do you assume that these personnel are here to make your life miserable? I imagine you'll find they are the most loyal people you'll ever encounter. To you, those ships may be space junk. To their crews, they might be their pride and joy. Why don't you talk to them? You might be surprised at what you find. Just as I was surprised at what *I* found when I finally bothered to listen."

Kyle remained mute but suddenly looked at her.

"So let me end this lecture with one small piece of advice from a retired CO of the line," she laughed before she became very serious, "never, ever let your pride get in the way of doing your job. Always remember that you are the Light and the Way -- you have a great deal of power and resources at your disposal. If

someone is out to get you, make them resent it by turning this so-called disaster around into your favour."

Finally, Kyle gave her a slow smile.

"In other words," Arcadia continued, returning his smile as she stood up, "right now, you've got plenty of lemons but eventually you might be able to serve one glass of lemonade to each citizen of the Obsidian sector."

Kyle stood up, grabbed his wife, and hugged her. "Perhaps one day, I'll return the favor."

"You already have, Kyle," she responded, reciprocating his embrace. "You're the one that taught me that valuable lesson. I'm just passing on the wisdom I gained from a very able Squadron Commander I once had under my command."

* * *

Gareth Roscoe, having finished his appointed task, strolled into Boffin Gateway's office. While he waited for Boffin to complete his business, he took the opportunity to gaze around. This was largest in the suite of offices that served the administrative staff of *Serenade in Blue*. One corner held Boffin's antique desk, the other walls were filled with expensive artwork. The other corner held a model of the club, rendered not in holographic imagery, but constructed from wood and other genuine materials. Many visitors just marveled at the idea of actually touching and feeling something "real." The carpet was thick and luxurious and the chairs that dotted the office were made out of rich Corinthian leather.

"What can I do for you?" Boffin finally asked him.

Roscoe took his regular chair besides the large desk. "Did you see the pieces of shit that just limped in this morning?"

"What?"

"You need to get out more, Bof... the new Task Force. They look like crap."

"Really? Aren't they supposed to take care securing the spacelanes?"

"One and the same," Roscoe confirmed. "But hell, I wouldn't be surprised if they don't need protection from whatever might be out there. Forget giving it to others..."

"Captain Argent must have his knickers in a twist over their arrival if they are as bad off as you say. But that's his problem and I have other concerns. Any nibbles?"

"If I'd known this job was going to be that dangerous I would have asked for hazard pay."

"What?"

Roscoe stood up and sauntered over to Boffin's private bar to pour a glass of imported root beer. Boffin always had some on tap for him -- no replication wanted here. This was the real thing. He paused to take a long sip before returning to his chair.

"Boffin, I swear..." Roscoe took another long sip, shaking his head in dismay. "Anyway, I figured I'd go to the top and start with Orumoff. Hell, he's got the biggest import-export business around this joint. If nothing else, after a short tete-a-tete, I figured I'd get the lay of the land from him."

"And?"

"Well," Roscoe replied after he took another gulp, "I walked in and his secretary or whatever gave me the evil eye. I could tell she had her finger on some kind of protection switch when she asked me if I was with Federation Security."

"You!"

"Yeah, ain't that some shit? I mean, I got out of the spook business years ago. So anyway, I tell her no and that I wanted to talk to Mister Orumoff about our possibly investing money in his operation. She looked me over once again and gave me an emphatic no before she politely suggested that I haul my carcass out of her sight. Trust me when I tell you that I quickly obliged her."

Roscoe drained his root beer and stood up to walk over to the bar for another. "Let's just say that was my most interesting discussion this morning. Everyone else wasn't interested or suggested that if I wanted to keep my good looks to invest in tribble farming or raising killer sehlat's for fun and profit."

"No joy?"

Roscoe took the back of his hand and wiped the foam off of his mouth. "Perhaps. They seemed ready, willing and able to sell us some of their ships."

"Oh really?"

"Yup. From what I can gather..." Roscoe had to pause to let out a rather large belch. Noting the look of disgust on his partner's face, he carefully slunk down in a chair lest he fart in the great man's presence. "Many of them are taking a bath because of the pirate activity. They seemed to be willing to listen if we waved credits under their noses. I suspect after seeing the sad shape the Task Force is in, they'd rather get some cash for what they have on hand then gamble it on future business."

Boffin gave him a slight frown. "Not really what I wanted to do, Gareth. Starting up a company of that magnitude will take an enormous amount of capital. I'd have to divest myself of some holdings to raise money or get back into gambling full time."

"Speaking of gambling are you going to the Rigel Cup this year?"

"Rigel Cup?" Boffin repeated absently. "That's a bloody good question. I honestly hadn't thought about it though you'd think I would have..."

"Yeah, you always make a bundle there," Roscoe pointed out.

"That's quite true..."

"But?"

"Gareth, I honestly haven't given it much thought to the annual fighter pilot competition." Noting the look of disbelief on his partner's face, he quickly added. "But at this junction, perhaps I should... I need to take a good look at my portfolio and other.... err... bits and let me see what I come up with."

"OK by me boss, I got work to do," Roscoe replied before he left Boffin's office.

* * *

"Captain, may I present the Commanding Officers of the Perimeter Task Force," his Chief of Staff began in his crisp upper class British accent.

Despite his initial feelings of dread upon their arrival, Kyle knew that his wife was right. They weren't the enemy and shouldn't be treated as such. Kyle stood up and rounded his desk to walk towards the group.

"Captain Argent," Jefferson continued, "this is Captain Trevor Postlethwaite of the *Clarksdale*, Captain Aquilan Sahen of the *Hotspur*, Captain Johanna Aubrey of the *Sophie* and Commander Kendra Zanin of the *Akula*. As you know, Captain Dillinger was injured and is currently on the mend in sickbay."

Kyle shook each and every hand as they were introduced to him. He took his time to carefully look them over quickly forming an opinion of each officer finally giving long consideration to Captain Postlethwaite.

"I'm pleased to meet everyone. Please take a seat." Kyle quickly walked back behind his desk to retake his own chair, knowing that no one would sit until he did. "May I offer you refreshments?"

"A spot of tea if I may, Captain," Trevor piped up in his rough-cut middle class British accent as he sat down.

As Kyle had correctly deduced, Captain Trevor Postlethwaite of the *Clarksdale* was their unofficial leader. "Hot or cold?"

"Hot of course!" Trevor proclaimed.

Kyle chuckled. "Will Darjeeling be satisfactory?"

"Oh, very much so, sir," Trevor replied while fixing his gaze on his nominal Commanding Officer.

Kyle offered up milk and sugar, just like a right-proper Englishman should. Trevor declined the former and asked for two lumps of the latter.

"Thank you Lieutenant." Trevor paused to take a long sip that culminated in him smacking his lips. "This is a fine cuppa, sir!"

"I'll be sure to let my wife know that, Captain. It's one of her favorites," Kyle replied. He waited for Jefferson to distribute the rest of the refreshments and noted they were seemingly content to allow the senior captain to do all the talking for them. "I understand," Kyle began, getting down to business, "that you encountered some problems."

Trevor put his cup down so fast, Kyle was afraid he'd broken the saucer.

"It was dicey there for a while, sir. According to the *Horatio's* CO, we were behind schedule and they had a rendezvous with a battle cruiser. Calder left us high and dry," he replied with disgust in his voice. "By the time he'd gotten back, it was too late. All he could do was assist us in setting up the tow. But Calder was in command and ours was not to reason why..."

Kyle allowed a small smile cross his lips when he realized that Trevor had no time for Calder either. "Do you know who attacked you?"

Trevor nodded his balding head. "Orions, sir. I imagine they thought they could just swoop down and nick whatever it was we supposedly had."

"Not surprising," Jefferson responded. "We've suffered a number of cargo loses to those pirates and I imagine they thought you had something *extra* special. I'm sure they were surprised when all their efforts were for naught."

"Except," Kyle pointed out to Jefferson, "the *Akula* was damaged."

Trevor nodded. "Indeed. If it wasn't for that young lad Wallace, it could have been worse. He had to take over when the CO and XO couldn't get near the bridge. Very fine work, indeed. In fact, I'm sure that without his able assistance, we wouldn't have made it here at all."

Kyle made a mental note to read up on the incident. He took a sip of his hot tea before continuing. "How much did they tell you about this assignment."

Trevor frowned. "The usual Starfleet hurley-burley. But I'd really like to hear it from you directly, if you don't mind, Captain Argent."

Kyle Argent rolled his eyes in disgust. Starfleet hadn't even taken the liberty of adequately briefing them before sending them out in what amounted to spacefaring relics. It confirmed his suspicions. Someone at SFHQ definitely had it in for him because this situation had all the trappings of one very big disaster.

* * *

"*Yo, Boffin!*" Roscoe bellowed into Boffin's office.

"What can I do for you, Gareth?"

"Just got a message from old Lady Holloway from Regency Station. Sez if you wanna reserve a suite this year for the Rigel Cup, you need to get your butt in gear."

"It's not a problem."

"What? How so? You know that if you don't act now, you won't get squat!"

"Lawrence sold me his Regency Station penthouse," Boffin calmly informed him.

"No stuff! I take it he needs the cash?" Roscoe asked, walking into the office and closing the door behind him.

"He must, he sold it to me for a song."

Roscoe whistled out loud as he sat down. "That bad?"

"I deliberately made a low offer and he didn't even flinch."

"Geeze..."

"Indeed..." Boffin replied, lost in thought. "Actually, I was thinking of asking Lawrence to come out here."

"Social call?"

"Yes and no. He's always had a keen eye for arranging things -- his assistance was incalculable when I redecorated my estate."

"He did keep you from killing the contractors, that's for sure," Roscoe pointed out.

"True," Boffin smiled.

"So what's your real reason for bringing Lawrence out here?" Roscoe asked, cutting to the chase.

Boffin eyed him suspiciously. "I think you've been around me too long."

"There's a reason why I've been able to keep you in one piece, Bof," replied his former bodyguard. "So what gives?"

Boffin leaned back in his chair, briefly considering getting up and pouring himself a sherry. "I thought that a change of scenery and no gambling pressure would do him some good. I also wanted a chance to chat with him in private."

"Is that it?"

"Why, is there more?"

Roscoe scowled at his partner. "I suspect that if Lawrence wanted any money..."

"Of course, I'd be more than willing to lend him a few quid. After all, if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here." Boffin swept his hand around his luxurious office.

Roscoe nodded. "That's what I suspected... so what about the Rigel Cup this year? Made up your mind yet?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Too much is going on right now, besides, next year is the big year..."

"Something special about next year?"

"Number forty-eight," Boffin replied. He stood up and finally poured himself that sherry.

"What's so special about forty-eight? I mean, I can understand a fuss about fifty but forty-eight...." Roscoe allowed his voice to trail off, looking towards Boffin for an explanation.

"I thought it was rather unusual myself but as Lawrence had explained it to me, forty-eight holds a deep significance to Regency Station, especially for one casino." Boffin paused to sip his sherry. "Apparently during the early days of the Rigel Cup, a new casino called the Bright Star opened. The gamblers seemed to enjoy it and the house was happy. In fact everyone was quite pleased until one day when Little Mikey Smith came to town and broke the bank by placing a considerable sum of money on the number forty-eight."

Roscoe laughed out loud. "Are you serious?"

"Quite. As you can imagine, the imminent collapse of prominent casino didn't sit well with the Regency Station Board of Directors especially after they had to pour in pots of money to keep it solvent."

"No stuff?"

"Indeed. It was the first *and* last time that ever happened. However, that's not all. After Mister Smith's stroke of good fortune, everyone started to play forty-eight, resulting in some of the casinos paying off large sums. Fortunately, the tide had turned and enough gamblers started to lose but not before the number itself had gained a mystical significance."

"Come to think of it," Roscoe considered, "I always wondered why there was this reverential silence anytime someone won with the number forty-eight."

"The Board of the Directors tried to downplay the significance as much as possible but you know how gamblers are." Boffin paused and finished off his sherry. "However, since the number does have historical significance, the Board will likely have a big bash for next year. Probably invite all the past winners and that sort of rot."

"Now you know what would really cap it off."

"What's that?"

"If one of the *Nexus* squadrons makes the final cut..."

"Oh..." Boffin replied, sitting back down in his chair. He placed his hands behind his head. "I think there's a chance for next year...."

Roscoe laughed out loud. "And here I thought you weren't keeping up with things."

"Once a gambler, Gareth, always a gambler. But seriously, the talent's there, especially for the Black Knights. What they need is one more solid year and perhaps a new direction."

"Direction?"

Boffin nodded. "Blackie's a good enough leader but I think they need something different and I would bet that Flight Branch is doing something about it right as we speak."

"Ayesha doesn't talk shop when we're together, so I haven't been keeping up. Besides, one thing I learned in all these years with you Bof is that I'd never bet against you."

"Enough about the Rigel Cup. How's our little project going?"

Roscoe grimly shook his head. "I took a look at what that buttwipe Thomasin was going to try and palm off on us and they make our new perimeter action ships look like state-of-the-art battlecruisers."

"That bad?"

"I'd say so."

Boffin tossed up his hands in exasperation. "We don't exactly have the liquid capital to invest in buying new ships. I've sold off as much stock that I can without raising too many eyebrows and I've applied credit lines to all my real estate."

"Including the palace?"

"Yes. However, all those credits combined -- while a goodly amount -- isn't, in my opinion, comfortable enough for me yet."

"OK, Bof."

Boffin looked up at Roscoe who was standing over him. "Keep at it, Gareth. Perhaps something will pop our way."

"Yeah, maybe we can hire some pilots with crafts?"

Boffin sank back in his chair. "Not a bad idea." He paused for a moment to think. "There's someone I want you to find."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

* * *

"Sparky?"

"*Yes, Captain Argent?*" replied the Station's Computer.

"Is Lieutenant El Jafeer available?"

"*Yes, Captain. Shall I send for him?*"

"Yes."

Kyle sat back and waited for the arrival of his Chief of Staff. He'd just spent a good portion of the day reading the official task force reports and wanted any updates.

"You wished to see me, Captain?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Please have a seat."

Kyle patiently waited for Jefferson to sit down. "I've read all the material on that the PAs supplied including the Captain Postlethwaite's official report."

"Yes, sir."

"When is the *Akula* expected to be finish repairs?"

"Difficult to say, Captain."

"Why so?" the Station Commander replied with a distinct frown on his face.

Jefferson paused to consult his padd. "Repairs to the hull are still in the planning stages. One snag seems to be with a radiation leak. The Minofsky levels are still quite high but our people are working on the problem, Captain."

"These older ships are prone to leaks. How's the CO doing? He managed to get hit with a full dose."

"I discussed this with Doctor Argent and she told me that Captain Dillinger is recovering nicely and should be released in a few days. She did have to call in a specialist on Minofsky particles for consultation..." Jefferson paused to check his padd again, "an Ensign Yuki Shiratori who--."

"Ensign?"

"Ensign Shiratori was recently assigned to us as a High-Energy Physics specialist. Evidently she is doing a graduate paper on the subject."

"That was fortunate," Kyle remarked. He'd take any bit of luck he could find.

"Indeed, Captain Argent. Otherwise, we would have had to request that an expert be sent to us."

Kyle nodded his head as he gave his Chief of Staff a rueful smile. "And it would have been just our luck that the expert that SFHQ sent us would have had one foot in the grave and the other in a skimmer."

A small smile formed on Jefferson's lips. "Captain Postlethwaite said he'd give you a complete rundown on the *Akula's* repair schedule himself in a day or two. I believe that the other three ships will be ready for patrol within the week, sir."

"The sooner the better," Kyle added sternly.

"I understand, Captain, and have impressed that fact upon the repair crews."

Kyle stood up and wandered over to the lone window in his office that overlooked the docking bay where the perimeter ships now sat. "You realize that this isn't going to be enough."

"Sir?"

Kyle crossed his arms, shaking his head in dismay. "These ships will be no match against our Orion friends."

"Oh, that... Once the pirates find out they can outmaneuver these old ships, it will be business as usual, sir."

"I know..." Kyle murmured. He glanced once again at the ships perched on the docking arms before he abruptly walked back to his desk to sit down.

"Oddly enough, Captain, we've got quite a bit of firepower," Jefferson pointed out. "The Nighthawks and Shadowhawks are excellent craft though they are limited to escort duty. The perimeter ships have the firepower except they are so ancient, the pirates probably have better equipment."

"What we need," Kyle finished his thought, "is a ship in between. Nimble as a hawk but has the firepower of the PAs..." He paused and stared at his Chief of Staff. "However, I believe we may have an ace in the hole."

"How so, Captain?"

"You heard Captain Postlethwaite mentioned that the only reason they were able to get out of the ambush was because the *Akula* had an expert on the Orions."

"Yes and I took the time to read about it. It was impressive, sir."

"It's not that," Kyle waived off, "but if we had an Orion expert around here, that might just give us an edge."

"Isn't... err..." Jefferson stumbled as he searched his padd for the name.

"Lieutenant Christopher Wallace," Kyle supplied before he broke the bad news. "He was put on the *Akula* on temporary duty. He's actually assigned to the *Horatio*."

"You could request that he be assigned *here* on temporary duty, sir..."

Kyle emphatically shook his head. "I don't believe that Captain Calder is about to let me have dick let alone his young hotshot Orion specialist. However, I will sound Calder out. I just don't have much hope."

"In that case, Captain," Jefferson ventured. "Perhaps if we asked Lieutenant Wallace to stay and he agreed, he could convince his CO to allow him to remain here on temporary duty."

"I'm totally convinced that my asking Calder will yield nothing but a scornful sneer. Talking to Wallace just might do the trick."

"I'll make an arrangements to have a word with him, Captain."

"Make it sooner than later, they're scheduled to warp out in a few days."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Jefferson replied at the implied dismissal.

* * *

"*Jefferson!*" Arcadia greeted the newly arrived station's Chief of Staff at the entryway of the main Hospital. "Running errands for my husband?"

"Doctor, you are just the person I want to see!"

"In that case, come into my office."

"What can I do for you?" she asked, sitting down behind her desk while indicating that Jefferson should take the visitor's chair.

"I'm here to get an update on Captain Dillinger."

Arcadia leaned back in her chair, eyeing the young man sitting across from her with some suspicion. "You could have requested the information from any number of sources as well as read the official report. So why are you *really* here?"

Jefferson laughed. "That's quite true, Doctor, but I am here to find out about Captain Dillinger."

"Captain Dillinger took a rather large dose of radiation poisoning but he's recovering nicely. I don't see keeping him more than a few more days besides, he's quite anxious about his ship."

Jefferson nodded. "The *Akula* was badly damaged."

"Will she be repaired?"

"Good question, Doctor. We don't exactly have the budget or spare parts for it and..."

Arcadia smiled. "Oh, I know exactly how that goes, Jefferson."

"So Captain Argent has told me, Doctor."

"What else can I help you with?" Arcadia continued, getting them back on track.

"I need to contact a Lieutenant Christopher Wallace, Doctor. I hear he has been consulting with you."

Before Arcadia could reply, the comlink signaled a message from her yeoman.
"Sorry to interrupt, Doctor."

"What can I do for you, Electra?"

"Ensign Shiratori just dropped off her report and wanted to know if you could spare a few moments."

Arcadia looked over to Jefferson. "Do you mind, it won't take long."

"Of course, would you like me to leave?"

"Not necessary," she replied to Jefferson, then to the link. "Show her in."

"Aye, aye, ma'am!"

A young Japanese woman crept in and politely bowed before the Chief Medical Officer's desk.

"Ensign Shiratori, please sit down." Arcadia waited until Yuki was seated before she made the introductions. "Lieutenant Jefferson El Safeer Chief of Staff to the Commanding Officer, this is Ensign Yuki Shiratori."

"Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant," Yuki replied formally in a hushed voice.

"My pleasure, Ensign."

"As you probably read in the reports, Arcadia continued, "Ensign Shiratori here is our resident expert in Minofsky particles. We ended up having to recalibrate some of our equipment to detect and treat Captain Dillinger and the two DC engineers. Ms Shiratori was quite helpful in that regard."

"I can tell you, Ms Shiratori that Captain Argent was quite pleased by this turn of events," Jefferson pointed out.

Yuki blinked several times then darted her eyes between the two officers.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she whispered.

"What can I do for you, Ensign?" Arcadia prompted.

"I've finished my report and wondered if you have any questions for me?"

The Chief Medical Officer took a few moments to scan the document that Yuki had just given her. "I don't believe so. You've done a splendid job. I'd like to

keep you on tap until Captain Dillinger is released. You said there would probably be no lasting effects."

"That is correct, Doctor Argent. My research indicated that most patients fully recover."

"Excellent, Ensign Shiratori. I'll let you know if I require anything further."

At the dismissal, Yuki quickly stood up and bowed before she departed the office.

Jefferson nodded his head in appreciation. "Nice young lady."

"And very smart too," Arcadia added. "Now you said something about needing to talk to a Lieutenant Wallace?"

"Right. I *really* need to talk to him, Doctor."

Arcadia shrugged. "I haven't met him personally. I've only conferred with him over the link."

Jefferson's body slumped in disappointment.

"However, I did talk to him just before you arrived and he said he was coming over to look in on Captain Dillinger. I was going to send someone to escort him here, but if you would like to play messenger..."

"Yes!" Jefferson responded enthusiastically. "And can you put in a good word for me at the introductions? "

"I don't see why not..."

"That's all I need, Doctor. And for the Captain's sake, make it a good one, ma'am," he all but pleaded.

The CMO's mouth formed a silent 'oh' as she tapped the comlink on. "Sparky, where is Lieutenant Wallace?"

"He's about to board the NexT with Lieutenant Midori Sato on a route towards the Hospital," reported the Station Computer.

"Looks like this is your lucky day. And if my husband has sent you on this errand, you're probably going to need all the luck you can muster."

"That's a good way of putting it, Doctor Argent."

* * *

Lieutenants Chris Wallace and Midori Sato walked down the docking arm and into *Nexus Station* proper. They saw a sign that directed them to the "Nexus Transport" annex and walked to a magnetic-levitation transport tube station. Both took a moment to look "down" the docking arm, which stretched off into the distance where they could see shops and stalls all along the way. They boarded the transport and started their journey to the central area.

"Impressive," Midori commented as they sped along.

"Eh..." Chris replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"Eh?"

"Haven't you ever been to Spacedock on Terra?" Chris asked.

Midori shook her head. "I've seen pictures and such, but never inside."

"*Horatio* left from their on her way here. The place is incredible. Still, this is a pretty impressive facility from what I've read about it," Chris noted. "You should enjoy your assignment here."

They rode the NexT to the central terminus and quickly disembarked.

"Lieutenant Wallace?" a voice called out.

Chris's attention was drawn to a Lieutenant with command white on his shoulder strap coming towards them.

"That is correct," Chris replied.

"Thought so," the other said. "Not many still wear the turtleneck with their duty uniforms. Myself, I find they itch too much." He extended his hand. "Lieutenant Jefferson El Safeer, Chief of Staff to Captain Kyle Argent, Commanding *Nexus Station*."

Chris took his hand and shook it. Midori followed suit.

"I've been asked to escort you to Sickbay to see Captain Dillinger," Jefferson informed them.

"How is he?" Midori asked.

"Doing much better in good part to an Ensign we have who happens to be a specialist in the field of Minofsky radiation," Jefferson replied.

"That was a nice coincidence," Chris noted. "Having an expert appear just when you needed one."

You could say that again, Jefferson thought, nodding his head as he continued to escort the pair to the Station's main hospital.

"*Doctor Argent!*" Jefferson bellowed as he walked into Sickbay.

"Lieutenant, if you please!" the CMO snapped in a hushed voice. "This is a quiet zone. We have patients recovering in here." She tossed Jefferson one last scowl before she put a smile on her face for the newcomers. "Good to finally meet you in person, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Doctor," Chris replied. "Doctor Arcadia Argent, CMO of Nexus may I introduce Lieutenant Midori Sato, Chief of Operations on the *Akula*?" The two ladies exchanged their greetings.

"And I am very pleased to meet you as well, Lieutenant. Captain Dillinger is doing much better and we expect him to make a full recovery. Would you like to see him?"

Midori nodded her head and looked to Chris.

"Lieutenant Wallace, if may I have a word with you?" Jefferson asked.

Arcadia heard a beep and grabbed her link. "If you'll please excuse me..."

"Sure, Lieutenant..." Chris replied as they both sat down. "I'll be there in a moment," he said to Midori.

Jefferson watched Midori walk into the ward then looked to Chris. "I was wondering," Jefferson began tentatively, "what your future plans are."

"Future plans?" he repeated and shrugged. "Go back to the *Horatio* and continue my work, of course. Why?"

"Captain Postlethwaite spoke highly of your abilities concerning the Orions. We could use an Orion expert here at *Nexus* and--"

"*No way!*" Chris emphatically cut him off, shaking his head for good measure.

Despite the fact that Jefferson hadn't even asked the question, he duly pressed on regardless. "Captain Argent is *really* interested in having you consider taking a temporary duty here."

"I am sure the Captain is, Lieutenant. But I have a staff and the best-equipped starship laboratory around on the *Horatio*."

In other words, Jefferson mused grimly, *Calder has given you everything you need so you won't be tempted to jump his ship*. "Would you at least think about it before you give me a definite answer?"

Chris offered Jefferson a wane smile. "No offense, Lieutenant, but I hold Division Head Status in two separate Departments on the most advanced starship class in the Fleet. I really do not think you can offer me anything here on *Nexus* that would compare to what I have back on the *Horatio*."

"I see," Jefferson replied, finding himself reluctantly in agreement with Wallace's assessment of the situation. He motioned for Chris to head into the medical ward and he followed him. They found Midori standing by Captain Dillinger's bed, softly talking with him.

"Hello, sir," Chris greeted as he came to attention at the end of the bed.

"At ease, Lieutenant. Little hard for me to stand of ceremony when I am lying on my back," Dillinger quipped. "I want you to assist Midori and the rest of the crew to get our ship back together until the *Horatio* comes and picks you up."

"Yes, sir," Chris said.

There was a slight tap at the door and it sprang open. Doctor Argent stuck her head in. "Just wanted to let you folks know that visiting hours over. You can come back and pester your CO tomorrow."

"See how I rate around here?" Dillinger smiled, tossing her a wink. "The CMO herself comes and kicks out my visitors."

"Keep that up and I might just keep you longer, Captain," Doctor Argent tossed off before she closed the door.

Chris and Midori laughed before they said farewells. All three of them left the ward and walked back towards the main entrance.

"So, Lieutenant, how did you become an expert on the Orions?" Jefferson asked in an effort to continue the conversation by shifting the subject.

"My 'cellmate' at the Academy was going into Starfleet Intelligence," Chris replied. "I'm a military history buff so I used to read his books on the tactics of the Orion Syndicate and studied with him. The more I learned about them, the more interested I became, so I took some courses in Orion physiology."

"Studying those green slave women, eh?" Jefferson remarked with a grin and a wink.

"Uh... yeah..." Chris stammered, glancing quickly at Midori. "So when we graduated, he went to Starfleet Intelligence and I was assigned to the *Horatio*"

"Well, it's good to have an expert here, even for only a little while. Thank you for your time, Lieutenant Wallace."

Jefferson made a hasty exit out of the waiting area. He briefly contemplated taking the long way back to the Command and Control Center but ultimately realized that his best course of action was to simply get it over with and suffer the wrath of the Station Commander when he gave Captain Argent yet another piece of bad news.

* * *

Captain Trevor Postlethwaite rushed over to catch the NexT. Nexus Transport was a set of connected monocars that linked various parts of the Station together. Trevor hopped into the car that would drop him off near the main mall. He immediately noticed a young Lieutenant with a technical schematic of one of the Perimeter Action Ships spread out on the seat beside him.

"Which ship are you from, lad?"

Chris glanced up to see a Starfleet Captain peering down at him.

"The *Akula*, sir," Chris replied, starting to come to attention before Postlethwaite waved it off.

"You lads took quite a stomping from those Orions," Trevor remarked as he took the seat opposite the schematics.

"Yes, sir," Chris replied. "But we gave them what-for." He turned back to the detail of the pod.

"You the Chief Engineer?" Postlethwaite asked.

"No, sir. I'm actually the acting Chief Science Officer. But they tasked me with trying to put this jalopy back together."

"They may be old, but they can still do their job," Trevor smiled. He held out his hand. "Captain Trevor Postlethwaite, Commanding the USS *Clarksdale*."

"Lieutenant Chris Wallace, formerly of the USS *Horatio* and now on TDY with the *Akula*."

"You're the young lad who was in command when the Orions attacked!" Trevor exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"Nicely done there, indeed."

"Thank you, sir." With a sigh, Chris scratched out the pod. "Looks better, anyway."

"Aye, it does at that," Trevor agreed. "They removed them from the *Akula* when they built the *Adelaide* Class like my *Clarksdale*."

"The *Adelaide* class was based on the *Akula* design?"

"Aye, lad. Came into service about ten years later. Used almost all the same components, but they got rid of the boom when they came up with stronger shields," Trevor replied, warming up to the subject. Like any true Commanding Officer, he loved to talk about his ship.

"Hmm... Could we turn *Akula* into an *Adelaide* class?" Chris asked.

"It might be possible. I have a full schematic set aboard *Clarksdale*, and I can try to get a set for the *Akula* and compare them..."

The car finally arrived at the mall and slowed to a stop. Chris folded up the schematic and stood up. "If you will excuse me, sir, I am on my way to breakfast and work out on how to get *Akula* operational again."

"I also happen to be on my way to have a late breakfast before I meet with Captain Argent. Do you mind some company? I have been working on these ships all my life, and would be more than happy to help you."

"Thank you, sir. I would like that."

* * *

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I did, Roscoe. Come and take a seat," Boffin requested, hastily tossing the datapadd he was working on aside. Once Roscoe was settled, he got straight to the point. "Did you find him?"

"Oh, I'll say," Roscoe snorted.

"And?"

Roscoe didn't answer right away. Instead, he sat up straight, carefully rearranging his clothing. "He's an interesting character."

"I realize that. So?" Boffin prompted.

"Where do you find them, Bof?"

"Gareth!"

"Keep your shorts on, Boffin. Yeah, I found him and he was where you said he'd be."

"Not surprising."

Roscoe eyed him suspiciously. "When the hell do you have time to hang with Klingons?"

"I found him when I did a favor for Captain Argent last year. So, what did Khodos G'ompoc have to say for himself?"

"Other than muttering 'May fucking Kahless forgive me' every other sentence, he wasn't interested."

Boffin was clearly stunned. "I'm surprised. He seemed rather interested in taking the job a few months ago. Aren't the pirates mucking about with his profits too?"

"Apparently so, Bof. I don't think anyone around here hasn't been affected one way or the other. But he wasn't about to bestir himself for love or money."

Boffin shook his head in near misery. "Any other leads?"

Roscoe shrugged. "I went back to see Masie Thomasin. She left a message about a 'good deal'. However, I would like to point out that her idea of a good deal and ours are sectors apart."

"What now?"

"Oh, she tried to pull a fast one. Told me that she could hook me up with 'something special'. Not having anything else to do, I took her up on it."

"And?"

"Ended up she wanted to try and stiff us with one of those old Crimeas."

Boffin stared at Roscoe in confusion until he suddenly remembered where he'd heard the name before. "Oh, a lamb..."

"Yup. Any pilot who's flown one says that when the engines kick in, they swear it 'baas' and not 'humms'."

Both men chuckled.

"Keep at it, Gareth."

"You mean," Roscoe began as he stood up to leave, "see what or whom else I can dig up."

"Indeed," Boffin replied as he picked up his datapadd and went back to work.

* * *

"Enter..."

Kyle spoke the phrase with no enthusiasm what so ever, knowing full well that as immersed in work as he was this afternoon, he was bound to simply ignore most everything this unscheduled guest would have to say.

"Captain Argent, sir!"

Kyle briefly looked up at that rather crisp salutation. It was Captain Trevor Postlethwaite, the CO of the Perimeter Action Craft *Clarksdale* -- or in Kyle's mind just one more of his many worries. He decided to devote a modicum of time and interest to the man solely for the sake of appearance. He set his padd aside and motioned Postlethwaite to take the visitor's chair in front of his desk.

"Sir, as per your request," the elder captain began, "I have completed the repair and refit estimates on *Akula*. If you please?"

Kyle took the offered padd and gave it a quick glance. Estimates were in the 15 million range and time was fully 6 weeks to refit. He had been afraid of that.

Not only was he stuck with a squadron of mostly worthless ships, he now had to plunder the station maintenance budget just to make one of them spaceworthy again. This was a disaster -- no matter what Arcadia may think. In frustration, he bounced the padd on his desk and bolted out of his chair over to the window in his office.

"Aye, I thought it was pretty bad me'self," Trevor agreed, watching the padd finally settle in the corner.

Kyle gave brief consideration to the fact that he still had a visitor present, but opted to fix his gaze forward once more. This old codger could go to hell for all he cared. And he could kindly take his toy squadron with him while he's at it.

"Beggin' the Captain's pardon, but I think there might be another way to make *Akula* spaceworthy."

Was he still here? Well, might as well indulge him. Kyle turned to face the veteran captain once more. Postlethwaite had his eyes locked on him in a gaze that was anything than what he expected. It was one of sheer kindness and almost serene calm, which was much in contrast to the scowl Kyle was certain was now gracing his features. *Best put that away for now*, he thought, attempting to put somewhat of a less threatening look on his face.

"Y'see, sir, I was once an engineer on a ship just like that. The *Samakov* -- and a fine ship she was! Temperamental as a fine lady, but she got us home again time after time and you cannot ask more form a ship than that!" Trevor boasted proudly.

Kyle nodded restlessly. He was not in the mood to indulge in story time right now.

"I had breakfast this morning with that young Lieutenant Wallace from *Akula*. Budding starship designer there, indeed. Anyway, we tossed ideas about over steak and eggs and we came up with an idea on how to refit her. And we came up with plans to refit her -- and upgrade her a bit as it were. This is what we came up with..."

Postlethwaite produced a second padd and this time, the information was much more pleasing. The Table of Equipment required was updated and augmented with current data and resources. The end result was almost night and day -- less than one million budgeted with only 7-10 days of dock time.

"You propose manufacturing a whole slew of parts here independently of the contractor?" Kyle frowned. "In my experience, that can be rather problematic."

And that was an understatement. Without exact part specifications, shoddily replicated parts were almost destined to fail. There were reasons such practices were generally frowned upon by Starfleet. Sanctioning it could result in liability judgments and thus a court-martial assuming that would be the *least* of his troubles.

"Aye, right you are there, sir. But in this case, it's a bit different. Y'see, each of the PA ships is in many ways like a piece of art. Unique you might say. All of them... every last one of them was just a mite different than the other. Since they all were sent out on patrols where the nearest friendly space dock was weeks away, most every engineer worth his salt eventually just got himself a schematic inventory of every last bolt of each and every ship."

Kyle allowed a thin smile to grace his lips. A schematic inventory of a craft was exactly what the Fighter Corps ground crews swore by. More often than not, it allowed them to replicate even the most obscure parts at a moment's notice. To use the same tactic with a starship was simply unheard of -- and yet, the PA's were just small enough to possibly make it work.

"How big would such a database be?" Kyle finally asked knowing that the Nighthawk inventory was roughly 60 decaquads.

"Each PAs database is about 2 hectoquads. Give or take a few."

Kyle groaned. Well, that settled that. Having that much storage ready and handy was possible, just not common. "I suppose the last engineer was kind enough to leave his inventory in the ships computer banks?" he finally ventured.

"No, sir. But I've taken the liberty of contacting him through PAX Link -- that's our Perimeter Action eX-crewmembers society -- and he says a copy will be here within a day or so. Told me to give the old fish some legs, he did."

Kyle smiled inwardly once more. They even had associations, much like the Fighter Corps. But there was still one additional matter. "It says here," Kyle consulted the datapadd, "that you are proposing to remove the deflector pod entirely? Won't that compromise defense?"

"Not, significantly, no sir," Trevor replied earnestly. "The other PAs do without that infernal pod. What little loss in shield strength by going to a flat grid like the others will be more than compensated by the extra maneuverability and speed she'll then have."

Kyle could all but hear the Old Engineer in Trevor Postlethwaite now. He had obviously given this some extensive thought back when Kyle was but a lowly ensign. But he still couldn't justify risking the lives of the *Akula* crew on what

amounted to a non-regulation re-build. No matter how convincing the argument.

Trevor seemingly read the doubt on Kyle's face. "In actuality, my own *Clarksdale* is an Adelaide class vessel, which was heavily based on the Akula class, herself. I am pretty confident we can turn Akula into an Adelaide." Trevor paused and looked straight at the Station Commander. "Sir, if I could speak freely?"

"Go ahead."

"I know what you must be thinking about of us and our ships. We're not much to look at, now are we?"

Kyle remained quiet, though it didn't take much to discern that he was in agreement with that statement.

"We are not as nicely turned out as *Horatio*, or even a fine Constitution or Belknap class, aye," Trevor paused to nod his head. "But we got something they all lack. Y'see, the men and women in my crew want to be here. We want to be on that ship. I meself was due to retire in a month's time. But when I heard they were bringing the old girls back out, I couldn't fathom sitting at home on me backside."

Kyle was somewhat taken aback by that revelation. People willing to risk their lives in an old crate like that were either crazy or sentimentally devoted like few others -- most likely a combination of both.

"Every last man jack in my crew is over forty-five years old and all served on PAs before. If you look at the rosters of the other ships, you'll find veterans on all of 'em. And the rest -- well, you may think they are young whelps with questionable records -- but they are perfect for the Perimeter Action Ships! A PA requires officers who think fast and are willing to try different things -- things you'd never do in a ship of the line! We've got just the right mix of old seasoning and young fire. And we are not just willing, but wanting to go out there and have one more crack at the enemy."

Trevor's dismissive hand gesture demonstrated what Kyle was now thinking -- whoever the enemy might be. In his time, Trevor would have patrolled the Klingon and Romulan frontier, now long since fallen on peaceful times.

"We are willing to fight, sir. And if the time comes, we will fight -- and do ye proud, if I dare say so meself. I know this in me heart o' hearts. But all we need now is for someone to have a little faith in us. And we'll do the rest."

Kyle considered the gray eyes that were almost watery as they looked at him -- almost pleadingly. What a magnificent fighter pilot he would have made! There was no doubt he could talk the talk -- the sincerity of his words were written plainly all over his face. He truly believed everything he had just said. In Kyle's mind, a man with such heart and spirit deserved more than the rather unremarkable ships he had commanded. He deserved more than the *Clarksdale*, but it was plainly evident that he wanted nothing more than that old ship and damn whatever consequences it brought. Kyle considered his options once more. If only the ships could match their crew in heart and vigor, they would be indeed magnificent. "Very well then," Kyle finally agreed, "I'll authorize the funds and work orders."

"*Thank you!*" Trevor gasped with sudden relief, before adding a hasty though emphatic, "*sir!*"

"Under one condition," Kyle replied evenly.

"Sir?" Trevor replied, fearing the worst after having heard such good news.

"Under the condition that you call me Kyle, Captain Argent," Kyle began to wave his hand in frustration, "whatever -- anything but sir. Agreed?" He appreciated the exceeding politeness of Trevor's nature, but in Kyle's mind, they were peers and this formality just would not do.

"Agreed, sss..." Trevor obviously swallowed the "sir" he automatically wanted to append.

With a final nod, Kyle dismissed his visitor. He sat back with a smile on his face thinking that perhaps the tide had finally turned.

* * *

"What are you doing at my terminal?"

Yuki had become conditioned to the noise of the work crews scuttling about repairing systems in the background and had tuned them out. However, this question was directed right at her. She snapped her head around and found herself staring at the midriff of a Starfleet Officer's duty uniform. Her eyes moved up and to the left to the departmental strap, which showed the light gray of Sciences and the opposing rank insignia of a Lieutenant. She continued upward, locking her eyes onto his face and noting that the officer addressing her had a scowl there. This scowl immediately faded, replaced by a look of surprise.

"Lighten up, Chris," Lieutenant Midori Sato began jovially. "Ensign Shiratori isn't planning to take up permanent residence at that terminal. Though I am sure you would love that, since you could leave our humble vessel and return to your beloved *Horatio*. Besides, if you haven't noticed, we are being repaired and there just aren't that many functional terminals to go around."

"Oh... err.... sorry, Ms Shiratori," Lieutenant Chris Wallace stammered, trying to keep his mind on the business at hand and not her large brown eyes. "It's just that I have some work to perform."

"I won't be too much longer, Lieutenant," Yuki began in a professional voice. "In fact, I'm almost done, sir."

"Oh... no hurry. I can wait. We're paid by the hour, afterall," he quipped, though he could immediately tell the joke was lost on her.

"As you wish, sir," Yuki replied before she set her mind back to work and the task at hand.

"You'll have to forgive Tigger, Ensign," Sato began, "Lieutenant Wallace here is actually from the U.S.S. *Horatio*. He was shanghaied by our Captain to act as Chief Science Officer for the trip here to *Nexus* and, despite saving the ship with all hands, can't seem to stop bemoaning the fact that the *Akula* is not an *Ambassador Class*."

"Uh... yes. Thank you, Lieutenant," Chris said as he sauntered over to the Operations console and leaned against it. "Who is she?" he whispered to Midori, who was busy tapping the console keys.

"Ensign Yuki Shiratori from *Nexus*. She's the one that helped with the Minofsky radiation leak. She's just checking the levels."

"*Kirei*," he muttered in Japanese under his breath.

"Yes, she is attractive," Midori replied. "And you sure made a great first impression with that thoughtful remark, I am sure," she added.

Chris suddenly looked stricken and mumbled, "Great. Just great. Meet a cute Japanese girl and make a fool out of myself. What else can go wrong on this assignment?"

Yuki suddenly stood, and Chris immediately straightened up, carefully rearranging his uniform jacket back to Starfleet standard. Yuki reached up to hit a malfunctioning monitor, which suddenly stabilized, and then sat back down.

"Try not to look so obvious, Chris..." Midori pointed out.

"I'm just standing here waiting for the terminal, Midori."

"Sure you are. I know you and cute Japanese girls," she replied. "I remember you making googly-eyes at me when we first met at the Academy."

Yuki picked up her datapadd and nodded in Chris' direction, letting him know that the terminal was now free.

Chris walked over to her. "I want to apologize for my outburst earlier," he said. Yuki stared at him for a moment, then smiled. She turned and headed over to a panel on the other side of the Bridge.

Chris sat down and began his work, but found himself staring at Yuki in the corner of his eye.

This fact didn't go unnoticed by the ever-vigilant Operations Officer who merely smiled before she too went back to her own work.

* * *

"This is hopeless..." Boffin muttered. He was sitting in his luxurious office while sifting through a pile of datapadds.

"I'll say. I've been spending the last few days scrounging around looking for ships to purchase and I've come to the conclusion that we'd be better off raising tribbles for export to Quo'nos," Roscoe replied disgustedly.

"That's a proposition with almost as much potential for repeat buyers perhaps sehlat farming for Organians," Boffin agreed slowly.

"That's a fact, Bof," Roscoe chuckled.

"No luck?"

"Nope. A few nibbles here and there, but the pilot-owners want a guarantee that the pirates will be out of their faces."

"Did you mention the new ships?"

Roscoe winced. "They laughed."

"If we're having this much trouble, I can just imagine what the lot hanging on by a sliver is having. If Captain Argent doesn't make this all work, he's in for a rough patch."

"It's pretty fucking rough now. I'm surprised he doesn't have a full scale riot on his hands."

"They don't riot. They just go out of business causing a negative effect on the *Nexus* if not Galenan economy. Since we're seemingly stuck purchasing *slightly* used craft refurbishing them seems to be our only option. Then, of course, there are pilots to be hired."

"If you build a fleet of good craft, there are always pilots of some sort who've washed out or who are sick of being paid dick to fight for Fed and Country ready, willing, and able to work for us."

Boffin nodded his head. "Quite true. But..."

"But..." Roscoe finished the thought, "given the shit we've been offered, it'll take a hell of an investment to upgrade." He paused for a moment before he looked directly at Boffin. "Why not borrow against *Serenade in Blue*?"

Boffin suddenly put down the datapadd he had in hand and stared at his business partner. "Gareth, I'm not about to jeopardize this club for anything, understand?"

Roscoe held up his hand in retreat. "Just a suggestion, Bof."

"And it was duly noted. Just don't ever suggest it again," Boffin replied in a voice that indicated that Roscoe should never, ever bring the idea up a second time.

"Not a prob, Bof," Roscoe replied allowing a silence grow between the two men before he suddenly blurted out. "Spare parts...."

"What?"

"Where are we gonna get spare parts, Bof?"

"Eh?" Boffin's carefully cultivated accent of a fine country gentleman had finally fallen by the wayside.

"You're shitting me, right? Spare parts are gonna be a pain in the ass, Bof. Look, we're going to get a relic or two regardless of what we wind up with. So

something will break. Then what? If we don't develop a steady pipeline for spares, we might as well drop our shorts and invite everyone to kick us now."

Boffin fell back into his chair. He'd been a starship CO's yeoman for many years and he knew first hand about procurement. It completely slipped his mind. "I totally failed to take that into account, Gareth."

"Fine CEO you turned out to be, Bof," Roscoe chided before he became serious. "Yeah, those damned spare parts are gonna be a bitch. Let me talk to Gash. He used to be Merchantman and as head barkeep, he talks to everyone. Who knows what he might have line on?"

Boffin had to laugh. "We are going about this in a rather odd manner, aren't we? Sounds like a plan. Let me know what he says."

* * *

"So, Midori," Chris asked his friend as they had dinner in the Nexalodeon Restaurant. "What can you tell me about this Ensign Shiratori?"

"You really like her, don't you?" Midori replied with a grin.

"Midori..."

"Alright. Alright. She's 21 and just graduated from the Academy, " Midori began. "She is currently assigned to *Nexus*' Science Department as a High-Energy Physicist. She appears to be an expert in Minofsky particles, which is how she came to the attention of Doctor Arcadia Argent, the Chief Medical Officer of *Nexus Station*. With *Akula* so short-handed until the extra crew arrives, Commander Zanin asked for some extra helpers from *Nexus*' Science Officer. Much like in your case, being the junior member of the staff, Yuki drew the short straw and has been helping us get the ship back into shape."

"That's all?" Chris asked.

"All?" Midori exclaimed. "What do I look like, Memory Alpha?" She placed both hands to her temples and squinted her eyes shut.

"What are you doing?" Chris asked.

"Calling up the Ensign's life history for you," Sato replied. Chris reached across the table and knocked one of her elbows out from under her, almost causing her head to crash onto the table.

"Smart ass," Chris ribbed with a grin.

"Lovestruck teenager," she shot back with an even larger grin. They each went back to attacking their meal.

"So, when are you going to ask her out?"

Chris replied with a non-committal shrug.

"Coward."

"So I'm a coward," Chris replied.

"It's just that it took you six weeks to work up the courage to ask me out on a date," Midori remarked.

"Only to find out you already had a boyfriend," Chris noted.

"Well, I asked around and Ms Shiratori is currently unattached," Midori informed him. "Though at the rate you take, she'll probably graduate from the Academy before you ask her."

Midori shook her head. "She seems to like you, and you seem to like her, and it seems that the both of you are too afraid to ask each other out. Sad. Very sad."

"We shall see, Midori. We shall see..." Chris said. They talked no more of the beautiful young midshipman during the remainder of their dinner, the conversation instead turning to getting the *Akula* back online as soon as possible.

* * *

"...And as you all know," Chief Medical Officer Arcadia Argent continued, keeping a partial eye on the time because the Medical Branch morning briefing was running late, "the *Horatio* will be leaving tomorrow morning."

"Hu-*fucking*-zzah..." someone muttered.

Arcadia raised an eyebrow not to chastise the crewmember's outburst but to agree with his assessment. "As such," she pressed on, "please ensure that all reasonable medical requisitions are fulfilled by this afternoon."

She watched her people making notes before she decided to wrap up the briefing. "If that is all, you are dismissed."

Doctor Arcadia Argent paused to make a few notes for herself before she and Ike went back to their offices.

"I noticed," began Ike Ivanan, "that our personal assessment of the *Horatio* is one held by our crew."

Arcadia chewed her lower lip before she answered him. "It's not that the CMO is all that bad but the CO..." She shook her head. "Kyle told me that he was a hardcase and he was quite correct. Just because our people didn't acknowledge a request in a timely manner, Calder had the audacity to call *my* office and whine."

"At least he didn't call Kyle, Darce."

"I wish he had, I'm sure Kyle would have loved telling Calder to take his request in a dark closet and..." Arcadia didn't bother completing her sentence. The broad grin on her Chief of Staff face had done it for her.

"That would have been well deserved in my estimation," he grinned.

Arcadia couldn't help but chuckle at the thought. "As much as it would have been amusing, Kyle doesn't need the extra worry."

"He's not getting a break, is he?"

"Unfortunately not, Ike. Though, he did tell me that Lieutenant Wallace -- you've seen him, he's the officer who's been around here visiting with Captain Dillinger -- is an expert on Orions. In fact, it was his expertise that saved the *Akula*."

Ike shrugged. "Why doesn't he request that Wallace be signed here on temporary duty?"

"Ike love, Calder wouldn't give Kyle a used pair of knickers much less his prized expert and Wallace himself gave an emphatic no."

He remained silent for a moment. "Kyle really needs this boy?"

"Apparently so, Ike."

"I'll catch up with you later, Darce," Ike absently replied, his mind already noticeably elsewhere.

"Don't forget about the budget figures. Finance is tap dancing up and down my desk and I'd really like to hand them over so I don't have to take any further calls from Ensign Fermat. He's becoming a downright pain in the matter."

"You'll have them, Darce, you can count on it."

* * *

Medical Chief of Staff, Marine Lieutenant Ike Ivanan tossed his datapadd aside before he sat down at his desk to think. He finally concluded that if Kyle needed that kid and all regular channels were closed, it would be up to him to deliver the goods.

However, exactly how he was going to do this was still uncertain. Ike leaned back and recalled all he knew about Wallace realizing he didn't know very much. He knew that he was on temporary assignment to the *Akula* and saved their butts when the Orions came calling. And once the *Horatio* left, he'd be warping out with her.

One way of keeping Wallace here is to have him involved in some kind of incident that would necessitate a 'hold' be placed on his leaving the station. Most of the time, these holds wouldn't be issued unless there was a serious crime committed. On the other hand, if a civilian made the charge against Wallace, Kyle wouldn't have any choice to but hold the kid until it was all sorted out.

Ike allowed a small smile to cross his lips as an idea started to percolate. It had been a while since he had pulled a "73," but it would work here. However, this was a scenario that would take some time to set up and a lot of luck. But, as he well knew, sometimes one can force luck to come one's way.

As the formation of a plan started to appear, he knew it was time to call in the reserves.

"Sparky, is Gunny Hoth available?"

"*Want me to buzz him?*" the Station Computer responded.

"Yes, thank you."

Suddenly, a cragged face filled Ike's terminal. "*Well, if it ain't the Lieutenant... Miss us real grunts?*"

"Once a Marine, always a Marine," Ike retorted.

"*Hoo-rah! What can I do for you, ell-tee?*"

"Gunny, I need you and the boys to do me a favor. I'm gonna stage a Number Seventy-Three."

Hoth winced but Ike immediately noticed a thin smile starting to cross the craggy face.

"Where and when?"

* * *

"Thought you'd like an update," Roscoe announced as he strolled into Boffin's *Serenade in Blue* office.

Boffin looked up from the datapadd he was studying. "What did Gash have to say?"

"All he's heard are sob stories about how much the merchant boys are losing and doesn't know much about spare parts around here but he'll be keeping an ear out for us."

"How much did you tell him?" Boffin asked with a slight edge to his voice.

Roscoe shrugged. "I had to tell him something so I just said that you were thinking of getting yourself a private liner and just wanted to cover all the bases."

"It's a stretch but it'll do for the moment..."

Roscoe walked over and grabbed a rootbeer. "Got another call from Masie Thomasin saying she had another 'good deal'."

Boffin sighed. "What now?"

"Having nothing else to do," Roscoe began between gulps, "I dragged my carcass over to see what else she was going to palm off on me this time."

"And?" Boffin asked in a bemused voice.

"Oh, it was the usual. 'New' ships that didn't look like they were used by a little old Vulcan Lady on Sundays she said they were."

Boffin chuckled.

"Next time, I'm going to just ignore her messages. I hate to think what kind of crap she'll have for me next time."

"You must admit," Boffin wickedly tossed off, "that if it wasn't for Masie, things would be a bit dull around here."

"I could use with less excitement," Roscoe grunted before finishing off his root beer and heading into his own office.

* * *

Ike paced up and down his office noting that even though a lot had been accomplished in twenty-four hours, there was plenty left on the list. After Hoth had informed him that his men were properly briefed and the vid cameras would be taken off-line (Ike steadfastly refused to ask for details), it was time to move on to phase two: How to get Mr. Wallace at the appointed place and time?

The most obvious idea was for Ike to just invite him out. But Wallace didn't know him from a hole in the wall and as much as he tried, there was no plausible excuse Ike could come up with for a date. Therefore, Ike sat back and tried once again to recall everything he knew about Lieutenant Wallace.

Ike snapped his fingers while he suddenly remembered when one of the junior nurses mentioned casually that one of the *Akula* people was nosing around asking questions about Ensign Shiratori. When Ike asked what this was all about, he was told that Wallace had a bit of a crush on the young ensign, so his shipmates were scoping her out.

Ike allowed a smile across his face. *Well, if that's the case, then I have the bait.*

After giving the idea some further thought, he finally tossed up his hands and shook his head in wonderment. *If she falls for this, I should consider performing Hamlet.*

"Ike?" The Station Computer interrupted any further consideration.

"What, Sparky?"

"Doctor Argent wants to know where those budget figures are."

Ike tossed up his hands again in disgust. "Tell her she'll have them in a few hours."

"She's not gonna be happy, Ike."

Kyle's gonna be decidedly more unhappy if I don't pull this off, he thought to himself but said to the computer, "I know, Sparky."

"OK, I'll tell her," Sparky.

"Sparky, before you go, where is Lieutenant Chris Wallace?"

"Lieutenant Christopher Wallace is in the hospital waiting room. Captain Michael Dillinger is due to be released in an hour."

"And where is Ensign Shiratori?"

"Ensign Yuki Shiratori is currently at a terminal in the science wing."

Ike mentally pulled up the floor plans to the hospital and smiled while crossing all appendages. "Ask her to meet me at my office as soon as she can."

"Righto!"

Ike leaned back in his chair and waited for Yuki to appear, knowing full well that she'd be right over. He spent the time busily polishing up the lines he was going to hand her while he made pretense of walking her past the waiting room.

* * *

As expected, Ensign Yuki Shiratori wasted no time in arriving to the Medical Branch Chief of Staff's Office.

"Ensign Shiratori, thank you for being so prompt. I had a few questions to ask you about your report. However, I just received a call that requires me to go up to the waiting area. Do you mind accompanying me?"

"Not at all, Lieutenant Ivanan."

Yuki dutifully followed Ike out of his office. He busily asked her several obviously lame questions concerning her research into Minofsky particles, which she dutifully, if not confusedly answered, until they arrived at their destination.

"Thank you. You've clarified a few points for me. Now, before I have to leave you, I thought you'd like to know we here at the Medical Branch have a special program to demonstrate our appreciation. We give out coupons for drinks and dinner at *Serenade in Blue*."

Yuki's eyes went wide. "That's the most exclusive restaurant on the station," she whispered.

"Now, I hope you won't consider this a slight, but the recipients told me this morning that they couldn't go and considering how much assistance you've been these past few weeks, I thought you might enjoy this."

Ike pulled out a datachip and handed it to her. "The downside is that the reservations are for tonight at 1900 hours."

Yuki examined the chip. "This invitation is for two."

Ike nodded eagerly. "Yes, it is and Mister Gateway would be *very* disappointed if you showed up alone." Ike hoped that he sounded natural and she didn't suspect that she was being set up.

She frowned. "I understand, Lieutenant."

He watched Yuki's eyes float over and settled on Chris Wallace, sitting in the waiting room then drifting back towards him.

"I have someone in mind to ask," she continued. "Thank you again and I shall make it a point to thank Mister Gateway myself."

"No need to bother!" Ike blurted out, hoping he didn't sound like he was at the edge of panic, which, in fact, he was. "Just seeing you both enjoying yourselves is appreciation enough for him," he added calmly, he hoped.

Yuki nodded her understanding.

"I hope you enjoy yourself, Ensign."

"Thank you, sir."

Ike carefully crept out the area, covertly watching Yuki enter the waiting room. Yuki and Chris were now in a deep discussion. He allowed himself a sigh of relief at the sight but also suddenly realized that it was possible that Chris would turn her down. If that were the case, it would be on to Plan B -- as soon as Ike thought of one.

* * *

Chris removed his jacket from the closet and laid it on the bed in his cabin aboard the *Horatio*. Since *Serenade in Blue* was supposed to be a ritzy kind of place, Chris chose to wear a dress shirt and jacket with slacks. He attached his communicator pin to his jacket and slipped into it. He checked his wrist

chronometer, which showed the time as slightly past 1830 hours, and headed for the docking arm.

He walked down the hallway in the junior officers quarters of *Nexus Station*. He pulled a padd from the inside pocket of his jacket and consulted a schematic of the area. Once oriented, he replaced the padd and counted the door numbers until he reached Yuki's quarters. He activated the chime, and he heard her bid him to enter.

The doors slid open and Chris walked in. He noticed that her quarters were standard-issue Starfleet, and he did not see any obvious personal touches. He heard a sound in the bedroom area, and Yuki walked into the main room. She was wearing an iridescent purple top of some silk-like material with a black skirt and black boots.

"*Utsukushi*," Chris breathed, louder than he intended. He saw Yuki blush and realized she had heard him.

"Sorry," he said, sheepishly. "But you do look beautiful."

"Thank you," she replied. "You look quite handsome, yourself. Ready? "

Chris nodded. Yuki offered her arm and Chris linked his with hers and they walked out together.

Yuki decided to start first. "Midori said that you are from the *Horatio*? "

"Yes, " Chris replied. "I am the Chief of Exobiology and the Chief Xenospecialist."

"The *Ambassador* Class looks magnificent. I am hoping to get posted to one someday," she admitted. " But then, you probably already know all that," she offered with a sly grin, informing him that she knew the reason why Midori had been asking all these questions about her.

"Midori is not known for her discreteness," Chris noted, reddening with embarrassment.

"As for myself," Yuki began, switching the subject to spare Chris any further embarrassment, "My specialty is High Energy Physics, but I really love Astronomy."

"Astronomy?" Chris said.

"Yes."

"You like stargazing?" he asked, and Yuki noted a sense of incredulity in his voice.

"Very much. *Nexus* has a wonderful observation port and I enjoy spending my off-hours there," she replied.

Chris' face lit up like a small sun. "*Suteki!*" he exclaimed.

"What is wonderful?"

"I *love* to stargaze," Chris answered. "It's great that you do, as well. I have met very few Japanese girls who like to, for some reason."

Yuki shrugged her shoulders and they continued.

* * *

Ike Ivanan sauntered nervously into *Serenade in Blue* at 1850 hours on the nose. He strolled over to the bar and paused to survey the scene. All his assets were in place -- he gave a sharp nod to Gunny Hoth who nodded in return. Right on time, Yuki and Chris had walked in and sat at a small table in the bar area.

* * *

Chris pulled back the chair for Yuki, and helped her get settled. The server took Chris' jacket and handed it over to another employee to hang in the cloakroom while Chris took his seat.

"Impressive place," Yuki remarked.

"Yes, it is," Chris agreed.

The server came over and handed them both a menu.

"They sure have an impressive selection of drinks."

"Uhm hmm," Chris said, looking over the offerings. "One thing I like about the *Horatio* is that there is a real galley, in addition to the replicators. It is nice to be able to make real food now and again."

"You like to cook?" Yuki asked.

"Yes. I am from Switzerland and my family ran a very popular restaurant. I've been studying under five star chefs since I could pick-up a wooden spoon."

Yuki smiled. "I can hardly boil water," she replied. "But I do like to experiment."

"That is the key to good cooking," Chris grinned. Something in Yuki's purse beeped, and she reached in and withdrew a communicator.

"Shiratori here." She listened for a few seconds, her face changing from a smile to frown, then became serious. "I understand," she said. "I'll be right there." She closed the communicator and gave Chris a look of profound regret.

"I'm sorry, but they seem to be a problem with one of the *Akula's* engineers and they need me," she said, pushing back her seat.

"Of course," Chris said, starting to rise.

Yuki waved him to stop. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I will be here," Chris said. Yuki gave him a quick smile and dashed out of the club.

* * *

Ike had watched the couple settle in and once their drink order was taken, Ike let out a huge sigh of relief. He turned to bartender Gash Tucker and requested a scotch on the rocks. He watched the couple several more moments until the Yuki received the false call. There was no need for her to be involved, so Ike had arranged for the young lady to be called off. He carefully watched Yuki obviously give her regrets before she dashed out.

Ike waited a moment before sauntering over to Chris, glass in hand.

"Lieutenant Wallace is it?"

A decidedly glum Chris looked up. "Yes, it is."

"What happened to Ms Shiratori?"

"She got called away... damn..." he muttered under his breath.

Ike managed to repress a smile before he sat down uninvited. "I understand that you were offered a posting on *Nexus* here."

"Yes, I was," Chris replied, taking a sip of his wine before repeating the words he'd said a few days earlier to Lieutenant El Jafeer. "But I have a nice post on

Horatio and the chance to do some serious work. Not to mention the constant excitement of traveling into unexplored space."

"We may be stationary, but we don't lack for excitement, believe me. Especially as of late..."

"Oh?" Chris asked.

"Yes, those Orions that gave your ship such grief have been a thorn in our side for a few months now," Ike replied. He could tell from Chris' expression that he was not interested in pursuing the matter any further. Ike decided that there was no reason to prolong this discussion any further. He took a surreptitious look around and settled his eyes on Hoth letting him know that it was show time. Finally, he leveled his gaze back to the object of this evening's endeavor.

"So nothing will convince you to stay?" Ike asked innocently.

"Sorry," Chris said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, so am I kid..."

* * *

While polishing the fine wood that made up his bar counter, Gash Tucker thought that tonight was turning out to be a rather slow one despite all the Grunts that had somehow managed to stage around the main bar area. As a retired Merchant Marine, it wasn't hard to spot Starfleet's "Misguided Children" but as long as they behaved themselves and paid for their drinks, they were fine with him. Besides, even Marines should be wary of getting into a fight in a posh place like this -- their pay just wasn't *that* good.

There were very few couples in his area, so when a young pair had walked in, he took special notice. The server barely had time to take their orders, when he noticed the young lady bounce out of her chair and out the door. She didn't have a look of distress on her face and he certainly hadn't heard any strong words from the table therefore, Gash assumed that the young lady had been summoned out on an emergency. *Poor kid*, Gash thought while he tracked the man he'd served the scotch to walk over to the vacant chair and sit down.

Gash suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Several of the groups of men scattered around a few tables had suddenly started to get restless. He decided perhaps it was time he gave his patrons some personal attention. He put down his handtowel and walked out from behind his bar towards the group but didn't make it before the minions of hell began to tapdance all around him.

"What do you mean 'Marines are worthless slugs!'" Ike exclaimed as he sprung to his feet glass in hand. "Take that!" He emptied the contents on top of Chris' head.

"What the hell are you doing?" Chris cried as he pushed his own chair back and stood, wiping away the alcohol with a napkin. "Are you nuts?"

"Oh! I'm a moron *and* I'm nuts!" Ike retorted in a raised voice. "Did you hear that?" he yelled to the "patrons" while stabbing a finger towards Chris. "He said I'm nuts!"

"We heard, ell-tee!" a Marine built like a tree barked, rising from his table. Every other Marine in the area quickly stood with him. "You might want to watch what you say there, Wing Wiper!" Gunny Hoth grumbled to an obviously astonished Chris.

"That Starfleet Lieutenant's just telling like it is, leatherneck!" Flight Officer "Dutch" van der Weege interrupted, jumping to his feet.

"*Dutch!*" Flight Officer Brent Dallenbach hissed and tugged at his sleeve. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Keep out of this flyboy!" another Marine threatened, balling his fists to underscore his point.

"Dammit, Brett, I'm not gonna put up with the shit those grunts are tossing out," Dutch growled.

"If you insist," Brett noted with an audible sense of resignation as he rose to his feet and started to roll back his sleeves.

"Your momma!" Dutch yelled, coming around the table to emphasize *his* point up close and personal with a gesture that was considered less than polite even in the worst of company.

"Sez who?" the big Marine growled. "How'd you like a Knuckle Burger, junior?"

"Come and try me, buttface!" Dutch snarled in return, clenching his fist, ready for action.

"*At ease!*" Chris yelled out.

Gash Tucker heard Chris' attempt to restore order and noted how it was ignored. He put his hands on his hips and shouted. "*Sacre Bleu!* What's gotten

in to the lot of you?" Not receiving an immediate answer save the sound of fists crashing against bone, Gash tapped his emergency communicator and called for club security that arrived just in time to be greeted by a barrage of flying knuckles.

* * *

Gareth Roscoe erstwhile partner of Boffin Gateway in both *Serenade in Blue* and their new import-export endeavor was rudely shaken back into club business by the alarm that went off in his office. He knew that it was from Gash and he knew that Gash wouldn't sound the alert unless there was a major fuss brewing. He quickly brought up the vid camera around the bar and noticed it was blank.

Cussing loudly, Roscoe bounded out of his office straight into the club. There was no need for him to ask what the problem was. He could see it. Tables and chairs were strewn about. Blood dotted the gray carpet. *Boffin's gonna have a cow when he sees the stains on the carpet*, Roscoe mused while the fists were still flying around him.

"*That's enough!*" Roscoe bellowed before he plunged into the crowd to start tossing bodies away from each other. Finally, with the help of station security augmenting his own club staff, calm was restored.

Satisfied that all was secure, he was about to ask a few questions when he noticed that one of the statues that sat in the nooks dotting the bar area was broken. *Oh shit, if he's gonna have a cow over the rug, he's gonna have a herd over this*. "Who broke the damned statue?" he yelled.

All Marine eyes settled on one lone figure. "*He did!*" they chorused.

"Wha'?" Lieutenant Wallace cried, holding one of the linen napkins to the side of his head, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

Roscoe walked over to person in question. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Chrish...Wallish..." he mumbled, obviously groggy from his head injuries.

Roscoe frowned, not able to understand what the man had said and besides, he reeked of booze. "Well, whoever the fuck you are, you are in serious shit. That's the owner's favorite statue. He's gonna have your ass for dinner."

"Me?"

Roscoe just shook his head in exasperation. He turned around and searched for station security. "Yo! Garvin!"

"Yes, Mister Roscoe?" the petty officer replied.

"Haul this trash out of the club," Roscoe began, emphasizing his point by waving his hand over the fallen combatants. "And tell the Chief we're going to want to press charges, especially on that one." He paused and pointed to Chris. "Because *he's* in bigger trouble than the lot of 'em!"

"Yes, sir," Garvin replied.

Gash walked over to Roscoe while the mass of humanity was being rounded up and hauled out to the station's brig. "*Sacre Bleu*. I don't envy you, Roscoe."

"Save it, Gash. I know... Boffin's gonna have cats when he finds out."

"Meow."

* * *

"This is an outrage, Captain Argent!" Captain Melvin Calder of the *Horatio* thundered over the link. *"I don't care if the club's vid cameras weren't operating! There are twenty witnesses who saw that Marine Lieutenant start the fight last night! And more than half of them say it was someone else entirely who broke that statue! In fact, my officer tried to stop the fight in the first place!"*

Kyle threw up his hands in a gesture of futility. "What can I say? The damages were quite extensive and the proprietor has stated his intention to press charges once the guilty parties have been determined. As you well know, I can't hand over Lieutenant Wallace until everything is properly sorted out."

"And how long will that take?" Calder growled.

Kyle decided he should appear to think about this matter for a moment. "Shouldn't be more than six weeks," he replied calmly, trying to conceal his bemusement.

"Six weeks!" Calder bellowed, *"I have to leave here in an hour, dammit!"*

Kyle gave him a placid look that he hoped would properly convey a message along the lines of 'sorry, but my hands are tied'. "We need to analyze the security tapes, interview witnesses and the accused for statements, allow the prosecutor's time to determine charges. Set a time with the Magistrate..." Kyle continued to drone on when suddenly, his face took on the appearance of someone hit with a downright inspired idea. "If you want, I'd be happy to take

Lieutenant Wallace on detached duty here on *Nexus* until this is all straightened out..."

Captain Calder opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly stopped. He squinted his eyes. *"This is all a setup and you know it!"* he snapped.

"That may very well be, Captain Calder," Kyle all but purred, "and if it is indeed what you say it is, then I'm sure the Magistrates will exonerate your young officer. However, until the case is heard..."

"There isn't any possibility you could intervene on his behalf with the Magistrates, is there?" Calder asked quietly, clearly resenting having to grovel before this damned backwater Station Commander.

"Influence the civilian Magistrates?" Kyle sniffed in mock outrage. "Why, Captain Calder! I could not possibly abuse my power as Station Commander like that!" *At least not twice in one day.*

Kyle watched as Calder's shoulders slumped a centimeter or so, clearly indicating his resignation on the matter.

"It appears that I have no choice," he replied through clenched teeth.

"Not really, Captain Calder," Kyle admitted still hiding the triumph he felt.

"Very well. Draw up the TDY papers, I'll sign them," Calder relented. *"I expect this matter to be cleared up to my satisfaction within six weeks time."* He paused a moment, then added a deadly, *"I will remember this, Captain Argent."*

Kyle narrowed his own eyes. "Is that a threat?"

"A promise," Calder retorted icily.

"I see, in that case, are there any more promises you would like me to direct at the Magistrates? I'm sure they'll take it all in spirit it was offered in and--"

Kyle wasn't able to finish his sentence as Calder had simply terminated the transmission, leaving Kyle to quietly relish one of his very few victories of late.

* * *

"I see you had a good time last night," Midori Sato noted as she sat down at the edge of Chris' bed in *Nexus*' Sickbay the following morning. The security guard patiently took his post near the door so he could keep an eye on the both of them.

"Delightful," Chris replied in a voice dripping with sarcasm. He had a small bandage on the side of his head hiding a nasty-looking gash he had received when he hit it on the edge of a table during the fight. He'd also taken a nasty bump to the back of his head when he was slammed into the wall after being blindsided by two of the Marines.

"How do you feel?"

"Okay. One of the doctors patched me up and gave me a mild sedative," Chris said.

* * *

"The Captain is here."

"Thank you, Electra," Arcadia replied to her yeoman over the link. "Inform Captain Argent I shall be with him straight away." She quickly finished up her report and walked out of her office to meet her husband.

"You realize," she began while they walked toward the patients' wing, "you could have sent Jefferson to do the deed."

Kyle shook his head, giving her a smile worthy of a Cheshire Cat. "After all the trouble everyone had gone to, I wanted to keep this honor for myself."

"But of course," she snorted. They had arrived and were standing in front of the door. The security guard was nowhere to be seen, so Arcadia assumed that the patient had a visitor. "Now Kyle," Arcadia faced him, becoming the CMO, "don't tire him out. He suffered skull fracture as well as a partial concussion." She had insisted that Chris stay overnight for observation.

Kyle nodded before he rapped on the door and walked in. "Lieutenant Wallace," he announced before he turned towards the security guard standing at attention near the door. "You are dismissed Ensign."

"Aye, sir!" the guard replied quickly leaving the room and resuming his post outside the patient's room.

"Captain Argent!" Chris said as he tried to sit up in bed. Midori smoothly slid off the bed and to attention.

"At ease, Lieutenants. I talked with Captain Calder and he agreed that, until we can clear this all up, that you be attached to *Nexus* on temporary duty."

Chris had plenty of time to consider what had happened to him last night and had come to conclusion that he'd been railroaded. On the other hand, he could not think of anything to do to stop it. And if his CO was going along, there was no point trying to fight it.

"I'm assigning you to the Tactical and Flight Operations branches where you can work on the Orion issue we're currently having."

"You'll work with Doctor Emrys Geraint, one of the leading Xenologists. I'm sure you've heard of his work?" Arcadia asked him.

Indeed, he had. While Chris wasn't entirely pleased with the way he'd been shanghaied into working on *Nexus*, he did look forward to working with Doctor Geraint. And then, of course, there was Yuki... *Yuki!* He hoped she did not know what had happened! Chris doubted she'd be interested in a brawler.

"Yes, sir," Chris replied, his mind snapping back to the here-and-now.

"Very well, Lieutenant," Kyle replied before he and Arcadia left the room.

"Sorry, Chris," Midori said as she resumed her perch, seeing the look in his eyes.

"*Shikatta ga nai*," Chris uttered with a sigh.

"No, I guess it can't be helped," Midori agreed. "Get some sleep. I'll see you later."

* * *

"He looked like a kicked puppy, Kyle," Arcadia remarked while they walked back to her office.

"He'll be fine. He knows it is just temporary. Once the Orions are taken care of, he can go back to exploring the galaxy."

"But his record..."

"...will be wiped clean. In fact, by this afternoon, there will be no mention of it anywhere on his career jacket."

Arcadia stared at her husband. "You had it all figured out already, didn't you?"

"May I remind you that it was your Chief of Staff who started it?" Kyle retorted smugly. He rocked back on his heels and grinned. "All I did was pick up the pieces."

"Speaking of Ike..."

* * *

Marine Lieutenant Ike Ivanan, Chief of Staff to the Medical Branch was finally able to resume his duties after having spent a good twenty-four hours cooling his heels in the brig. He stomped back into the hospital where he was warmly greeted by the staff, receiving a few winks of appreciation from some of them, before he stormed unannounced into his boss' office.

"Darce! What exactly was your husband thinking by leaving me in the can like that? After what I did for him?"

The sight of her Chief of Staff stomping up and down in her office amused Arcadia. "Oh, I don't think it was that bad, Ike. After all, young Wallace got the short end of the stick. You lads did quite the number on his skull."

"Purely by accident. It had to have been those fighterpukes!" Ike capped off his response by giving Arcadia his most sincere puppy-dog look for added emphasis. "Honest, Darce."

Arcadia grinned at her Chief of Staff.

"Yeah, well..." Ike continued. "But still, why was it necessary for him to leave us in the brig like that?" he grumbled.

"Far be it for me to point this out, Mister Ivanan, but Kyle is still the Station Commander and let's face it, you lads did destroy property held by a private citizen here on the station."

Ike bit his lower lip before he sat down and rubbed his temples. "Things got a little bit out of control." He shook his head. "I didn't notice the flyboys in the corner and by that time, my boys were into playing their parts -- all too well it seems."

"But on the other hand, you did accomplish the mission and to show his gratitude, Kyle asked me to give you this." Arcadia reached into her desk and handed Ike a padd.

"You'll note," she began as he scanned the padd, "that Kyle has worked out an agreement with Mister Gateway concerning the damages. He had settled the bill

himself and in return, you lot will stay out of *Serenade in Blue* for six months. He arranged for all participants to have their records cleared of the incident. And he also told me to tell you that you, and I quote, 'had better cease your inevitable bitching and moaning and kindly not pull another one hundred twelve again whilst under his command.'"

As if to underscore his point, Kyle had taken the time to itemize each and every participants name along with an entry for "One Cleared Record" and the word "Priceless" in the cost column. Finally, Ike looked up from the datapadd and gave Arcadia a faint smile. "Tell him that I am... err... well... say something nice, OK... Oh, hell, just tell him thank you." Ike capped off his response with a feeble smile as he stood up.

"Just a moment. There are two pending matters to be taken care of."

"Oh?" he squeaked.

"One should be relatively easy to accomplish. Mister Ivanan, there is still that matter of the budget figures. We have a meeting with finance this afternoon and those figures *will* be with us. And the second matter is Ms Shiratori and please don't even begin to give me that look that says 'what about her?' Ike. You and the lads set her up. I think that as long as Kyle took the time to bail everyone's sorry backsides out, I believe you owe Ms Shiratori some consideration."

She watched Ike gamely search for a reply, but obviously, he couldn't come up with one. Instead, he simply lowered his head and kicked an invisible dust mite, reminding her much of a schoolboy who had just been caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

"Well?" she prompted.

"I'll... I'll see what I can do about it."

"Very well then, Serg--," Arcadia knew she'd get his goat by using starting to use his former enlisted rank before she employed the proper one, "*Lieutenant*. Dismissed."

Ike left as quickly as he possibly could.

* * *

"I am on my way to get a bite to eat. Care to join me?" Lieutenant Midori Sato asked Lieutenant Chris Wallace as she entered his new temporary quarters aboard *Nexus*.

"Yes, I'd love to," Chris replied, putting down the box he was unpacking. As he had no intention of staying aboard *Nexus* a minute longer than he had to, Chris had only his essentials beamed over from *Horatio*. "I need to get my mind off past events. Where do you want to eat?"

"Well, you're probably *persona non grata* at *Serenade in Blue*..." Midori noted. "Let's see if we can sneak you into the Nexalodeon."

Chris and Midori were quickly shown to a table as the Nex wasn't busy this evening. Their waitress handed out datapadds then took their orders for drinks.

"So tell me young Tigger," Midori began with a gleam in her eye, "exactly what did happen in *Serenade in Blue*?"

"I threw Lieutenant Ivanan over a table," Chris deadpanned, taking a sip of water. "I was giving a lot better than I was receiving, until I was blindsided by two marines," he continued. "They slammed me back into a wall and they tell me it fractured my skull. I was still doing okay until one of them grabbed my legs out from under me. I went down, catching my upper forehead on the edge of a table and opening up a gash." He tapped his bandage for good measure. "Security showed up a few seconds later, and next thing I knew I was on a gurney going to Sickbay."

"You always knew how to have a good time, Tigger," Midori smiled. "So what started this fight in the first place?"

"I was set up," Chris said. "The Lieutenant must have been acting on orders from someone higher up. He picked the fight with me to get me in trouble and keep me here."

Midori gave him a sidelong glance. "I think those blows to the head have made you a little paranoid."

"The Chiefs of Staff of both the Station Commander and Chief Medical Officer tried to convince me to stay on *Nexus* and help them with this Orion problem. I refuse and end up in the middle of a fight. I am then blamed for starting the fight, as well as charged with destruction of property. All the night before *Horatio* leaves for patrol. So now I am conveniently 'assigned' to *Nexus* and put to work on that problem. Coincidence? -- I don't think so."

"What did Yuki think about all this?" she asked.

"She was not present to witness it," Chris said. "Unfortunately, or fortunately, as the case may be, she was called off on some type of medical emergency. She

said she'd come back, but less than five minutes later I was in Sickbay. I hope she doesn't know. I'm so embarrassed."

"Well, with the whole station talking about it, she probably does know," Midori pointed out.

"Great," Chris sighed. "Just great. I sure am enjoying my time here."

* * *

The following morning, Lieutenant Chris Wallace stood at the main observation windows, watching the one of the PAs detach from the docking arm and start to pull away from the station on a test run. He stood and watched it until it disappeared into warp.

"So," a soft voice said beside him, "you're staying?"

Chris turned at the sound, and saw Ensign Shiratori standing there. He had been concentrating on watching the ship so much, he had not heard her approach.

"Yes," Chris said. "It appears I am."

Yuki still looked out the window, but in her reflection, Chris thought he saw the barest hint of a smile.

"Good," she said then turned to leave.

Chris' eyes following her all the way out of the room.

* * *

On their way to the Galenan equivalent of the Spring Ball, Arcadia was still surprised that Kyle wanted attend even with the arrival of the perimeter action ships a week ago. So, when he still wanted to attend the Ball, she didn't argue but secretly considered the fact that had she been Station Commander, nothing could have pried her body from her office. She smiled at the thought then frowned, trying once again to find a comfortable sitting position. All had she managed to do these past few moments was make herself more uncomfortable. And she was continuously being kept off-balance by the constant swaying.

"Can you please tell me yet again why we are traveling to the Gala in a horse drawn carriage?" she asked between clenched teeth to her husband sitting across from her on the opposite bench.

Kyle Argent cocked a wicked eyebrow in her direction. "Is there a problem?" He capped off his question with a smile.

Arcadia narrowed her eyes at her husband comfortably dressed in his Class-A Fighter Corps uniform, complete with all his ribbons on his chest. She, on the other hand, was wearing her favorite green gown adorned with an emerald necklace that perfectly matched the color of her dress. As much as she enjoyed wearing this dress, parts of her were starting to itch in places she couldn't comfortably scratch without doing damage to herself, her dress, or both.

"It won't be long now." He leaned over to look out the small window of the carriage. "In fact, I can see the Palace off into the distance."

Arcadia carefully looked off to where her husband was pointing. Sitting amongst the lush greenery of the area sat a magnificent Palace, illuminated by a multitude of small lights, giving it the over all impression of a fairy castle as the sun began to set.

"Oh... my... I don't think I've ever seen anything like it."

"Neither have I," he whispered.

Both continued to gaze at the palace until it went out of view as they were driven up to the front door. Once the carriage had stopped, a grim faced majordomo opened the door. He offered a hand to Arcadia. She appreciated the gesture as she found it difficult to navigate the one step down to the ground.

"Captain Argent," the majordomo formally began to Kyle. "Doctor Argent," he formally began to Arcadia. "If you will both please follow me."

They followed the majordomo into the Grand Ballroom where they were immediately assaulted by a barrage of bright lights and music.

"What are they playing?" Arcadia whispered.

Kyle listened for a moment. "Something similar to a waltz."

Arcadia looked away from her husband towards the orchestra, trying to discern the typical waltz cadence. "If you say so, love."

"This way," the majordomo intoned, leading them to a small group towards the side of the dance floor. "The Regent specifically requested that I escort you directly to him upon your arrival."

Arcadia managed to stifle her awe while they both followed the majordomo. She refused to rush, preferring to take time to survey her surroundings. The elegant ballroom floor reminded her of those that inhabited Regency Station. One side held the orchestra while the food and drink were located on the opposite wall. In the middle, several small tables surrounded the dance floor.

Having taken inventory of the physical area, she turned her attentions to the people. The vast majority of the men were dressed in a simple dark frock coat with a high-banded collar and dark pants. She remembered reading that anyone who had gold bands around their sleeves indicated membership in the First Family, the Regent's immediate kin. The women, on the other hand, wore long dresses with brightly colored prints. In fact, it seemed to her that the brighter and bolder the pattern, the more fashionable it was. Most of the women favored wearing their hair swept up, piled high on their heads, dotted with jewels, flowers, or other adornments. Arcadia felt somewhat self-conscious of the fact that she was the only woman present whose dress was monocolored. However, she had been assured that her attire was not only appropriate for the evening but also had been specifically requested by the Regent himself.

Scattered amongst the attendees were men seemingly not enjoying themselves who kept a constant covert watch over the participants. Arcadia concluded that they were part of the Galenan Secret Service assigned to take care of any problems, not that she could imagine any.

She was so caught up in her musings that she didn't notice that they had stopped moving. The man she knew as the Galenan Regent Hakon Ja'Fadey quickly ceased all discussion to turn and smile at them.

"I was so pleased when I saw your name on the official attendees list." He paused to take the Station Commander's hand and give it a warm shake before he smoothly turned his attention to Arcadia. "I am very pleased to finally meet a fellow rose gardener, Doctor Argent."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she replied with some reverence to her voice. She noticed that despite having a slight physique, he projected an aura not only of confidence but also of someone that you wanted to be your friend.

"May I introduce you to the Speaker of the Council of Ministers and the Assembly?" the Regent offered. "Gav, this is Captain Argent, the Commander of the Station. Captain Argent, Gavril Hadiyan, the duly elected Speaker and politician extraordinaire."

Gavril narrowed his eyes in exasperation before addressing the Regent. "You *are* trying to insult me again, aren't you?"

"It is working," the Regent shot back with a warm smile, "is it not?"

The Galenan Speaker simply sniffed in mock disgust before addressing Kyle. "Of course I've heard of you. I'm glad to finally put a person to the image."

"Now that you've been properly introduced," the Regent began in a congenially tone of voice, "Gavril, would you mind showing the Captain around while I take his lovely wife out to see my rose garden? The roses are their best at this time of day. Captain Argent, I think you'll find that you and Gav have much in common."

The Speaker smiled serenely and quickly moved to Kyle's right side leaving the Regent free to escort Arcadia to the rose garden.

"I'm very glad," the Regent began as they walked into the garden proper, "that you were able to convince your husband to attend. Too many of the other Station Commander's considered this just another obligation they could foist off upon their lessers."

"I *was* going to ask how you knew, but I decided that there wasn't very much you don't know about us, is there?"

He flashed a congenially smile. "I don't believe so."

"I suspected as much."

"Now, there is something I wish to show you."

The Regent led her into his private Rose Garden where Arcadia was greeted not only by the deep rose scent but also the variety of colors. Each aisle held a single color arranged from the lightest to the darkest shade. The Regent walked Arcadia over to the green aisle and led her to the middle of the row. He stopped and picked off a single rose.

"I thought so..." the Regent began, holding the newly plucked rose up close to Arcadia's eyes, "a perfect match."

Arcadia moved her eyes towards the rose in question. "That's why you wanted me to wear this green dress?" she stammered.

"Yes, I wanted to make sure the roses complimented your dress because I knew this was your favorite. You'll find a bouquet waiting for you when you leave and one will be delivered to you each week."

Arcadia felt herself blush. "I'm not sure what to say, Your Majesty."

"As I said to your husband last year," he began, continuing their stroll up the aisle, "a simple 'thank you' would suffice, however, I would be honored if you would allow me to call this the Arcadia Rose."

She took the offered rose from the Regent and held it close to take in its aroma before she held it up in the twilight. It was perfect, no petal was out of place, and the color was exquisite, like a jewel shimmering in the twilight. She turned away from admiring the rose to gaze into the kindly eyes of the Regent. "I would be honored, sir. Thank you, I shall admire them always."

"I know," he smiled, his eyes twinkling in pure delight.

* * *

After some vigorous hand pumping and numerous opportunities to practice the fine art of *extremely* small talk, Speaker Gavril Hadiyan and Captain Kyle Argent finally found themselves momentarily alone in the crowd.

"So..." Gavril began with a knowing smile, "I take it you too used to work for a living before the Regent got to you."

"I beg your pardon?" Kyle stammered, totally caught off-guard by the Speaker's casual tone.

"Let me guess..." Gavril continued smoothly, "he talked about expanding your horizons, about what it takes to play in The Great Game and all that, perhaps? How through the fine art of politics one can make a difference and so on and so forth."

"He didn't use the expanding-my-horizons metaphor," Kyle admitted with a somewhat resigned look.

"*Oh ho!* You must have been an easy mark then!" Gavril chuckled. "He rode me for two full months before I took a post in the Grand Assembly. And look how that turned out!"

"What did you do before your current career?" Kyle asked.

"I was what one might call a environmental activist. A lawyer by trade. I made sure that the green lands you see on Galena *stay* that way."

Kyle could readily see the potential for having to cross The Powers That Be to reach such goals, but he was also certain that no heavy pollutant industry was

located on Galena. Even the ore mining was done with an eye on keeping the balance of nature -- and it had been done this way for nearly 400 years now.

"But what exactly was threatening the Galenan environment?" Kyle finally asked. "Your mining facilities are model operations in terms of replacing precious substances. What would give people concern for environmental problems?"

"Well, in a word or less -- you."

"Me?" Kyle blurted out incredulously. "But waste disposal on the station is entirely self-contained," he considered as he mentally reviewed the last report on the subject, "or so I'm told -- and if not, then..." He looked up at the Speaker questioningly as his voice trailed off.

Gavril smiled. "No, not you personally. People like you -- Humans. We Galenans have never minded the occasional influx of other civilizations on our shores. We even had a colony of Klingon expatriates once, but *you* humans were a bit different. You came, you saw, and you figured there were opportunities here. Opportunities to build factories, harness the elements, tear up the country side and turn Galena -- which must have appeared rural and rambling -- into one contiguous urban sprawl like Earth itself."

"It's not that bad, honestly. We've made great strides over the past few centuries in containing urbanization and preserving nature."

"After nearly throwing it all away once or twice, yes. Well, good for you. But it was people like me who were determined to ensure that Galena wasn't going to be at the point where you humans finally got it all right and destroyed the planet."

"That sounds more like Xenophobia for the sake of Heritage Preservation than environmental activism."

Gavril again chuckled softly. "So the Regent said some forty years ago. He encouraged me to find a more... sensible solution."

"Did you find one?"

"Me?" he began somewhat ruefully. "Well, yes and no... In the end, I was there to implement the scheme, but the idea was not mine."

* * *

"Do you mind my asking a personal question?" the Regent asked while they continued their walk through his private garden.

Arcadia was obviously surprised. "I had the impression that there wasn't much you didn't know about us."

He smiled. "It does seem that I am knowledgeable on many subjects."

"It does, indeed," Arcadia laughed before she became serious, taking a deep breath before she spoke. "What is it you wish to know?"

"I'm just curious about how a veteran starship commander becomes a Healer who is now subordinate to her husband," he paused to consider. "A complex relationship I should think."

Arcadia shook her head, giving him a tight smile. "I don't think I was expecting that question."

"I can tell from your expression that you weren't."

She thought for a moment before she spoke. "My stint as a commanding officer was a surprise... while I was trained to be a Bridge Officer, I certainly didn't expect to have a command of my own in less than a year. But I am an Officer in Starfleet and I shall do what is required of me," she declared more for herself than for the Regent.

"And I understand you did it very well. The Award given to your Wing demonstrated that."

Arcadia found herself blushing slightly at that thought. "My people deserved it."

"Yes, they did," he responded gently.

She allowed the silence to grow between them as she became wrapped up in thought. "It was a mistake for me to have left Healing," she admitted not for the first time. "You know about my first husband?"

The Regent nodded.

"I'm glad," she replied softly. "Then you know that I felt responsible for his death and left Healing." She stopped and gazed off towards the sunset. "It took me years to realize that my true path was as a Healer."

"What changed your mind?" When he noted her wry smile, quickly added, "Ah... it is *who* changed your mind then?"

"It's not that Kyle specifically did anything... but being with him forced me to consider what I wanted out of life. And I realized what was really important especially after being so close to losing my ship." She paused and gave the Regent a quizzical smile. "As for being a subordinate, I learned very quickly that I curry no favours from him what so ever."

"So I heard."

"I'm sure you did..." She suddenly stopped walking and faced him straight on. "Did you also know that I have a hologram of my reprimand on my wall?"

He shook his head. "That's something I didn't know," he murmured becoming deep in thought. Suddenly, he spoke. "Why?"

"Because I never, ever wanted to forget why I am here. I'm a Healer and my covenant is to my patients. And I never want to forget that... Ever..."

After that forceful declaration, Arcadia felt somewhat ill at ease so she quickly turned to admire a flower. In the corner of her eye, she could see the Regent quietly mulling over her answer as he watched her seemingly enjoy the rose's delicate bouquet.

"I understand." He patiently waited until she had turned to back to face him. "You two seem perfectly suited for each other. Each complements the other's strengths and bolsters the other's weaknesses."

It was her turn to be surprised by an answer. "I never thought about it that way."

"Perhaps you shouldn't. After all, one shouldn't temp fate nor can one steer it in one's direction."

"That's true enough. But what one can do is be prepared for whatever life tosses one's way."

"I agree," he smiled.

They spent the rest of the time admiring the garden taking the time to discuss the finer points of their beloved roses. However, on more than a one occasion, Arcadia caught the Regent casting a wary eye towards the ballroom. It was obvious to her that he was concerned about something or perhaps... someone in there.

* * *

"Gavril, dear..." a newcomer interrupted in a voice that demanded he be answered, "*who* is this person?"

By the tone of his inflection and his general posture, Kyle decided that this newcomer would be referred to by some back home as a fop. Others would gladly use ruder terms. The newcomer's initial appearance was mildly offset by his gray eyes blazing with deep intensity and a thin moustache, all combining to give him a decidedly dashing air.

"Sir," Gavril began formally, "may I introduce you to Captain Kyle Argent, Commander of *Space Station Nexus*. Captain Argent, this is Kadar Ja'Fadey, the Regent's eldest son."

"And no doubt to be Regent myself someday!" he proclaimed while he narrowed his eyes into a thin slit. "You keep forgetting that, Gavril. Very bad form indeed!" The young man finally decided to give Kyle a distinct sneer, offering his hand almost as an afterthought. "Captain," he deigned to reply.

This slight didn't go unnoticed by Kyle who chose simply to respond, "Sir," in an even and noncommittal tone of voice.

Gavril had been outgoing and friendly up until now, but since the arrival of the 'Regent-To-Be' and his throng of cronies that followed him like a pack of hyenas, Gavril had the look of a man waiting for the first opportunity to flee.

"If you will excuse us, Your Excellency..." the Speaker formally announced using his official voice, "we shall take our leave."

Kadar arched a finely shaped eyebrow. "Why?" he sneered. "Do you have something better to do than talk with the most important man on Galena?" He stopped to give the Speaker a benign smile. "Oh, very well, leave then. But perhaps you could get us some wine first? You wouldn't want to lose favor with your future Regent, now would you?"

Kyle was taken aback by the almost decadent brazenness of the young man. Had the request been made to him, a diplomatic incident would have followed. Kyle quickly glanced at Gavril. Surely, the Speaker would tell this upstart in no uncertain terms where he could go and what he could do with his request...

"Very well, sir," Gavril replied with no hint of malice.

Kyle watched in astonishment as the Speaker dutifully went off in search for a waiter to fill the order. The throng of followers that had accompanied the Regent's son either snickered or gasped in awe of his authority over the head of their government.

"Here is a man who knows his place in this world!" Kadar exclaimed triumphantly to his sycophants upon receipt of his wine. "There *may* be a role yet for him in the days to come!"

The chorus of young people, whom Kyle presumed were something akin to the upper-crust youths of Galenan society, simply smirked at the idea. It was a chuckle only those who were reasonably secure in the knowledge that they were going places and could afford to stand around and pity the unfortunates they were forced to interact with.

"To the most important man in Galena!" one of the young men finally yelled out and was immediately joined in by the rest of the minions.

Kyle increasingly became disgusted by the display of revelry unfolding before him, but also had to admit that he was oddly fascinated by it all. If someone would have said to him that the son of the Regent -- who was a seemingly kind and gentle man -- was this... oaf, he would have never believed it. But here he was...

"Why, Captain Argent -- you do not drink," Kadar observed with disdain. "Do you not agree?" He pointedly turned away to address his flock. "Surely anyone who can have the head of planetary Government bring him refreshments is undeniably at the pinnacle of importance in society." He paused then looked directly at Kyle, "do *you* not agree?"

Kyle gave the matter brief thought, taking the time to weigh a diplomatic response versus speaking his mind. Finally, he decided on a compromise.

"Once," Kyle began in an extremely calm but commanding tone of voice, "the President of the Federation bowed before me and told me that I was a credit to all of the Federation. I suppose if I would have asked him to fetch me a drink that day, he would have willingly done so."

Not bloody likely, Kyle mused, but that didn't need to be said out loud to these jokers.

"But that overt demonstration of power was nothing compared to the one truly important aspect I took away from that meeting."

"And what might that have been? The President's silverware?" Kadar sneered.

The future Regent's comment opened the floodgates of the like-minded youths as they cackled with glee. Kyle opted to ignore the insult and pressed on.

"No. It was the feeling of respect that I was given. That day, I had Admirals saluting me and the President telling me that what I had done was the bravest action they had ever seen. That was the day they gave me this." Kyle lightly fingered the medal that hung around his neck on a royal blue silk ribbon. "In case you don't recognize it, this is the Federation Medal of Honor. I was a lieutenant back then -- a very small cog in the scheme of things at Starfleet. But when the most powerful people in that organization are willing to recognize your accomplishments and contributions, *despite* my being a lowly lieutenant, then you know they do so out of respect." Kyle took a step towards Kadar to face him straight on. "You clearly have people's admiration and your birthright does indeed make you important. But do you have their respect? Because that and only that is what truly makes you important -- on Galena or anywhere else."

Kyle realized his efforts to be polite in this matter had failed when Kadar began to flush bright red. His eyes seized Kyle with an almost hateful intensity.

"*People respect me!*" he shouted, pointing to his circle of friends. "*They respect me!*"

The Chorus vigorously nodded their carefully coifed heads. They agreed with his assessment in such a fashion that it was obvious to just about anyone willing to see past their facade that they had no clue what the word "respect" meant.

"But what of your father?" Gavril suddenly interjected, taking his place at Kyle's side once again.

"But what of the *old* man? He's the past..." Kadar proclaimed, pointing to himself with a carefully manicured finger, "*I am the future!*"

"The past in this case," the Speaker began in a controlled voice, "has a ninety-two public approval rating. Good Regent Hakon, they now call him. Does the public respect you for what you have done or because of him?"

Kyle doubted whether the public even knew enough about who Kadar was to have any sort of opinion of him, one way, or the other. But he hoped the Speaker's retort had taken the youngster down a peg.

Visibly enraged, Kadar growled in a low and deadly voice. "You forget yourself, sir! Do not think that *I* will forget this sort of talk when *The Day* comes!"

After this last exchange, Kyle had finally decided that he'd had enough. His tolerance for fools was notoriously low. Especially fools in high places. "I'd say from the shape of things here tonight," Kyle began calmly, "we should all be thankful that at the very least, Galena's *past* is in good hands. If you will excuse

me, but the most important man on *Space Station Nexus* has something better to do with his time. Speaker, care to join me for a drink?"

"With pleasure, *Cap-tain* Argent!" Gavril purred, seemingly taking special care to hit the syllables of his rank with extra emphasis, to demonstrate that this was something Kadar could not measure up to even if he tried.

His Excellency Kadar Ja'Fadey was left standing with his mouth hanging wide open with raw naked fury blazed in his eyes. "I will *not* forget this! *No one* gets away with insulting me like that! I... I..."

"*You will do what?*" the Regent's voice snapped in a harsh tone as he forcefully placed himself in between the two parties.

They froze in their place and slowly fixed their gaze on the Regent.

"Challenge him to duel like you did with the last person who told you to stop acting like a spoiled child? Four thousand years our society has functioned without any formal demands for satisfaction -- yet a son of mine had *changed* all that in an instant!"

"Father, this is not the place!" Kadar pleaded in a low whisper.

By this time, the music had stopped and all eyes in the ballroom were fixed on the unfolding spectacle. Kyle noticed that once again he had unwittingly become the center of attention. Chances are he would not be asked back anytime soon.

"Of course it is the place, you young fool!" the Regent snapped at his son again. "Be advised that according to Captain Argent's file, he has more than a passing proficiency with the Klingon Longsword. Challenge him now and he's likely to cut you to ribbons with no effort what so ever!"

Kyle was stunned by the Regent's proclamation. It wasn't generally known that his Klingon friend Morag had taught him how to handle the Bath'let during their days of service together on the Frontier. But then, the thought of choosing a Bath'let for something as barbaric as a duel hadn't occurred to him. He had figured a few good punches to the nose and the matter would have been settled, but the Regent clearly had feared the worst.

"Very well, Father." Kadar slumped his shoulders in defeat.

"Thank you..." the Regent sighed with obvious relief before he turned towards his guests. "Music! Dance! Please! Don't let this little incident spoil the fun and revelry of the night!"

"That's the Regent's son?" Arcadia whispered with surprise. She was now standing besides her husband's shoulder. Kyle nodded as they watched the group slink away with their collective tails between their legs.

"My oldest son and perhaps my greatest failure," the Regent lamented from behind them.

The frank admission of failure was a bit startling to both Kyle and Arcadia, who were not used to the concept of parents berating their young in public like that. Kyle had read that familial structures on Galena were virtually identical to those on Earth, but concepts and conventions did in fact differ. He'd now been privy to such a demonstration of one difference. Galenan Families were not shy about voicing their displeasure of one another even if it meant public embarrassment.

Obviously sensing what his honored guests were thinking, the Regent addressed them both. "I know you must think me to be a terrible father after that display..."

"You knew he was about to get himself into more trouble than he could handle," Kyle interjected smoothly. "And did what you thought was best to save himself from his own undoing. Nothing wrong with that." His answer was diplomatic and factual even though he was unsettled by the exhibition.

"Quite, quite..." the Regent began, clearly still trying to compose himself. Nevertheless... Kadar takes too much after his grandsire, I'm afraid. I love him dearly, but it's not been easy sometimes..."

Arcadia gently touched the Regent's arm. "You owe us no explanation." She cocked a wicked eyebrow in Kyle's direction giving him a warm smile. "We were both young once ourselves."

Their words had the desired effect because a broad smile erupted over the Regent's lips. "Come. Allow me to introduce you to my youngest son. Piran?"

A teenager, who had been standing away from them, quickly turned around and smiled at the Regent. "Yes, sir?"

"Oh, stop the formalities, Piran," he gently scolded the young man. "Let me introduce you to Captain Argent, Station Commander of *Space Station Nexus*. And his wife, Doctor Arcadia Argent, Chief Medical Officer, *Space Station Nexus*."

"I am very pleased to meet you, both. My father has spoken highly of you."

The Regent beamed at his youngest son. "Piran, I would like to leave Doctor Argent in your most capable hands." He paused for a moment. "Arguing with your Brother isn't exactly easy on me these days, as you well know. I think I need to rest. Yes..." he wearily concluded. "Rest is what I need now."

Piran's face lit up. "I'd like that."

"Captain," the Regent began as he faced Gavril and Kyle once more, "I think you are in good hands with Gavril here." He paused and cocked his head to the side. "I knew you two would get along. Perhaps not quite so... well, but that was the chance I took, I suppose."

"Captain, if you'd come with me," Gavril requested formerly.

* * *

Arcadia watched Gavril and Kyle walk away. She then turned her attention to her young host whom she found grinning at her.

"I see my father gave you the roses he'd been working on," Piran began while he escorted Arcadia over to the refreshment table.

"Yes," Arcadia paused to take a long look at the one rose she still had in her hand, "he did and they are the loveliest roses I'd ever seen."

"He told you he named it after you?"

Again, she blushed slightly but this time, it didn't go unnoticed.

Piran gave her a bright smile. "I see he did, Doctor," he replied. He accepted two cups of punch from the waiter and handed her one.

Arcadia took a sip and smiled. "This is quite good."

"It's an old recipe," he replied. He led her to an empty table near the ballroom floor. "We serve it each year for the Spring Ball." He shrugged. "Everyone expects it."

Arcadia noticed that Piran was staring over her shoulder. She turned around and noticed a strikingly beautiful young lady intruding on the group of surely young men who'd finally managed to gain their composure after being soundly whipped in front of their peers and other important folk.

He shook his head. "I don't know what Calandra sees in him." Piran noticed Arcadia's look of confusion. "The tall one in the middle who was giving Captain Argent a bad time is my brother. That's his... current lady."

"Oh... I see," Arcadia replied between sips.

Piran went back to his own drink. He caught a glimpse of the dancers in the middle of the floor having a good time. He turned to Arcadia. "Would you care to dance?"

She wasn't expecting the question and nearly choked on her drink. Deciding that she needed to concentrate, she put the cup down and gave all her attention to the music. She finally noticed the worried look on her young companion's face. "I'm tone deaf and I was listening to the music to see if I would be able to discern a pattern. I'm afraid that I can't."

Piran was clearly puzzled by this admission. "You mean..." he stammered, "you can't hear music?"

Arcadia considered for a moment. "I can hear music, but not in the same way that you do. What I hear is 'noise' of different pitches but nothing quite makes sense. There are some dances that I can 'feel' especially if there is a distinct cadence."

"Yes, I think I understand. When you come back, I'll make sure that you will have music you can dance to."

She looked closely at Piran and instantly felt his sincerity, a far cry from the hostility emanating from his brother. While she knew that he would have to be polite to her tonight, she was not expecting him to go out of his way to make *her* feel so comfortable. "That's so kind of you and I really look forward to it."

He grinned. "Let me introduce you to some of my friends. They've already seen the roses and I'm sure they'd like to meet the inspiration."

They both walked over to his friends who greeted her warmly. Whether or not they were making an effort for Piran's sake or they genuinely enjoyed her company, it didn't matter to her because it seemed to her that they all were having a splendid time together.

* * *

It was nearly midnight before Kyle and Arcadia found themselves alone again, admiring the lovely spring-like evening on Galena.

"Keeping up your busy social schedule, Milady?" he asked with a sparkle in his eye.

Arcadia sighed. "I prefer to think of it as spreading goodwill to smooth over your previous faux pas, Pilot."

Kyle decided to give all his attention to straightening out his medal of honor. "Oh ho! Do I detect some criticism on your part?"

"No," she shook her head, "not really. Apparently young Piran doesn't think much of his sibling either." She paused to chuckle. "He thought you standing up to him like that was -- how did he put it -- 'very nifty'."

Kyle snickered at idea. Even he didn't use 'nifty' as an expression anymore. He peered over at his wife who was unconsciously smoothing out her dress. "You spent a great deal of time with him tonight," he noted. He offered her his arm and they began to stroll towards the garden. He stopped and allowed a wicked grin to emerge on his lips. "Looking to trade me in for a younger model, are we?"

Arcadia pretended to give the thought great consideration. "He is a *very* nice young man. He certainly has the heritage and besides, he does like cats." She proceeded to look Kyle over, studying him carefully. "Hm... perhaps I should..."

Kyle gave her a grave expression. "Think of the brother-in-law you'd end up with."

"Oh... my..." she blurted out, shaking her head. "There is that." She paused to look up at him. "It appears I must keep you?"

"I'd like it if you did," he whispered.

"Very well then, Mister Argent. Your charm and distinct lack of loathsome relatives has conquered your deficiency in the title department... For now," she added with a wicked grin.

He pinched her bottom as a means of communicating his approval. She gasped then retaliated by tickling his ribs. Kyle chuckled and easily captured her hands in his, drawing her closer for a kiss. The sound of someone clearing his throat startled them. The couple slowly turned to see the Regent and the Speaker standing close by, keeping a tactful distance, possibly in case issues of modesty should have arisen.

"I'm very sorry to bother you both like this," the Regent began to the extremely embarrassed couple, "but it is late and I shall be retiring soon. However before I do," he directed his words toward Arcadia, "I though I would have a few words with your husband."

Arcadia smiled in understanding. "Gentlemen," she said, and then turned to leave them to their official business.

"Oh, by all means stay, Doctor Argent," the Regent stopped her. "None of what I have to say are matters that you are not aware of. Do not deprive us of your lovely company."

The Regent led them to a nearby table and chairs. Kyle purposefully chose the loveseat, which allowed Arcadia to nestle up against him. He had noted that the air had grown considerably cooler and she didn't have a cloak to protect her against the coming chill. He idly began to rub her bare shoulder while remaining attentive to the conversation.

"Captain Argent," Gavril began formally, his tone now that of the Galenan Assembly's Speaker, "we'd like to know what your immediate plans are to resolve the issue of our declining trade."

Kyle took a deep breath. At one time, with the coming arrival of the Task Force, this would have been an open and shut matter. But with the Task Force being what it was, traders had continued to give him a vote of "No Confidence" by simply opting not to run through Red Omega Sector altogether.

In short, Kyle had no idea whatsoever how to resolve the matter and bit the bullet to tell the Regent and Speaker as much.

* * *

"Something wrong?"

"Naw..." Roscoe replied. He sauntered over to the bar to retrieve a cold drink. "Just the usual Friday night fun and games. Actually, it's quieter than usual."

Boffin looked up from the datapadd he was studying. "It bloody well better be after that melee we had last week," he grumbled.

Roscoe could tell that *Serenade in Blue's* majority owner was still a bit miffed concerning the fuss caused by the Marines and a few so-called innocent bystanders. While all the repairs were finished and remuneration was offered and taken, it was still a sore subject with Boffin. He was still peeved about his favourite statue being shattered into little itty-bitty pieces.

"Trust me when I say it's been quiet. So quiet..." Roscoe began before he took a deep drink, "I had a chance to chat with Gash."

"And?"

"He has a few ideas but will need a bit more time to work on them. And don't worry, he still thinks you're just getting parts for a new personal ship."

"Good..." Boffin mumbled, going back to reading the padd.

Roscoe silently finished up his drink and went back to work, keeping the peace in their nightclub, *Serenade in Blue*.

* * *

All in all, his admission had been received better than Kyle thought it would be. Both the Regent and the Speaker had agreed that it was paramount that he find a trader willing run the Niffelheim-Nexus-Qu'bat Loop. He knew that if he could find one brave (or foolish as the case may be) soul, he would provide them with an escort of all four Perimeter Action Craft in the hopes of getting a few uneventful runs completed. Now the issue was simply to find the right person to approach...

All contemplation ceased as Kyle was suddenly stirred back into the here and now. He became aware of the soft and warm object on his right side who had made herself very comfortable next to him. He'd held her closely to him against the coming cold and she had taken advantage of it. She had even managed to doze off a bit -- a fact that didn't go unnoticed by both the Regent and Speaker Gavril.

"I think Doctor Argent has the right idea, Gentlemen," the Regent noted quietly as he stood up. "Sleep sounds like a very good idea right about now."

Kyle gently nudged Arcadia awake in time for all three of them to stand and bow politely before the Regent slowly began to move away. He suddenly turned back to face them again.

"Captain Argent, I should like to apologize to you for the way my son acted earlier -- and to you as well, Gavril. He is... impulsive at times. He can say things he does not mean and does things he should not do. It is my hope that he'll grow out of this phase before it's too late. I'm afraid I won't always be here to set right his mistakes as I did tonight. Someday it will be up to people like you two...." The Regent allowed his eyes to sweep over the two men, "to make him listen to reason. I hope I can count on you both when the time arises."

Kyle didn't quite know what to think. He seriously doubted that his tenure on *Nexus* would run past the decade or two the Regent likely still had left to live so why even presume?

"I think I speak for all of us, My Regent," Gavril finally replied for them all, "when I say that we will always strive to do what is best for Galena. And that no apologies are necessary, My Regent."

"Spoken like a true diplomat, Gavril," the Regent chuckled.

The reference brought a slight smile to Gavril's face. "People change, don't they?"

"For the good of us all, I *hope* they do," the Regent replied solemnly before addressing Kyle and Arcadia directly once more. "Captain, Doctor -- and you too, Gavril -- perhaps you will allow me to make things up to you by being my personal guests for the Festival of Plays? It is customary for me to host friends at my Residence. I would be honored if you would join us."

The reference to the Festival of Plays was completely lost on Kyle, but he detected the waves of anticipation course through his wife at the thought of spending a weekend at the Residence. Kyle briefly glanced over to her and realized that to say "no" here would be somewhat detrimental to his life at home for the next few months.

"We'd be honored to accept, Regent," Kyle replied cordially prompting a smile of appreciation from his wife.

"Good...." the Regent replied, as if his mind was already somewhere else. "Very good, until then."

The three of them remained standing as they watched the Regent depart.

"I believe we should be going as well," Kyle announced to the Speaker.

"Do allow me to escort you to your carriage," Gavril insisted.

"Speaker, just what is the Festival of Plays?" Kyle asked as they made their way to the front of the palace.

Gavril gave him a wry smile. "It's an old Galenan tradition. With a somewhat more modern *Human* twist these days. I'll send information to your office in the morning."

"Thank you," Arcadia replied for the both of them before they entered the carriage.

* * *

The return trip to the shuttle was spent with Kyle's head resting comfortably against Arcadia's shoulder, presumably asleep. Arcadia used this quiet time mulling over the feelings she'd had when the Regent made his mysterious comments about his not being around to take care of his oldest son's follies. The last time she had detected such was a very long time ago.

Arcadia regretted her limited Healing psi abilities. She knew some Healers who could just glance at someone and whip up a spot-on diagnosis... or know that this person was dying. *Not something I'd want to be able to do*, she reflected. But there were times like this when she would prefer to know than to give into idle speculation.

Be that as it may, she wasn't privy to the Regent's medical condition and as such, would cease this line of thinking. However she would let her husband know of her feelings. They both had made a pact after that business with Jasmine of not keeping personal secrets from the other, even if came under the category of gut feelings.

Whatever the outcome, she hoped that if the Regent did need her, he would feel free to call on her at any time.

* * *

"So what do you think, T'Mura?"

The *Clarksdale's* Executive Officer coolly looked down at her Commanding Officer who returned her gaze with one of expectation. "It was a good run, Captain Postlethwaite," she replied.

"Just good? I thought it was bloody well right!" Trevor Postlethwaite exclaimed.

Now that their test run was over, he was gleeful with the idea that his girl was now ready for patrol duty. And he was more than pleased with the idea of showing the lot of them what these so called "toy starships" were capable of.

"This was just a run to test the ship after our repairs, Captain."

"We've passed the tests with flying colors, lass! We've passed them all!"

"Captain, our last encounter was not successful."

Trevor reluctantly nodded his head in agreement. "Aye. We didn't know what we were up against, Tee. And we were lugging the *Akula* with us. Despite that, we made a fine show there." He paused to emphasize his point. "I have faith in our abilities."

"As do I, Captain Postlethwaite."

He'd always appreciated her candor. They'd been together far too long for her to start pulling her punches now. "I realize that you think we're up against a rather large unknown, Tee, but I have faith that Captain Argent will give us the tools we need. He trusts us and I trust him," he declared.

"Speaking of Captain Argent are you not going to be his guest for dinner tonight?"

"Indeed I am, lass!"

"If that is the case, Captain..." T'Mura pointedly raised her arm to glance at her chronometer, "perhaps you might want to prepare for this occasion. I don't think you will impress anyone with your soiled tunic."

Postlethwaite stopped and surveyed himself. His old engineering jumpsuit was so dirty it had taken on a new color. He dared not think how messy his face had become. He glanced at his XO and wondered how, despite their spending the majority of the day mucking about the engines, she'd managed not to get a speck of dirt on her clothing.

"Good idea, lass. I'll just trot along to me cabin, tidy up, then make me way to the gathering."

"Very good, Captain," she acknowledged before they went their separate ways.

* * *

"I hope I'm not too early, Doctor."

Arcadia Argent had opened the door to her quarters and came face to face with a casually dressed, older, balding man with a smile that could light up a night sky.

"Captain Postlethwaite, please come in. Kyle's on the link taking a call and will be with us shortly."

"Thank you." He nervously handed Arcadia a package. "This is for the hostess."

"Why thank you, Captain." She accepted the package and quickly opened it to discover it was a canister of tea.

"When Captain Argent mentioned that you enjoyed hot tea as much as I did," Trevor began, "I thought you'd enjoy a bit of me special blend."

"I shall indeed." Arcadia motioned Trevor to come in and meet the rest of the dinner guests.

"Captain Trevor Postlethwaite, may I introduce, Lieutenant Commander Razi 'Ramrod' Colins, Wing Commander of the 5-0-3, Lieutenant Commander Kieran 'Blackie' Hawthorne, Squadron Commander of the Thirteen and Lieutenant Philemon 'HighLight' Daywalt, Squadron Commander of the Eighteenth."

After exchanging formal greetings, Arcadia suggested that they all sit on the couches in the living room. "Thank you again for the tea, Captain. It is so good to meet a fellow tea drinker. I'm going to serve a rather special blend after dinner. I do believe you'll enjoy it."

"I look forward to it, Doctor!" he replied with gusto while the rest of the guests kept a wary eye towards the newcomer coming towards them.

"Oh... there you are Kyle," Arcadia greeted her husband with a kiss.

Trevor immediately sprung to his feet. "Captain Argent."

"Good evening to you, Captain Postlethwaite," Kyle began, shaking hands with Trevor. "If you'll excuse me it's back to the galley for me to finish up the meal."

Arcadia noticed the confused look on Trevor's face. "Kyle is the one that cooks around here, you'd starve it was left up to me," she enlightened the newcomer.

Trevor shook his head but otherwise stayed silent as he retook his seat and fell into easy conversation until Kyle called everyone to enjoy his efforts.

* * *

They had all mutually though independently decided to talk about anything *but* subjects that started with an 'S': Starfleet, the Space Station or Starships of any kind. However, once the after dinner tea was about to be served, it was a free-for-all.

"When Kyle told me," Arcadia began, placing a fine crystal cup and saucer in front of Trevor, "that you were a fellow tea drinker, I thought you might enjoy

something unusual. This is a special blend of tea called 'Fireblossom'. It has quite the interesting effect..."

They all carefully watched as she poured out the tea. It appeared dark and strong, much like any tea. Suddenly the complexion of the tea began to change -- first at the center then an explosion akin to a star going nova. The color shortly changed from very dark brown to a cardinal red before settling into a soft orange glow.

"*Blimey!*" Trevor exclaimed while the others murmured in kind.

"Try it," she urged but noticed he was reluctant. "I know you prefer yours with sugar but I assure you, you'll enjoy the taste."

Trevor hesitantly brought the crystal cup to his lips and took a small sip. Suddenly, his eyes became bright and he smacked his lips. "This is extraordinary! I've never tasted anything like this!"

"I thought you'd enjoy it, I've never known a tea drinker who didn't," she replied before she sat down again.

Silence fell over the table as everyone savored their tea. Finally, Arcadia spoke up. "How is everyone settling in, Trevor?" He had insisted that she call him Trevor and she opted to oblige him.

"Considering how we came in, limping to port and all, we're doing pretty fair. Took me old girl out on our final test run today and I'm happy with the results. We'll be ready to start our duties in a few days."

"Good to hear," Kyle said.

"Everyone has been very kind to us," Trevor nodded his appreciation towards the flight officers. "We've had a chance to tour your flight deck and see the facilities which, I must tell you, are quite impressive." He paused to take a sip of tea. "In fact, Captain Blair runs a very tight ship, so to speak."

"Yes he does!" Blackie interjected. "But you really missed it when Captain Argent took over as Interim Director. That was before Captain Blair had joined us."

"We learned a lot," RamRod blurted out. He capped off his comment with a hasty grin in Captain Argent's direction.

"Living is a never-ending process of learning, lads," Trevor said before he took another sip of tea. "Young Jo Aubrey of the *Sophie* was amazed at how compliant the crew was when it came to their physicals."

"Really?" Arcadia asked with a distinct smile of triumph on her lips.

"Aye... most pilots she was accustomed to put up a fuss at flight physicals, but not these lads and lasses. She was told that the flight crew didn't dare skip a physical because the CMO would be down on them like a ton of bricks. She was informed that she'd already stood down a squadron for mucking about with the medical staff."

"That's quite correct and I'd do that again." Arcadia made her reply in a firm voice directed at the flight officers who all knew that she meant every word.

HighLight coughed, almost choking on his tea. Suddenly, their eyes met and she gave him a benevolent smile. He sheepishly turned his eyes away in embarrassment because he was the commander of the squadron she had stood down. The other flight officers snickered at HighLight's obvious discomfort, which didn't go unnoticed by Trevor.

"I take it you were the Squadron leader?" Trevor ventured.

Rather than answer him, HighLight simply nodded, his face now displaying a slight rosy glow.

Once again, silence fell upon the table. Arcadia noticed that all the flight officers had become quiet, probably contemplating how to get the conversation back on track. She silently agreed with Trevor that life was a never-ending series of lessons to be learned and she wondered how long it would take them to continue the conversation. As it turned out, she didn't have to wait long.

"Yeah, but she's one of us too!" Blackie tossed out quickly.

"When are you going to fly again, Ladyhawke? Y'know, you gotta keep up those flight hours," HighLight added jovially.

Arcadia watched him quickly glance at the Station Commander whom she knew wasn't logging many hours of late. Kyle simply narrowed eyelids in HighLight's direction. She barely managed to stifle her amusement.

"Two months ago," RamRod illuminated, "Doctor Argent was made an honorary Grandmaster and we gave her the call sign Ladyhawke."

"*Really!*" Trevor exclaimed.

"Yup," Blackie breathlessly continued, "next thing you know, she'll be at Regency Station again before we are."

"Regency Station..." Trevor mumbled, becoming lost in thought. "Oh... the Rigel Cup."

"We have hopes that one of the squadrons from the Grandmaster's is chosen." Blackie added glumly, "I'm not sure we have a chance though."

"There's always a chance," wing commander RamRod sternly interjected to the two young squadron commanders.

Trevor was intrigued by the conversation. "When were you at Regency Station, Doctor?" he asked. "I'm curious because I've heard of the Rigel Cup but in my line of work, there's little opportunity to attend."

"I was assigned there in thirty-seven as the Starfleet Experimental Team's Medical Officer. Besides," she paused briefly to flash a smile at her husband, "We were married there and," she paused again to give Kyle a wicked grin, "Kyle won his fifth solo cup."

Trevor looked over at Kyle with renewed appreciation. "Impressive..." he murmured.

Noticing that Kyle wasn't interested in relating his exploits in the cockpit, Arcadia turned the conversation back to neutral territory. "I'm so glad you're enjoying the tea, gentlemen."

"Oh, aye, Doctor!" Trevor exclaimed.

"Kyle thought pretty much the same thing when I served it to him on the *Stellar Wind*."

Trevor thought for a moment. "Ship that went missing a few years ago?"

"The very same. I invited him to breakfast after he took me on a joy ride in a Nighthawk simulator," Arcadia glanced at Kyle with a distinct twinkle in her eye, "to see if I would lose my lunch."

"I was the Squadron Commander at the time," Kyle replied giving Arcadia a slight scowl at her additional commentary. "We were upgraded to a Wing a year later."

"Didn't know science ships had fighters on board," Trevor wondered aloud. "When did this 'appen?"

Arcadia grimaced. "It was a special program and believe me, I was quite surprised when *they* showed up."

Trevor frowned in Arcadia's direction. "Why were you surprised?"

"I was the Commanding Officer," she replied coolly.

"*Oh!*" Trevor exclaimed, obviously caught short by this information. "CO of a ship of the line? I'm... I'm impressed..." he stumbled.

"We thought it would be a might confusing to have two 'Captain Argents' trotting about, besides, I really wanted to be doctor again." She smiled before she finished up the last of her tea. "Would you lot care for another cup?"

"I'd think I'd better." Trevor gladly took another spot of tea, leaving the other guests to smile in bemusement.

"I'm curious about something," Kyle directed his question to Trevor.

"Yes, Captain?" Trevor replied.

"I'm curious about the how the *Sophie* got her name."

"I was wondering about that too," a flight officer piped up.

Trevor chuckled. "You're not the only one, Captain. It isn't exactly the typical name for a perimeter action ship." He paused to sip the newly poured tea. "I don't know the exact details but one of me mates told me that the engineer used his ex-girlfriend's name for the work in progress. Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your point of view, the real name of the ship was never registered."

"I've heard of ships named for the engineer's dog, so that isn't *too* unusual," Arcadia mused.

"True enough, Doctor, but in this particular case, the recipient wasn't too keen on the notion."

"Why?" Blackie pondered aloud. "If I could name my Nighthawk after my girlfriend, I'd *really* score."

The men at the table chuckled in appreciation.

"I'll have to keep that in mind," Arcadia grinned, "assuming I ever managed to buy my own fighter." She gave Kyle a wink and was rewarded by a subtle arching of his eyebrow.

"Aye, lad. That would be true but Ms Sophie was the *ex-* and decided to exact revenge. She convinced the dockmaster to allow her to paint the PA a bright pink before the christening ceremony."

"So? Most of the PAs have unique color schemes," RamRod pointed out.

"Aye, but this was a sickening bright pink. Pink enough to cause most men to cringe in fear."

"She's not pink now," Blackie replied.

"After all the complaints, the dockmaster took it upon himself to have the ship repainted. But her first CO decided to keep the name *Sophie* because it was her grandmum's name."

Arcadia stood up. "May I suggest that you gentlemen retire into the sitting room? Since Kyle cooks, I always clean. Besides, Boffin said he might bring over a little something from the *Blue's* special stock."

"Best damn port on the station!" Kyle declared as he rose and motioned his guests to follow him.

* * *

"Sorry I'm late, Mam'selle," Boffin began, walking into the Argent's quarters. "A bit of extra business required my attention."

"Cut the chat. *We Want the Port!*" Kyle bellowed from the living room. This action caused Arcadia to whip her head around and glare at her husband. Boffin on the other hand, simply held out the bottle as an offer to the angry lord of this manor and was promptly relieved of it by one of Argent's flying minions.

Once the lord was appeased, Arcadia turned her attention back to Boffin and noticed the look of concern on his face. "Everything going well with *Serenade in Blue?*"

Before Boffin had a chance to respond, a pilot presented Boffin with a glass of port. It was only then that Arcadia introduced Boffin to her guests after which he finally addressed her question.

"Oh... no worries there, Mam'selle. Despite the Marines pulling a number forty-two the other week..." Boffin paused to grimace, still rather annoyed about the statue, "the *Blue* is doing better than I could have expected. It is making me pots of money. It's just that I've decided to diversify." Boffin walked out towards the middle of the living room to stare at Trevor. "I'm going into the import-export business... That is, assuming our new PAs can manage to keep the spacelanes free of pirate interference."

Upon the not-so-subtle challenge, Captain Trevor Postlethwaite immediately sprung to his feet to meet Boffin at eye-level. "Aye, Mister Gateway. That's what we're here for and that's what we will do, by George!" he declared before he once again took his seat.

Boffin didn't react except to take a sip of his port and find a comfortable place to sit down. He held up his glass and slished the contents around. "'Tis rather comforting to know that there are plenty of us good ol' blokes on this station who know how to appreciate a good port. Truly a drink for a person of refinement and taste."

Arcadia chuckled. "Keep in mind that taste and refinement were not exactly two qualities associated with Mister Gateway when he was my yeoman."

"Considering what I learned this evening, Doctor, I'm not surprised." Trevor's reply was accompanied by a wave of chuckling from the other guests. He took another sip of port. "Mister Gateway, as I told the Captain here, our ships may not be the newest in the 'fleet and our crews may not be that much to look at but every one of us *wants* to be here. And the lot of us want nothing more then to kick every last Orion bastard back to wherever they come from."

Boffin took a moment to size Captain Postlethwaite up. There was no doubt the man believed every word he had just said. But it was easy to talk the talk. Could he walk the walk?

"I appreciate your conviction, Captain, but that isn't going to keep me from losing everything that I've just invested in getting my business going if your motley collection of antiques can't get the job done."

"Mister Gateway, I spent much of my career on ships just like those four we got here. Saw many a good man killed by enemies that would make a ruddy bunch of Orions look like lapdogs. We fought border skirmishes with renegade Klingons back in twelve and we thrashed three D7s with a force same as what we got here. The conviction you may lack in our abilities, I've paid for in blood, sweat and tears, aye... If you sell us short, then the only thing you are doing is rejecting a prime opportunity for making profits. Now, then, if you ask me, that

sort of statement says an awful lot more about *your* ability as a business man than whatever you may think of me and my squadron!"

Boffin began to blush after having been soundly put in his place. For the moment, he was at a loss for a proper comeback. At least he was now reasonably certain that Postlethwaite could walk the walk -- though perhaps next time it would be nice if he didn't trod all over him.

"Besides," Kyle interjected, "the Perimeter Action Squadron will continue to be augmented with at least one flight of fighters per convoy. It is difficult to believe that *any* ship could have been less effective than what we've been offering up so far."

Boffin watched the three pilots fall quiet on this imagined slight.

"For what it's worth," Kyle concluded, "I have every confidence in Captain Postlethwaite's abilities."

Boffin turned and looked squarely at Kyle before he settled his eyes on Trevor. "If the Captain here thinks you can do the job, you have my faith as well. I've *never* lost betting on him." He leaned back in his chair, sloshed the port around in the glass, and flicked his eyes towards Trevor. "So tell me, Captain Postlethwaite, just how would you address our little trading problem?"

Trevor Postlethwaite appeared to consider the question before replying with one of his own. "Have either of you gentlemen ever heard of A. T. Mahan?"

* * *

"...*Dagmar* Class Freighters," Kyle continued to Boffin now that they were alone in Kyle's office. "Captain Hallstrom managed to unload the cargo he was hauling. He took some damage in the Orion attack but since it came up in the Station Registers that he had concealed weaponry of dubious legality installed, he hasn't been able to get another contract. I suspect he might go bankrupt soon."

Boffin gave Kyle a cautious look. "A smuggler then? Well, it's best for those lads to stay in the gray, as it were. But I don't see how sticking up for a suspected smuggler falls under the purview of your job."

"He happens to be a longtime freighter captain for Argent House who decided to strike out on his own. To be honest, the freighters he runs are not at all unlike the ones we commonly use." Kyle paused before continuing. "I did check out his company records and there was nothing but praise in his file. 'Unhappy to see him go' and such. But more importantly, he bailed out some of our

fighters a couple of months ago rather than let them get shot up. It's that kind of behavior that drew my attention. He's a good man and he deserves what little help I can give him."

"I'm surprised Roscoe didn't run across them...." Boffin mused aloud.

"I'm not. People in his line of work don't put up signs announcing 'Have Q-ship, will travel'."

"Ah..." Boffin chuckled knowing that a merchant ship CO who has augmented his ship with illegal weaponry would be reluctant to broadcast any of his woes. "So why are you telling me this?"

Kyle paused to stare at him. "Just how serious are you?"

"Very much so," Boffin said, tossing off Kyle's extremely intense stare. "I've looked at the yield charts for last season. The profit rates of twelve percent per run versus a two percent upkeep, maintenance and repair shows there is very good profit potential here. With the right outfit, one could make a tidy bundle..."

"How are you proposing to finance this startup of yours?"

"I've managed to consolidate all my liquid assets and have arranged for credit lines on much of my personal properties. Going by the figures, I've just about enough to make a go of it, though it might be a bit dicey at first."

Kyle hesitated a moment before he spoke. "A tip, then."

"A tip?" Boffin cautiously echoed. "I imagine such a tip would require that I repay you at some point?"

"Indeed. And you might start by perhaps giving Captain Postlethwaite some consideration."

"How so?"

"Not many are signing on to run out towards Red Omega sector, figuring that it's even money that with PA's or no PA's, they will like be shot up."

Boffin nodded.

"In the meantime, we've got cargo piling up on the docks and expeditors itching to pay top cred for any bulk freighters willing to make the run on a regular basis." Kyle stopped and looked at Boffin for a reaction.

Boffin knew where Kyle was going and momentarily closed his eyes to silently mull it all over. The chance for quick profit was certainly there. But if the freighters were damaged, he could be out on his ear just as quickly. Being known Q-ships, no reputable insurance agency was likely going to underwrite them. But still... "What sort of yield are we talking about?" Boffin asked finally.

"When I left the office this evening we had four gigatons at twenty-two percent and about three gigs at eighteen to twenty percent."

Boffin's eyes grew wide while he licked his lips at the prospect. He knew that regular yield on fixed bulk cargo was 12%. Sometimes one could get as much as 15% with performance incentives. With the standard bulk freight ton trading at 50 credits or so...

"What is capacity on those two freighters and what routes are we talking about?"

"About 500 megatons for both and the standard Niffelheim-Nexus-Qu'bat loop"

Boffin quickly did the math. That was nearly 5.5 million credits per run! He was reasonably certain that on a rigorous schedule, he could easily do 2 runs per week. If he could contract for the full load of goods currently on the docks, he could recoup the 40 million he had slated for investment -- in only 8 runs! *Eight runs on a route that currently boasted a 1-in-3 casualty rate*, he considered grimly but decided to allow Kyle to finish his pitch. "So, if I do this, what's in it for you?"

"Nothing, really. However, I will put all four Perimeter Action Craft at the disposal of anyone willing to make this run."

Boffin sat back. *So that was the guv'nors game!* If the convoys make it, it would vindicate the PA Squadron and boost trading confidence thereby getting the *Nexus* and Galenan economies back on track.

"...And not to mention two flights of fighters," Kyle added.

Boffin's eyes grew wide. Eight fighters instead of the usual four -- Kyle was leaving nothing to chance. *However*, mused Boffin, *there was one wee hitch to all of this*. "How many people know about this plan of yours?"

"Me, my yeoman, and my Chief of Staff. It's not due to be announced until tomorrow afternoon."

Boffin felt his face break into a broad smile. "It's a good thing you are not a gambling man, guv'nor."

"Why is that?"

"I don't think there would be a casino from here to Rigel that would let someone who plays like you do get past the front door and--"

They were interrupted by a tap on the door. Arcadia stuck her head in.

"Finished saving the universe?" his wife cheerfully interrupted. "Our other guests are departing and I thought you might want to bid them a good evening."

Both men walked out of Kyle's office.

"Thank you for inviting us, sir," RamRod began for all the flight officers.

"Our pleasure, RamRod." Arcadia shook the pilot's hands and watched them leave before she turned to her two other remaining guests. "Trevor, I do hope you've enjoyed yourself."

"I have indeed, Doctor and I must say, you are quite the lady..."

"I know, Captain, after all, I married her," Kyle chuckled, warmly shaking Trevor's hand.

"Aye," he responded, "and I can see why. Thank you again, Arcadia," Trevor turned to Kyle, "Captain... For a splendid evening."

"Thank you for coming Trevor," Arcadia replied before she shut the door. She turned and looked towards the lone remaining guest. "Can you stay a while longer, Boffin?"

"I'm afraid not, Mam'selle." He paused and tossed a glance Kyle's way. "I have business that can't wait."

Arcadia gave him a small frown but opened the door just the same. "In that case, have a good evening."

"I shall, Mam'selle. Good night guv'nor."

* * *

"Boffin, you look like stale Bantha dung."

Boffin peered up at his erstwhile intruder with eyes that were heavy with fatigue, yet were intrigued. "What's a Bantha?"

"Uh...never mind," Roscoe stammered. "It was practically another lifetime ago."

"Well..." Boffin began, unsuccessfully stifling a yawn. "We've got more pressing matters. Gareth, we're in business!"

Roscoe didn't immediately answer. A familiar but unlikely smell wafting around the office suddenly assaulted him. "Since when did *you* start drinking Irish Coffee?"

"Last night. I've been up all night, actually."

"You?" Roscoe asked with some confusion as he sat down in front of Boffin's desk.

"It's a long story..." Boffin started, but first, downed a gulp of coffee and grimaced. "I've purchased a Captain Hallstrom's license along with his two freighters -- and their debtload for that matter. But regardless of that, we also have a contract to haul three gigatons in six trips on the Niffelheim-Nexus-Qu'bat loop -- at twenty-two point five percent."

Roscoe blinked in astonishment. "You want to run that by me again?"

Boffin put up his hand. "No time for that. You've just been appointed the new corporate liaison, so you'd best be on your way. Hallstrom says he'll be ready to put out in about twenty hours."

"OK..." he replied obviously still trying to digest the previous information. "And that means exactly what?"

"You get to travel with the ships, of course."

Roscoe stared at Boffin for a few moments. "*You're shitting me, right?*" Roscoe bellowed. "You just didn't spend a good part of two weeks hearing all kinds of crap -- I did! It's a freakin' deathtrap! Does a one in three casualty rate have any significant meaning to you? It does to me!"

"Gareth," Boffin calmly began, "would I put you on a ship that I knew would cause you any sort of harm?"

Roscoe paused for a moment, giving his response a careful amount of deliberation. "In a word -- yes!"

Boffin cleared his throat. "Well, true... But I'd make sure that Ayesha was well taken care of."

"Riiight...." Roscoe retorted with dripping sarcasm. "Forget about it. No way. This is a no-brainer. Trust me. There is simply no way in hell that I'm doing this for you..."

"We've been promised a heavy escort by the Station Commander himself, if that will help you reconsider..."

"*Excuse me!*" Roscoe snapped indignantly, "What part of '*No way in hell*' did you not understand?"

Boffin's eyes narrowed. "I'll give you one percent off of the gross."

Roscoe's eyes widened. "The gross?" he repeated, licking his lips until they were raw.

"Indeed -- twenty-two point five percent on the haul. Almost six million creds a trip and your share would come to about sixty thousand." Boffin leaned back and smiled. "You can buy a lot of gloves and ointment with that sort of quid."

"One and a half," Roscoe calmly tossed back.

"*Sold!*"

"You realize, I would have settled for one point two five...."

Boffin shrugged his shoulders. "I would have given you two percent."

Boffin chose not to mention that the contract in fact gave him 25% of the gross yield. He had managed to haggle the extra 2.5% out in anticipation of expending them on various bribes and payoffs, such as the one he had just offered. Once he got the proper scent of money, it would be much easier to get Gareth to take a much more advantageous contract later on. Advantageous for Boffin, anyway.

"What now?"

"Report to Captain Hallstrom at Berth 4-3-9 within the hour and..."

Boffin proceeded to give him chapter and verse as to what he was going to do. When he was done, Roscoe stood up and gave his boss a solemn nod.

"There's one thing that I admire about you, Bof. When you make up your mind, you don't screw around."

"You know what the old saying is, Gareth, about the early bird getting the worm."

"What about haste makes waste?" he tossed back.

Boffin smiled. "What about, he who safely makes it through the Niffelheim-Nexus-Qu'bat loop right about now, controls commerce in the Obsidian System?"

* * *

Roscoe calmly contemplated his future as he made his way to the docking area. All these sudden plans left him just enough time to dash home and pack a small bag. Luckily, Ayesha wasn't home and he was spared having to explain to her in person what he was up to.

Ever since Boffin had gone legit and stopped gambling full time, Roscoe's pipeline of money now ran at a trickle. Between his previous boozing, Ayesha's current demand to be kept in a certain lifestyle (which was much higher than it used to be -- that was for damn well sure!), and despite her stipend as a fighter pilot, his finances had gotten a bit tight. He was still a few years shy of going broke, but at this rate, that was pretty inevitable. But there indeed was a lot of ointment to be had for 360,000 credits. The trick was to somehow stay alive to spend it all...

On the other hand, there was the Boffin Factor as Roscoe had come to think of it. Roscoe had known Boffin back on the old *Stellar Wind* and hadn't thought much of him at the time. He'd been a good person to have a drink and a laugh with but Roscoe never thought he'd ever come to this: whatever Boffin laid his hands on turned to pure gold.

Might as well go along for the ride and reap the benefits, he thought. Or die trying. Besides, what's that old latin phrase? Fortes fortuna juvat... Fortune Favors the Brave. Yeah, that's the ticket. We'll be brave and fortune will be ours.

* * *

"OK, listen up, folks!"

Lieutenant Commander Kavindra "Avalanche" Courage had decided to start the briefing on a strong note. This was her first major mission since the unfortunate business a few months ago and she was determined to do her best.

Besides, Captain Blair had faith in her and she wasn't going to let him down. What she needed to do was convince the rest of them that his faith in her wasn't misplaced.

"As you all know," she continued, softening her tone just a touch, "our latest mission outline calls for us to set up a 'Heavy' flight for some escorts out into Red Omega."

The mention of said location drew a few jeers from the attendees, which Avalanche interpreted as a sign of high morale. She hoped that it would stay that way for the remainder of the briefing.

"In order to accomplish this task, I was asked to assemble a joint unit out of elements of my Ninety-third and the Thirteenth."

The audience remained quietly attentive and Avalanche interpreted this as another good sign. So far, they had accepted her authority and were willing to see what comes next. Good...

"I think all of you are well acquainted with one another, so we'll dispense with introductions. Let's get right to the business at hand. Hawk?"

Neville "Hawk" Takagi, the senior tactical officer of the 206th Wing stepped up to the podium to continue the briefing while Avalanche retook her seat.

"For reasons unbeknownst to anyone," Hawk paused momentarily to wait out the good-natured suggestions consisting of 'Bribes!' and 'A pact with the forces of evil!', "a new trade consortium has stepped forward and announced their intention to run the Niffelheim loop. Our job, as always, is to see that they get there and back again. To this end, we will be utilizing the four units for the Thirteenth in a Space Superiority Role. The four units from the Ninety-third will bring along the heavy ordinance -- just in case we run into something a little bit more unfriendly than a stray Orion fighter."

This was met with universal nods. This mission profile would play to the strengths of both units and their respective roles. This was as Avalanche had planned it and so far, the audience was favorable to the idea.

"Neville, I think that Commander Deveraux has a question," Avalanche smoothly pointed out, not wishing to upstage her tactical officer.

"What?" Hawk blurted out having obviously lost his place in his extensive notes. "Oh... of course. Commander Deveraux?"

"Is it my understanding," the former Marine squadron commander began in her noticeable Vaegan accent, "that we are to escort a convoy for the duration of the entire Nexus-Qu'brat-Niffelheim Loop? That is, what?" She paused to calculate, "three days with nearly fifty-four hours of flight time and--"

"I'm glad you brought that up, Commander," Avalanche replied noting that Hawk was still trying to find the relevant section in his notes. "As you may or may not know, we've recently been given a task force of starships."

"Toy Starships" rang out from the peanut gallery. Avalanche simply used her eyes and ears to seek out the ringleader. She directed an intense glare squarely at Ensign Dallenbach who responded by slumping in his seat.

"Starships specifically designed to do battle with Orions, I might add," Avalanche picked up her comment having dispatched her evil eye upon the young ensign. "They will be with us for the duration of the mission and will allow two of our craft to dock and spell the crew at any given time." Noting that she had no further interruptions, she continued. "Our flight schedule will require that everyone fly three twelve hour stints with three hour breaks in between. We will also have two eight-hour breaks at Qu'brat and Niffelheim, respectively. It won't be easy on any of us, but it should be enough to keep everyone sharp."

"Additionally..." she paused and unconsciously ran her fingernails against the ends of her fingertips, "the Perimeter Action Craft will be able to allow us to project a considerably upgraded tactical advantage if we indeed come up against the same forces we've encountered previously."

"What if we don't?" Ravyn MacRae tossed out matter-of-factly.

"I think the point is that in any situation we might encounter," Hawk noted, picking up on Avalanche's thoughts, "we're better off for having the PACs and their additional firepower along than not."

There was a general buzz and nodding heads of the assembled pilots and tactical officers.

Avalanche quietly sucked in a deep breath. This was as good a time as any to bring up what she had figured would be the most contentious issue of them all this morning. "And just in case we do in fact come up against our old friends, I've ordered that the standard heavy ordinance will be Mark II spec Lancer missiles."

"*You can't be serious!*" Roadrunner Benson squawked. "If we take the prancers along, we might as well sign our death warrants now!"

Avalanche felt her back arch with tension. She had expected descent on this one. The Mark II's were, in almost every regard, considered inferior to the missile system they had replaced. Whereas, the original Lancer would impact with almost indiscriminate force, the Mark II was considered to be a weapon of refinement aimed at a ship's vital system. The first stage detonation, in theory, was supposed to collapse a small section of the ship's shields through which the accelerated mass of the second stage would be hurled and thus impact with precision guidance into a ship's vitals and disabling said vitals. That was the theory, anyway.

In practice, however, the missile had, more often than not, lost all guidance upon igniting its second stage resulting in the somewhat justifiable "prancer" moniker. Even though all this was supposed to be fixed by now, confidence in the missile system was virtually nil. About as high, Avalanche mused, as the assembled flight personnel seem to have in their nominal commander right about now.

"Still trying to kill us after all, I guess," someone from the back mumbled just a little too loudly.

This comment brought Avalanche up short. She assumed her decision would be controversial but it was all too evident that some reputations die a slow and painful death.

"With all due respect," Scott Nakamura began to his comrades, "I happen to think this is not such a bad idea. I've gone toe-to-toe with some of our Orion friends and I know for a fact that their craft are shielded better than even most small starships and maneuverable enough to decoy any of the big boomers we might throw at them. I've seen them do it. If we take them out with a Mark I, it'll be because their crews are either stupid or unlucky. And quite frankly, banking on one of those two things happening is pre-supposing an awful lot."

"Thank you Ensign Nakamura," Avalanche replied, grateful for his unexpected support, especially considering the fact that she still felt a pang of guilt at the way she'd treated him a few months ago. "The fact of the matter is that we *will* be in space for at least fifty plus hours. There will *not* be any reloads. No motherships, no friendly outposts. No nothing. If we were to bring along conventional ordinance, we could at best sustain one wave of engagement until our warheads would be mostly depleted. Personally, I do not think that if our Orion friends make an appearance, they will be alone. It's logical to assume they have reinforcements near by, and if they do, we cannot afford to be caught with our heavy artillery exhausted. We might as well be flying targets for whoever comes along next. Make no mistake, every single time you lock on to enemy you are under strict orders to fire *one* missile and *one* missile only. If it

misses then that's a victory for them and a loss for us -- plain and simple. It is my intention to target bridge, engine systems only, and stop these motherfuckers dead in their tracks. *Period.*"

After her pronouncement, Avalanche became silent, allowing her eyes to sweep the room and noticed that her detractors had suddenly gone silent. She decided that she needed to sweeten the pot a little. She stood up and walked over to the podium; Hawk gracefully moved aside.

"Look... every single one of you was chosen based on your performance and abilities in previous missions. The lot of you has shown singular ability to knock the opposition out of the sky and do so with the least amount of ordinance necessary. When we go out there, we go out there as a team. And it will require a certain modicum of trust on behalf of all of us to realize that one's personal fate may very well rest upon the abilities of the person next to them. Now I have faith in what our ordinance officer tells us about the Mark II's ability. I have faith that once properly instructed, every one of you will do exactly what is expected. But most importantly I have faith in your abilities to make this mission plan work for us. Otherwise, it would have never been conceived at all." She paused, her eyes sweeping the audience. She put a hard edge on her voice. "If any one of you feels that mounting Mark I's is the way to go, you're free to do so. And you're also free to find yourself another patrol assignment. Do I make myself clear?"

Avalanche looked around and noticed that everyone was slowly nodding his or her heads in agreement. "Would anyone like to leave at this point and time?" she pointedly asked. She was pleased to note that no one stood to leave.

"Very well," she replied, somewhat more relaxed now that she felt she'd won them over -- for this round, anyway. "We're scheduled to ship out in two-hours time. I would suggest that we hurry up and complete this briefing. Hawk?"

Hawk retook the podium and began to go over various details of the mission such as waypoints and flight rotation while Avalanche having retaken her chair was barely listening. She had managed to take on the first hurdle and clear it. She just hoped that her ordinance decision didn't turn out to be the colossal mistake everyone expected it to be. On the other hand, none of them would be around to call her on it if it did fail.

* * *

"We've been in business for three weeks now and I still don't understand why you felt it necessary to go on this last trip."

Boffin shrugged his shoulders and plopped his weary body into his chair. "I just wanted to see what it was like, was that a problem?"

"Of course not!" Roscoe barked with a bitter edge to his voice. "Let *me* take the risks on the initial runs--"

Boffin interrupted him. "You were well paid for your efforts, were you not?"

"Yeah.... well.... So why did you go this time?"

Boffin thoughtfully rubbed his chin a few times. "I wanted to see Hallstrom in action. When we expand..." He paused when he noted the look on Gareth's face, "and we *will* expand our operations, I want Hallstrom in on it."

Roscoe finally flopped down in his usual chair in front of Boffin's large desk. "Yeah, I can see that. Trust me when I tell you that Hallstrom's an all right guy. Doesn't like to talk much but knows his shit."

"Think he'd consider an administrative job?"

"Naw... he likes it out there. A desk job would kill him."

"Too bad," sighed Boffin, "he'd make an excellent administrator."

"I'd rather have a happy pilot than an unhappy administrator no matter how good he is."

"Can't argue with that, Gareth." Boffin leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "Anything interesting happen while I was gone?"

"Club's doing ok, no problems. Heard a rumor that one of the exporter's who is living on the edge is gonna chance a go without much of an escort."

Boffin's body snapped up straight in his chair. "*Are they mad!*"

"Either that or nearly bankrupt. But apparently Griffin Export is going to take their chances."

"That's bloody insanity!"

"Can't argue with that, Bof. They smell money. Let's face it, we've had several good runs and this overrode any resemblance of sanity on their part. When they were told they'd only have one Perimeter Action Ship escort with two fighters, they said it was good enough for them."

Boffin grimaced. "And they underbid us too, the sods. With a smaller force like that, their convoy will seem a lot more attractive to anyone who may be out there lurking."

"Agreed. But keep in mind that if the PACs get pulled off of our convoy details, we'll become more vulnerable too. Griffin is running slightly under 100 kilotons. We're hauling five times that. Makes *us* just that much more of an attractive target..."

"Well... keep in mind we're not exactly defenseless.... However..." Boffin pointedly looked at him, "don't try and be heroic on this next run. Save the cargo, that's what pays our bills, Gareth."

"I know, Bof. Remember, I've been shot at. I have no interest in a repeat performance."

* * *

After several weeks of frowning, the Station Commander found that he actually had a smile on his face when he had kissed his wife goodbye this morning before departing for the office. Unfortunately, the smile quickly melted into his usual frown once he had reached his destination and scanned the morning update.

"I don't like this at all," Captain Kyle Argent grumbled to his Chief of Staff.

"I can't say that I blame, you, Captain," Jefferson replied quietly.

Kyle angrily tapped the datapadd sitting on his desk. "As soon as we scaled back our escorts, our convoys became targets again. This is unacceptable."

Jefferson shrugged. "Griffin Export took their risks and came up short, sir."

"Along with both of our fightercraft."

Kyle was disgusted. After he had given Boffin that tip at the dinner party -- what he had done was at best unethical and at worst almost criminal -- Boffin had turned a quick profit while getting the station's shipping back on track. Had Boffin not succeeded, the whole trade system could have been in peril. Few people had seen the trade projections he had seen. If they had, they might have agreed with his assessment. Desperate times required desperate measures. All things considered at a time where breaks were few and far between, Boffin's sudden interest in hauling freight had saved Kyle from prostrating himself before that miserable prick Orumoff. Besides, Boffin had been used to making a coin or two by betting on him. So now it time for Kyle to put his chips on Mr.

Gateway and hope that Boffin's number came up. But this kind of action is perilous at best and the problem was, it could all come crashing down on them at any moment. Perhaps the time was now...

"On the bright side, Captain, I suppose we should note that the Perimeter Action Crafts have performed exceptionally well. The freighter captain credits their decisive action in allowing to pull out with only one ship lost."

"Be that as it may, we might as well be back at square one," Kyle pointed out. "No one is likely to venture out knowing we can *not* adequately support all of them *all* the time. It's time for plan 'B'."

"Plan 'B', sir?"

Kyle began to outline the idea tossed out the other night after dinner. When he was finished, he looked towards his Chief of Staff for an opinion.

Jefferson smiled. "Operation Jutland it is, Captain."

* * *

Arcadia left her job early to empty out her closets and sort through her clothing. She compared and contrasted fabrics and designs in an attempt to determine what she should bring with her. After all, they were to spend two days at the Regent's personal Residence attending the Festival of Plays.

She knew that Kyle wasn't exactly thrilled with the prospect of yet another official trip to Galena. However, he'd given his word and as he put it, despite the problems with the Orions, it wouldn't do for him to appear overly concerned and cancel his plans. Personally, if *she* were the commander, she would have stayed. But she wasn't going to start giving him advice on how to run *his* Station -- except when it came to medical issues, she added with a sly grin.

But that still didn't help her make up her mind concerning what to pack for this trip. She had finally decided on a few simple but conservative monocolored long flowing skirts, blouses, and vests. She'd never seen any Galenan women wearing pants and quick check with the protocol office indicated that the upper crust ladies preferred long skirts.

While in the midst of deciding which pair of shoes to bring, Kyle breezed into their bedroom, gave her a peck on the cheek before plowing headlong into his appointed task.

Knowing that he was an expert in such matters, she aside what she was doing to pull out her chronometer and stopped to watch the master at work. He

proceeded to grab several shirts, pants, fighter corps vest, shoes, underwear -- for some reason, he did take some extra time to select his briefs -- and toiletries. With military precision, he rolled up the clothing and put them in the bag; the toiletries were scattered amongst the rolled clothing for protection. He was about to close the bag when he decided at the last moment to take an extra shirt. He quickly rolled the shirt and stuffed it on the top. He snapped the bag shut with a flourish before giving her a snappy salute.

Not saying a word, she checked her chronometer; it took him exactly ten minutes.

Now that his task was completed, he settled himself on the bed opposite her, resting his back against the headrest with his hands secured behind his head. Catching her eye, he flashed her a bright grin.

Noting his smile of accomplishment, she frowned and dutifully went back to finalizing her selection.

"You realize," he finally said as she carefully rolled up the last of her shirts, "that we aren't going on a military campaign, just a short visit."

"With the *Regent* of Galena at an official event!" she snapped.

"Tsk... you were the one that wanted to go," he tossed out, continuing to watch the spectacle of his wife packing for a "short" trip.

She gave brief consideration to flexing her talons and scratching that smug look off of his face before paused and gave him a benign smile. "Did you pack the protection?"

"Protection? Why?"

She had moved away from her packing to sit next to him on the bed, all the while giving in him a wicked grin. "Well... I just thought..." she sensuously began to stroke his chin with two fingers, either of which threatened to pop a talon at any moment, "that perhaps you wouldn't want to cause a diplomatic incident by my shredding any bedding we were provided." She stopped and shrugged. "Perhaps you would prefer to remain celibate during our trip..." she purposely allowed her voice to trail off, capping off her response by batting her eyes in his direction.

Kyle abruptly sat up to rummage through his nightstand. "*Damnation!*" he bellowed.

"Problem?"

"I can't find the finger caps!"

Arcadia was once again back to packing. "Well," she began with a distinct hint of forced sorrow tingeing her voice, "I guess it is celibacy for us. That's too bad. I heard that the room has a hot tub..."

Kyle gave her a panicked look before a glimmer of hope washed over his face. "I trust you've taken care of it then?"

She sought out a small velvet box that was buried deep in her travel bag. Locating her quarry, she pulled it out and shook it, producing a distinct rattling sound.

"All ten?"

"Yes, *I* had spares. I'd still like to know how *you* managed to lose one..." she paused to watch Kyle fidget about in an attempt to come up with a plausible explanation.

"I was preoccupied."

"I know..." she smiled, grabbing the rest of his attention by sensuously licking her lips.

Her action didn't go unnoticed by Kyle. He quickly glanced at his chronometer. In one swift motion, he jumped off of the bed, rushed over to the other side. He hurled Arcadia's small packing case across the room before grabbing her as he jumped back on the bed, pulling her on top of him.

* * *

"Sorry we are late, sir," Kyle said apologetically to the Regent.

"That's quite all right, Captain Argent. Nothing formal is planned for this evening -- just a light buffet supper and engaging conversation, if you are so inclined. After all, we have a busy day tomorrow."

Arcadia could tell that Kyle was grateful that the Regent had chosen not to notice the small but deep scratch that bisected his right cheek. Only through superhuman strength did she manage to muffle the urge to laugh out loud at Kyle's obvious discomfort. And she was sure that he was *quite* uncomfortable.

Besides, it wasn't her fault. It was his idea to suddenly take some time out for a horizontal maneuver this afternoon only to find that they'd spent so much time

in this endeavor, they barely had enough time to dump the rest of her things into her bag and make a mad dash for the shuttle. She suggested that he request a point-to-point beam out but he told her that he didn't want to use his authority for essentially a personal trip. That left them running at full tilt to the shuttle bay, dodging and weaving their way through the crowds. She had no doubt that even as she stood there on Galena, there were all kinds of stories about how the Station Commander was dragging a laughing woman through the Station while his face was bleeding. As it was, they were still 30 minutes late. With her medkit stashed in the back of the shuttle out of easy reach, she couldn't take care of the gash she'd left. Consequently, here he was, having to face the Regent with an obvious remnant of their afternoon delight.

"Your baggage will shortly be in your rooms. Why don't you join us for a bite to eat? We were just having dessert."

"We are sorry to have interrupted you, Your Majesty," Arcadia apologized hastily.

"Oh, no need, Doctor," he replied with a glint in his eyes. "I'm sure you both had a good reason."

Not trusting herself not to laugh out loud at either Kyle's concern or the Regent's supposed lack of same, she soberly grabbed for Kyle's arm. They followed the Regent into the dining room where they both were shown a place to sit. They spent the rest of the evening in delightful conversation until the Regent decided it was time to break up the party and leave everyone to their own devices for the rest of the evening.

"Perhaps we should make an early night of it," Kyle mumbled under his breath while they were being escorted to their quarters.

"As you wish," she replied evenly.

"The Regent," their personally assigned maid informed them, "thought that you would enjoy this suite and he hopes you will consider it your home away from home when you are here."

She opened the double doors and stood back, allowing the couple to walk in and survey their new surroundings.

Arcadia guessed that the suite was twice the size of their entire *Nexus* quarters, which up until now, she had considered more than adequate. It consisted of a sitting room decorated in brown and orange tones. It had several comfortable looking chairs with a couch opposite. In the corner was a desk with comlink. On

the opposite side of the room was a small table and four chairs, complete with a fully stocked bar and replicator.

Another door led to the bedroom whose color scheme was that of greens and blues. There was a large four-poster bed in the corner, several chairs that surrounded a large window overlooking the lake and two large well-stocked dressing tables. Arcadia was keenly interested in looking in the closet. She suspected it was larger than their entire bedroom back on *Nexus*.

Once they were settled, the maid left them alone. Arcadia proceeded to unpack but suddenly changed her mind and peered into the bathroom -- the one room that the maid didn't personally show them. Obviously, the Galenans considered that room to be one of privacy. She opened the door and walked down a small hallway that held two sinks on one side with deck to ceiling mirrors on the opposite. This foyer was decorated in sea-green and white. Another doorway led to another small area also in various shades of green with a shower built for two or more. On the right, a door to the left held the commode and in the center of the room, near a large window, was a large sunken bathtub.

"It's not a hot tub," she sighed casually, "but I believe it will do."

"I think so."

"I need to go back and unpack." She began to leave when she noticed that Kyle was looking longingly after her. "I need to hang up my clothing. After all the time I spent choosing the right outfits, I am *not* about to appear looking like the cat had just dragged me in tomorrow."

Kyle stuck his hands in his pocket and kicked at the thick dark green rug, which surrounded the tub.

Arcadia leaned against the tiled wall with her arms crossed having just decided that her husband looked utterly adorable with that pout on his face. "Tell you what," she conceded. "Help me unpack and I'll make it worth your while. Deal?"

There was no need for an answer; his grin was all the acknowledgement she needed.

* * *

"I *still* think this plan is highly illogical," the Executive Officer of the *Clarksdale* stated coolly, her arms crossed defiantly.

They'd spent the last few days going over every aspect of the operation and even though they were now in the midst of it, there were some nagging doubts.

"Hush, T'Mura! It's a right-proper plan, if I dare say so meself," Captain Trevor Postlethwaite chastised his ever-so-logical XO with infinite calm. "It uses our craft to the best of her abilities and that's all I ever asked for."

He decided to keep to himself the fact that the plan was in fact based on his own ideas. It would most likely make Tee only that much more interested in arguing the illogical nature of it all. He never thought his idle after-dinner speculation would be taken so seriously. But that's exactly what had happened when Captain Argent had given him two days to iron out the logistics before promptly departing on holiday.

Trevor still wasn't sure if the latter was a vote of confidence or a sign that his nominal superior didn't care whether they all lived or died.

"But hanging here upside down..." the helm officer interrupted his personal thoughts much to his anger.

"You knew the risks when you signed on for this duty, damn your eyes!" Trevor snapped back before he turned to the XO. "Now is that tactical report finished yet?"

T'Mura was seemingly brought up short by the harsh undertone in her Commanding Officer's voice. She twitched her left eyebrow up a centimeter before she turned to the sensor officer's station.

"Lieutenant?" she asked.

Lt. Wallace turned around in his seat to face the two senior officers.

"Both fighters are at max sensor range and report no contacts. We are operating in minimum-emission mode except for sensors, which we have modified to mimic the pattern of the freighter. Weapons and shields are on five-minute standby. Engineering reports warp drive available at our command," he concluded.

When Captain Argent had told Captain Postlethwaite his plan was a go, Trevor had asked that Chris Wallace be assigned to *Clarksdale* for the initial run because of his expertise on the Orions.

"Aye, Lieutenant. Keep a sharp eye out lad," Trevor requested.

"Aye, aye, sir."

* * *

"I trust you both are well rested?" the Regent asked Kyle and Arcadia as they descended the front staircase to join everyone the next morning.

"We are indeed," Arcadia replied for the both of them though that was hardly the case.

"I'm very pleased to hear that. If you're hungry, there is a buffet laid out. We'll be leaving in an hour, so you have plenty of time." He turned his attentions to Arcadia. "Piran did mention that he had something special to give you and it would require at least fifteen minutes of your time before we left. It will be waiting for you in your bedroom."

"Oh?" she replied with surprise in her voice. "I look forward to seeing what he has in mind." *I hope...*

Arcadia took Kyle's arm and quickly led him into the dining room so they could grab a quick meal. "Oh... my..." she murmured, her eyes taking in the room.

"Nice," Kyle added.

The dining room -- the family one, not the formal one as she later found out -- looked very different in the sunlight than last night. There were plenty of windows to allow the spring light through and illuminate the area. In the middle lay a gigantic plain table with enough large wooden chairs to comfortably seat twenty. The wall opposite the windows held the buffet table. It took them several minutes just to walk from end to end. The other side held several over stuffed chairs near windows so that one could eat and enjoy the view. And that's where they supped, cheerfully enjoying the food, the warm sun, and each other's company.

Once they finished their meal, Arcadia went back up to their suite to find the maid assigned to them patiently waiting for her. She felt a twinge of regret, noting that the bed was already made up after having literally being stripped during their evening gymnastics. *At least*, she sighed to herself, *I remembered to bring the protection.*

"Mistress...." she began in a low hushed tone to Arcadia, "this was left for you by Master Piran."

The maid led her over to the dressing table where a frock was hanging on a rack. It was a gown styled after an Elizabethan dress of old Earth. It was drawn tight at the waist to accentuate the wearer's bosom. The gown itself was green and white -- the green matching the color of her eyes. Sitting on the dressing table was a crown of roses with green and white ribbons streaming down to

place on her hair. She was also supplied with a small bouquet of Arcadia Roses for her to carry.

"I hardly know what to say..." she whispered to the maid.

"Then say nothing at all," the maid said with a shy smile. "It's a gift that is meant to be worn, after all."

"Indeed."

Arcadia carefully undressed, all the while thinking about the time she'd spent putting this current outfit together, and allowed the maid to pull, tuck and wedge her into the new dress. When they were done, Arcadia paused to take a long look at herself in the mirror.

"You look splendid, Mistress," the maid told her, straightening out a misaligned pleat.

"I must admit, that I feel like a princess out of a fairy tale..." she replied. She took one last glance in the mirror before she walked out of the room and down the elegant staircase to the join everyone waiting below.

"Mirror, Mirror on the wall..." Kyle whispered to her when his breath was restored.

"Thank you for the sentiment, Pilot," she replied with a wry smile. "But I don't think I have much of a chance in a contest where being 'fair' is the objective." She watched him become momentarily confused by her off-hand comment, but soon gathered his wits once more.

"That might be, but you'd clean up in a contest of who is most beautiful any day, anytime."

"You're just biased," Arcadia chided teasingly.

"If you consider me an impartial source," the Regent interjected, "then I would have to say that your husband is correct."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Arcadia replied as she suppressed the urge to blush and wasn't sure she was altogether successful. "I don't think I've felt so lovely since we were married."

"You are stunning, Doctor and you'll fit in with the Festival. Piran has excellent taste. Let us be off. We'll join up with my two sons who are already there."

The Regent led the procession out the door of the residence to waiting carriages. The guests stood by until the Regent was settled in before they were led to their own transportation. Kyle and Arcadia shared a carriage with the Speaker.

"You do put us to shame, Doctor," Gavril smiled appreciatively.

"Thank you, Speaker. And you gentlemen look splendid as always," she replied, demurely flicking her eyes towards Kyle.

The men were sitting opposite because she insisted that her gown not be crinkled. Both of them were dressed simply in dark pants and a light colored shirt, opened at the neck. Kyle added a leather vest that Arcadia thought made him look quite dashing but at least *she* knew that she was biased in that regard. His brown suede boots capped off his look.

Kyle tried to suppress a yawn. Despite her assertion to the Regent that both had slept well, they had spent most of the night enjoying each other's company. The subsequent lack of sleep combined with their previous afternoon's encounter was starting to catch up with her as well. While the Speaker was informing them both about the countryside, she mischievously caught Kyle's attention and moistened her lips slowly with her tongue. She was rewarded by an arched eyebrow, which she returned with a naughty giggle.

Deciding that she should cease teasing her husband, she turned her attention to their transportation. She was pleased that this was an open-air carriage as opposed to the closed sedan she traveled to the Gala in three weeks ago. This gave her much more opportunity to observe the countryside and watch the residence slowly fading from view. It was much more intimate than the main palace, and lacked the formal air that the Palace had. But Kyle had told her that the Regent had made it clear that the residence was where he lived. The Palace was simply where he stayed while at work.

The streets were lined with people waving at the procession making its way to the main grounds that apparently weren't that far away from the palace. In fact, Arcadia thought that they could have walked there but obviously, tradition had it that the Regent's Party rode in. "I take it," Arcadia addressed the Speaker, "that our arrival is part of the Festival?"

"Yes... You'll find that the Galenans hold hard and fast to their rituals and traditions, Doctor," Gavril replied.

The carriages slowly toured the grounds, passing close to what Arcadia thought was a duplicate of an old Earth medieval village, complete, much to her surprise, with a castle! They next passed through a large grassy area where the

Speaker indicated the Festival of Plays would take place. The carriages went over the drawbridge and stopped in the middle of the courtyard where they all exited the carriages and were led over to the grandstands to the side. After he was introduced, the Regent mounted the dais and began his welcoming speech.

* * *

"Flight Five is away. Six is due to dock in five minutes," T'Mura announced in her usual calm Vulcan manner.

"Noted," Captain Postlethwaite acknowledged, hoping he gave everyone on the bridge the impression that he was a man who was unconcerned with the events going on about him.

These docking maneuvers were perhaps the most difficult part of their mission. If the enemy were to jump them while the flight personnel were extra-vehicular and they had to release... no; it was not worth thinking about.

"Contacts?" Trevor asked.

"Negative. Just our escorts and a few billion cubic kilometers of mostly empty space," the sensor officer replied.

He nodded. "Signal Six to come in for their docking."

As Trevor overheard the orders being issued and replies received, he dearly hoped that the calm would remain another 15 minutes.

* * *

"At least the Galenans," Arcadia whispered to Kyle, "keep their ceremonies short and sweet."

Kyle nodded. He stood up and helped her down from grandstand and onto the courtyard just in time to notice Piran coming over to them.

"I'm glad you came, Doctor Argent and you look quite smashing." He smiled brightly at Arcadia then frowned slightly. It seemed to her that he had suddenly remembered his manners and soberly greeted Kyle. "Captain Argent."

Arcadia noticed a slight smirk on Kyle's face while he shook Piran's hand.

"Thank you for the dress, Piran. I'm still not sure what to say."

"No need to thank me, Doctor. You are wearing the gown, that's enough for me," the young man replied eagerly.

"Does everyone dress up?"

Piran thought for a moment. "The idea is total immersion. It's so you not only experience the grandeur of the plays presented but we can also experience living in the Middle Ages. So I think that most of our visitors like dressing up."

"Complete with the lack of sanitary facilities?" Kyle asked wickedly.

Piran laughed. "We're not quite that authentic, Captain. The idea is to simulate without causing too much discomfort. And wearing the garb of the time won't be too bad. Besides, I err..." he stammered, "thought that she'd look nice in this dress."

"She does, indeed, Piran," Kyle replied, keeping an eye on his young rival.

"I told them that you have a good eye, Piran," the Regent informed his youngest son. "This dress is her." He paused for a moment, taking out his chronometer to check the time. "We have just over two hours before this afternoon's play begins. I just know that Garvil and Captain Argent will enjoy the contests and Piran has something he wishes to show Doctor Argent. Let us all meet at the pavilion in ninety minutes so we have time to get settled. They won't start the play without us."

Everyone nodded then scattered to all corners to enjoy the sights and sounds of a human Middle Ages village done up Galenan style. Arcadia glanced around and noticed that the Regent's oldest son was nowhere to be seen.

"Mistress?" Piran began with a flourish. He offered her his elbow to escort her into the village proper.

"Where are we going?" Arcadia asked. The dress she was wearing was a bit heavier than what she was used to and considerably longer. She had to pay special attention to keep it from dragging through the dirt. She was happy that the shoes she had picked out -- soft brown suede ankle-boots with a thick black sole -- worked well with the dress and were comfortable.

"I thought we'd meet up with some of my friends. Some of them are participating as artisans. The others you'll see later on in the play."

"Lovely!"

Piran led her over the uneven dirt roads, through the narrow lanes, and finally into an area that looked very much like an outdoor Renaissance market place. It was huge (Arcadia was beginning to believe that nothing on Galena was done on a small scale) and held numerous stalls all neatly lined up in several rows. They took their time to walk up and down the aisles, visiting with Piran's friends who delighted in showing off their many talents, which greatly impressed Arcadia. She was taken with the handiwork, especially the hand beading.

Piran suddenly turned to her. "Do you remember that I told you I'd have something for you to dance to?"

"Yes, I remember well. You seemed so distressed."

"Well... I was, Doctor. Music and dance are such an important part of Galena that I couldn't imagine anyone not being able to enjoy it with us. When you told me that you needed to *feel* the beat, I realized that your Earth Renaissance music was very rhythmic and the steps aren't too difficult."

Arcadia suddenly realized that Piran had planned something *just* for her and she began to blush. She hoped that in his excitement and his leading her on to wherever they were going, he wouldn't notice.

"Here we are, Doctor."

* * *

"That's odd."

"Define 'odd', lad," Trevor immediately put himself into quiet over-drive, asking the question with a decisive but calm edge to his voice.

Lieutenant Chris Wallace shrugged. "A momentary sensor ghost. I think. Or perhaps asteroids."

"Are you certain it wasn't a contact of some sort?"

The silence response was all the answer Trevor needed. "Battle stations," he all but whispered before turning back to his sensor officer.

"Scanning... I'm not reading anything, sir," Chris replied to the unasked question.

"Bring weapons and shields to hot-standby," Trevor ordered softly.

* * *

"When I heard you were expert in the Klingon longsword," Gavril began, "I just knew that you'd enjoy the competition, if not wish to be a part of it."

While standing in the hot sun watching a bunch of grown men beat each other senseless with sticks wasn't necessarily Kyle's idea of a good time, he had to admit that the demonstration had really caught his fancy. "The skill the fighters demonstrated was remarkable."

Gavril nodded. "Glad you enjoyed it." He paused to check his chronometer. "We have a while yet before we are to assemble at the pavilion. Care for some food?"

Kyle gave the matter some thought. He had last eaten not three hours earlier, but chances are the only things available during the play would be something akin to dainty mints and flavored water.

"You have a specific place in mind?"

"Indeed I do!"

Gavril led Kyle down a few authentically narrow alleys until they came upon a house that had an iron-wrought sign over the door, proclaiming it as the *Black Angus Inn*. The inside was about as authentic a recreation of a medieval pub as Kyle had ever seen, though by his own admission, his knowledge in the area was limited to whatever he had seen on the hologrid.

There was a huge central fireplace with benches scattered about it. The bar had some truly impressive looking kegs behind it and though neither crowded nor overflowing, the room was well populated with people drinking their beverage of choice, eating, talking, or playing various games of cards and dice.

Gavril found them a small table and soon caught the attention of the waitress ("Serving Wench" she later chastised Kyle), who to Kyle's surprise was... Human.

"Sallie, the Captain and I would like some of your husband's to-die-for stew. Ale for me and for the Captain...?"

Kyle realized that this was his spot to order a beverage of some sort. Normally, alcohol in general and beer or ale interested him this time of day about as much as ejecting into space in a faulty spacesuit, but he doubted that ordering anything but the same wouldn't do much for his reputation. "Beer, if you please." Ale simply was too bitter for his tastes.

While waiting for the food to arrive, Kyle opted to engage Gavril on an issue that had been lingering in his back of his mind for some time now. "What

exactly started the Festival of Plays? It's an awfully expensive enterprise, to be certain -- a medieval village, a castle..."

Gavril simply chuckled at the question. "Well, none of it really was our idea," he began, pausing only to take a long sip of his ale. "The Festival is a very old tradition here on Galena, going back thousands of years. It was mainly instituted to bring some culture to the more rural areas of the planet. While setting up the four main sites like this one managed to allow the staging of more and more grandiose productions, the Galenan people inevitably found other diversions and ways to entertain themselves."

Kyle simply nodded. Humans were not any different in that regard.

"So..." Gavril continued, "about one hundred years ago, some bright little bureaucrat had a brainstorm: why not stage some off-world plays as a means to attract tourism? It took a few decades, but eventually the idea took root. Then it took a few more decades to really gain momentum, but once it did..." Gavril shook his head and raised his hands in a dismissive gesture.

"You sound like you do not approve," Kyle commented cautiously.

"To some degree I absolutely do not!" Gavril pointed out a window. "Look around the village out there -- how much of it is Galenan, how much of it is Human?"

Kyle hadn't really given it much consideration, but he realized that much of the layout and structure of the village resembled that of a typically European village, circa 1300 ACE.

"Mind you, it's not as if I dislike Humans in general. Take Sallie and Angus here. They liked Galena so much they emigrated. And no one makes a stew quite like Angus. In fact, he and Sallie own a sheep farm not too far away from here. You'll find that most Humans living on Galena are just like that -- assets to their communities who have integrated themselves with no problems whatsoever."

"But...?" Kyle prompted.

"They still are the minority. Most simply come here to stay for no more than two months and in the process give little consideration to the culture and society they are stepping into. Cross-cultural contamination has really become an issue on Galena. Are we to endure as a separate and unique culture, or are we to blend into some Federation-standard issue cultural bland dessert? Look at our speaking patterns, the only place you can hear true Galenan is in the outer regions, but even then, it's still not what the language used to be..."

Kyle never gave such issues much thought. In Earth's past, there was a term for such reckless tourism -- "Ugly Americanism." Gavril clearly was concerned with what he perceived as "Ugly Humanism" and displays such as this were not likely to contribute to setting his mind at ease. "But what can you do about it? If the cultures are blending, it's unlikely you can legislate the genie back into the bottle as it were..."

"I know," Gavril admitted ruefully. "It's a losing battle put forward by you Humans and your natural ability to spread out and adapt. And aided by us Galenans and our natural curiosity and interest in anything that's different. To be honest, I can't in good faith say that all of this is a bad thing. Perhaps this simply is the direction we were meant to take."

"Perhaps. But be that as it may, I think applying a modicum of restraint to unbridled progress for the sake of monitoring the consequences has always been a good idea."

"I can only hope so," the Speaker nodded.

Their conversation was interrupted when Sallie returned with two bowls of stew. Kyle noted that was everything Gavril said it would be -- and then some. They were also provided with hunks of bread that were so fresh, they were still steaming and were the perfect implement for cleaning out their bowls until they were ready for seconds. Kyle considered the notion of having a second helping, but was told by Gavril that they should probably get going. Kyle nodded and fished out a credit chit to pay for the meal.

"I don't think ye gonna be able to pay with dat, laddie," a distinctly Scottish burr rumbled. Kyle glanced up to find a man standing at their table who most likely was once a posterchild of what a proper Scotsman should look like -- tall, stout, with long reddish hair and a full beard and moustache. The only thing out of place was the apron he wore over his Kilt.

"Angus," Gavril greeted, shaking the huge bony hand, "meet Captain Argent. He runs the Space Station up above."

"Aye, does he now?" Angus replied. "Well, in that case, laddie, ye can pay me for me stew. Ye causing me to run out of Scotch from back home!"

Kyle winced for a moment before advancing his credit chit once more, causing their host to erupt in peals of boisterous laughter.

"Och, I was just funnin' with ye, laddie!" Angus exclaimed, thumping Kyle on the back. "No one pays during the Festival. It's free -- especially for people like my good friend Gavril here. I just had to come out and say hello before the lot of

you trotted along." Angus turned serious as he faced Kyle. "But if ye can, I would like to get some Scotch before long, Captain."

Hopefully soon -- very soon, Kyle thought. "I'll see what I can do for you. Anyone who makes stew this good deserves special consideration."

His pronouncement caused Angus to pelt Kyle on the shoulder once more before he and Gavril took their leave. They were strolling back towards their rendezvous with the Regent and the rest of their party when they stopped to see why a large crowd had formed near the dance pavilion.

"Usually," Gavril mumbled with surprise in his voice, "it's not *this* popular. I wonder what's so interesting."

Upon sight of the Speaker walking towards them, the crowd parted slightly to allow the men to place themselves nearer to the action. Piran and Arcadia were dancing, slowly at first with very little movement save their feet, then once she had obviously gained her confidence, the dancers began to circumnavigate the floor waving their arms around in obvious merriment.

Kyle couldn't help but appreciate how lovely Arcadia looked in her long green gown as it flowed around her while she danced with Piran. He felt a twinge of jealousy as he noted how happy she looked as she danced with carefree abandon. He quickly pushed those thoughts aside and just stood there and enjoyed the sight of his wife twirling around. Once the piece was finished, he watched Piran bow and Arcadia curtsy while the appreciative crowd clapped in approval.

Arcadia spotted Kyle in the crowd and moved towards him.

"Thank you Piran," Arcadia said, gently wiping off the sweat that had formed on her forehead with the handkerchief that had been supplied with the dress.

"You're quite welcome, Doctor. And--"

"Please," she interrupted, "call me Arcadia. I can't have anyone who's gone through the trouble you have call me by such a formal name."

"Thank you... Arcadia, I should like that very much," he beamed in pleasure.

"You'll have to teach me that step," Kyle informed her. He had managed to displace his young rival and firmly placed his hand around her waist.

Arcadia smiled at him. He lovingly squeezed her tightly before giving her a kiss.

Gavril took out his chronometer again. "We should get going. The Regent is right, no reason to hold up the play just because of us."

Kyle and Arcadia started to walk after the Speaker when she suddenly turned around towards Piran. "Thank you again."

"My pleasure, Mistress," he replied wistfully.

* * *

Two hours passed since the initial sensor reading. Nothing had been tracked, not even as much as an asteroid fart. Captain Trevor Postlethwaite was also painfully aware that the number of words exchanged on his bridge since his order for battle stations could have filled half a screen and left room for a sonnet or two at that.

"Status?" Trevor asked his sensor officer, not moving his eyes away from the forward viewscreen.

"Nothing, sir."

This in itself was unsettling. It wasn't normal for space to be *entirely* devoid of everything -- no debris, no fragments, nothing. Not even a few stray hydrogen atoms.

"Sir, might I suggest we stand down from battle stations?" his XO finally suggested.

Trevor turned. T'Mura was thinking the same thing he was -- the crew had to be at their breaking point by now. They were all tired because of what seemed to be some small momentary anomaly...

Captain Postlethwaite once again reviewed the readouts that the sensors had produced over the last several hours. No asteroids. No debris. No gaseous materials. No stellar matter. Ahead of them was simply a void.

"No, not yet."

He ignored the silence that had fallen on the bridge again and turned his thoughts inward. Trevor knew they were out there. That much he could feel in his old bones. It now was a matter of who, as they had said in the old days, would blink first.

* * *

"Why are we rushing?" Kyle finally asked his wife who was obviously in a hurry.

"Because, love, while it is easy for you to relieve yourself with what you are wearing, it is not as easy with what *I* am wearing. I'm going to need some extra time."

"I could help you."

"I know, love, but I don't think that the rest of the women would enjoy the intrusion. They have separate sanitary facilities."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Trust me, love, I did!" she grimaced.

"Ah... there you all are," the Regent greeted his guests. Arcadia noticed that his oldest son had joined them and the young lady she remembered from the Gala was with them.

The cockiness in evidence the last time was gone and the oldest son presented the appearance not of a spoiled brat but that of the Regent in waiting. Arcadia gave no further thought to young Kadar as she patiently waited for the Regent's party to assemble while she hoped that her hoping about on one foot wasn't *too* noticeable. She waited for an opportunity to take the Speaker aside to ask him where the facilities were hidden. Luckily for her, the Regent once again displayed his uncanny ability to know what his guests required at their greatest time of need.

"Calandra, my dear, would you be kind enough to show Doctor Argent where she may.... freshen up?"

The young lady bowed her head and walked over to stand near Arcadia. "This way, uhm... Doctor Argent."

Arcadia was about to blurt out "Thank You, Regent!" but thought better of it by simply giving him a smile of relief.

Both women began the journey but she felt that her guide was moving much too slowly. "If you don't mind, can we hurry?" she pleaded.

"Of course, Doctor," Calandra replied, quickly leading Arcadia to a small, unobtrusive dwelling. She opened the door and Arcadia immediately noticed, not to her surprise, how large it was. She would have taken more time to survey her surroundings if her bladder wasn't being so insistent.

Calandra pointed to where the toilet was. Arcadia peeked in then looked down at her dress. She backed out and sighed.

"Your first time wearing such a dress?"

"I've worn long dresses before but I'm usually more prepared," Arcadia admitted.

Calandra was wearing a red dress of a similar design. She reached into the pouch around her waist and pulled out a small disposable funnel.

"You will find this useful."

Arcadia gave her a nervous smile as she took the funnel, closed the door, and proceeded to put it to its best use. When she came out, she had noticed that Calandra had also obviously used the time to also relieve herself and was sanitizing her hands.

"Thank you very much for coming to my rescue, Calandra. Trust me when I say that I won't forget it."

Calandra gave her a shy smile. "Think nothing of it, Mistress-- err... Doctor. Piran told me of his surprise gift. I thought you would not be prepared. I made sure that I had more."

"I am indeed very grateful for your foresight and am forever in your debt."

"That will not be necessary, Doctor. Shall we rejoin the men?" she asked.

The women strolled back to the group and were immediately greeted by the Regent.

"Ladies," the Regent acknowledged their return. "Let us depart."

Everyone followed the Regent to the vast grassy knoll where several audience hover-banks were already full. One was obviously waiting to be filled by the Regent, his family and guests.

Kyle and Arcadia were seated in the middle with Piran next to Arcadia and the Speaker next to Kyle. The Regent was sitting in front of them both. Calandra and Kadar were sitting behind them. Once the Regent was seated, the hover-banks rose above the grassy plain.

Kyle was totally fixed on watching the grass slowly drift away from them and the actors purposely gathering in their places. He finally joined his wife in

reading the information on the datapadd in front of them. It was background to this afternoon's performance of Shakespeare's "Henry V." He barely made headway when he noted that the audience suddenly became quiet. All the hover-banks had drifted towards one side of the grassy plain. His attention was drawn down below where a man dressed in garb traditional to Shakespeare's day began to speak to the audience as the Chorus.

*O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!*

* * *

"Captain?"

"Aye..." Trevor replied wearily. He wondered just how much more he... no, all of them, could take of this waiting game.

"We've ceased receiving any sort of outputs for nearly three hours now," the sensor officer began with a disgusted edge to his voice. "Either we're in what is officially the deadest region of known space *or* we're being blinded somehow."

The Captain stroked his chin, giving grave consideration to latest status report, which confirmed the conclusion he'd come to an hour ago. "Aye, lad. Any suggestions?"

Chris Wallace stretched as he slowly rubbed his own shoulders, totally wrapped up in thought. He stopped and looked at the CO. "I have an idea..." he began tentatively.

"Let's hear it, lad."

"If we presume for a moment that we are in fact in some sort of masking field, then whoever is doing this isn't likely to be aware of our presence and..."

"Aye!" Trevor knew where he was going.

"So," the sensor officer continued, "if we deploy a sensor probe and bounce a omni directional signal off of our comm system into the probe..."

"It might give us a sufficient boost in to burn through the field," Trevor concluded for him. "I like it, lad."

"It might also," T'Mura pointed out, "compromise our host, never mind the radiation surge..."

"Possible," Chris admitted, "but not likely. I'm reasonably certain that the *Nexus* comm array puts out more stray radiation than this is likely to produce and yet, I haven't seen anyone complain during a close fly-by. Ray shielding should be pretty fundamental on any space going craft these days. I think it will be ok."

Trevor nodded. "Considering our position," he began, noting then immediately dismissing the disapproving stare from his XO, "let's give it a go. Contact Captain Hallstrom and ask them to get ready to drop a sensor probe."

* * *

Kyle was engrossed in the performance -- no, the spectacle -- that was unfolding before him. He had seen "Henry V" many times before, and even though it had never lost its appeal, this presentation was quite unlike anything he had seen before -- authentic costumes, medieval castles and legions of men (and women) in authentic attire, making up the British and French armies respectively. The magnitude of the production was like what one might expect from a Hologrid production, and yet with the miracle of modern antigravity units made it possible for a small fleet of hoverbalconies to float over the nominal stage and follow the action in exquisite detail. It had helped convey the vast nature and complexity of what was truly being played out before them. Having been in battle many a time before, Kyle always could appreciate what it meant to be in a situation where if the battle was lost, there would most likely not be any tomorrow for man, woman, unit, king, country, planet, or Federation. He couldn't help but be drawn in once more by the enthralling aura that surrounded any scene about to explode into battle frenzy. He had been there, much like the King himself, his uncle, the Duke of Exeter, the Duke of Bedford, the rest of his family and troops. Oddly enough, he now found himself in a position of being able to order troops of his own into battle, much like young Harry Le Roi down there. It was in fact something he had done very recently and for a moment, he had to force down the fact that all things considered, he would much rather be with those men and women up there right at this moment, before he reluctantly returned his undivided attention down to the play itself.

*O God of battles! steel my soldiers' hearts;
Possess them not with fear; take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them. Not to-day, O Lord...*

* * *

"And away she goes!" Chris crowed in triumph.

Everyone on the bridge waited several anxious moments not knowing if it would work.

"Stellar mass!" Chris announced with a euphoric flair to the bridge, "0.238 particles per cubic meter, tracking several fragments... We were in the bag all right. There is a nebula ahead. I wouldn't be surprised if that's where we were headed. Heaven only knows what would have happened if they got us in there and--"

"Comm, signal Captain Hallstrom to expect company very soon now," Trevor calmly interrupted. He knew that the time would soon be upon them. "Stand fast, lads!" he announced to his crew, not bothering to keep the excitement out of his voice. "It won't be long now."

* * *

Arcadia became totally caught up in the staging of the play. It had allowed them to view the minute intricacies of medieval court life up close and then almost effortlessly shift to vast battlefields. The Chorus originally intended to help the audience bridge the conceptual gap going from the British Court to French battlefields, almost felt out of place. Why apologize for the inadequacies of the settings when reality itself could hardly have been any better? Of course, she'd seen production that left out that role only to be denounced by the Purist as not being of the Bard...

The nature of the play itself never had appealed to Arcadia as much as it had to most of her friends. But given the presentation here, she had started to find a growing affinity not so much for the play, but for the central character. There was much in young King Henry that she recognized in those around her: Kyle's strength and fierceness, Roscoe's roguish charm, Boffin's keen understanding of a situation, and Ike's quiet determination all presented in a milieu that was not unfamiliar to her -- that of the totally impossible situation. The Bard truly must have been a keen observer of the battlefield commanders of his day.

But given all things considered, she still preferred The Scottish Play.

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more...

* * *

"Here they come."

Captain Postlethwaite gave a wry grin at the quiet pronouncement from the sensor officer. Sure enough, realizing their bluff had been called, their assailants finally revealed themselves. Fully ten of the all-too-familiar Orion Attack Craft were inbound towards the freighters. He hoped that Captain Hallstrom was ready for them while he continued to quietly listen as the Pirates' message drone on and on and on.

"Unknown freighter, stand down and no harm will come to you and your crew."

After several moments, the Orions decided to emphasize their request with a few targeted shots against the hull of the *Freya*.

"Captain Postlethwaite, now would be a good time," the Captain of the *Freya* announced over the ship-to-ship, his voice showing the calm that Trevor himself clearly lacked at this moment.

"Bloody well right! Captain Hallstrom!" Trevor snapped back. "Comm, signal the fighters. Helm, release the clamps. Prepare for engagement!"

Trevor nervously tapped the armrest of his chair. All he could do now was wait and hope that the extraction of his ship from the *Freya's* artificial cargo hold would go smoothly. He watched the viewscreen as it showed the breakplates falling away and his *Clarksdale* beginning to emerge into space once more.

"I have a solid solution on all ten vessels," Chris reported immediately. "Weapons are armed and ready. Shields are ready to go as soon as we clear the *Freya*."

Trevor issued a wry smile. It was time to take the fight out of these bastards once and for all.

* * *

Kyle began to lean forward, inching closer to the action playing out before him. The pivotal battle was almost upon them. He could not help but marvel just how much it resembled "the real thing" -- just without Starships, Fightercraft, and phased energy weapons.

*What's he that wishes so?
My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin:
If we are mark'd to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more...*

* * *

"We're clear of the freighter," the Helmsman reported.

"Shields up. CIDSS up. TAVITAC reports solid lock on two ships. Phasers on-line. Torpedo launchers loaded." Chris rattled off their status in quick succession before he smiled.

The Close-In Deflector Shield Supplement was state of the art and designed to protect against close-range missile and energy attacks from small vessels such as fighters.

"Let's take it to them!" Trevor shouted to his crew before he activated the ship-to-ship comm system. "Tipperary, this is Black Prince, Cry Havoc, repeat, *Cry Havoc!*"

* * *

Once the signal from Captain Postlethwaite was issued, *Avalanche* brought up her ship-to-ship link. "You heard them, boys and girls. It's time to kick ass and chew gum. Remember, one shot, one kill. We gotta buy *Clarksdale* some time to get set..."

The four fighters that were already flying patrol were in the fortunate position to have already acquired a missile lock on the bogies. The remaining four fighters were unavailable having just extracted themselves from the cocoons similar to what *Clarksdale* had emerged from. But unlike the Perimeter Action Craft, the newly emerging fighters were immediately mission-ready.

"Tiger-2 here, Target locked, Fox-3, Fox-3."

"Lion-1, Targets acquired. Fox-3, Fox-3..."

Avalanche watched three missiles arc out from the deployed craft, followed seconds later by three more from the second group of fighters.

"Incoming!" Neville 'Hawk' Takagi all but screamed into the intercom. "I'm tracking twenty objects inbound. Heavy Warheads...PhoTorps!"

Avalanche didn't hesitate for a moment before ordering full evasive action. Photon Torpedoes could easily savage a fighter craft in a direct impact situation, but were also easy to evade and would require the attacking craft to remain in relative close proximity to the fighters themselves. This in turn would favor the speedier and more maneuverable Mark II's missiles considerably...

"Impact! Impact! Direct hit on the bridge!" Hawk shouted.

Avalanche only took a fraction of a second to glance at her display. The Mark II had done its job and burnt through the shields, destroying the bridge. Even if it had backup controls, that alien craft was as good as gone...

"Shit, we got a torp homing on us!" Hawk exclaimed, his voice becoming increasingly more agitated the closer the missile became.

"Drop Decoy," she ordered calmly.

Hawk responded by deploying the one and only Decoy Missile they had. It was meant to fly into the path of the oncoming torpedo and annihilate it in a fratricidal blast. Or so the theory went.

"Negative impact on the Decoy. Torp still coming... impact in eight seconds, seven-six..."

Avalanche nervously bit her lower lip as he continued his countdown. There was no way she could weave around and hopefully outbank the torpedo this close in. Doing so would only put her people in harms way.

"Countermeasures?" she asked.

"ECM, no effect, three sec..."

When Hawk had announced that the electronic counter measures were ineffective, Avalanche increased to maximum throttle, aiming her craft at the nearest attacking Orion. Maybe the blast would damage it sufficiently to take it out of the fi--

The sudden explosion that rocked her craft was more or less everything she expected except for whatever reason they were still in one piece. Somehow they were still alive...But how...

"Hi there, Lion-1. Figured you could use a hand," the familiar voice of the *Clarksdale's* Comm Officer announced with a glee that was almost palpable.

"Time to show these buggers a thing or two," Captain Trevor Postlethwaite of the *Clarksdale* declared on the ship-to-ship, thereby proclaiming his ship's entry into field of combat.

Avalanche stood by in her own fighter craft and watched as the ribbons of crimson energy streamed out from the *Clarksdale*, passing her own craft both high and low and on towards the Orion craft.

"ALERT! ALERT ALERT! ALERT!"

It was almost too late for *Avalanche* to realize that she was still on a collision course with the suddenly besieged *Orion* craft. She shoved her flightstick forward as hard as she possibly could, hoping it would be enough. She grimly noted that the gouts of energy her shields yielded barely skimmed past the attacking craft's hull -- and leaving her vulnerable to any sort of return fire the *Orion* might yield...

But that issue was almost immediately put to rest when the *Clarksdale* decided to force the issue and pressed ahead, simply crushing the much smaller vessel under the weight of its own bulk and shields.

"The CO of that fucking *Clarksdale* is crazy," Hawk pronounced with a mixture of awe and relief.

"That may be," *Avalanche* replied evenly, bringing up her tactical display to assess the flow of battle, "but he's our kind of crazy."

* * *

Arcadia sat back to continue to savor perhaps one of the most famous monologues in the history of mankind. She had heard stories where soldiers had recited it on the eve of battle and it had promptly whipped the troops, forlorn cause or not, into the proper mindset for the task at hand.

Much like it had helped her get through perhaps the darkest day of her tenure as Commanding Officer of the *Stellar Wind*.

*This day is called the feast of Crispian:
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian:'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'*

* * *

"Ship's status?"

"Shields are down twelve percent with minor structural damage to the hull on decks two and three," the *Clarksdale's* XO duly reported. "Damage control parties were dispatched, sir."

Trevor couldn't fail to notice the tone of resentment in her voice. T'Mura clearly hadn't approved of his order to make for 'ramming speed' and settle the issue before the Orion could get another shot off. But it seemed like the sensible thing to do at the time.

"Operational status?" he asked.

"Five attacking craft destroyed, two severely dis--" The sudden explosion illuminating the bridge via the forward viewscreen interrupted the XO. "Make that one severely disabled ships and six confirmed kills."

"Losses?"

"One fighter destroyed, one severely damaged, but the rest are still operational. *Freya* reports only minor damage and--"

"Sir," the weapons officer interrupted, "Lion Group is herding one of the bogies our way and--"

"Fire!" Trevor exclaimed without even waiting for him to finish his sentence.

First one, then two crimson bolts of phased energy engulfed the already stricken pirate craft. The result was more than the Orion design could handle. Its shields collapsed and exposed its relatively unprotected hull to the terrajoules of energy, disintegrating it upon impact. In short, the craft ceased to be.

"Well, not much left here," the weapons officer reported. "Tiger Group is mopping up two more of the Attack Craft, but I think one of them got away."

"Be prepared for the possibility of a counteratt--" Captain Postlethwaite ordered.

But Trevor never finished the sentence.

* * *

Kyle found himself on the edge of his seat. What an exquisite performance! The delivery of the St. Crispin's day speech was soaring, just as it should be. He even had that tingly feeling in his stomach that was usually reserved the eminent onset of combat -- a mixture of fear, giddy anticipation, and fierce desire to just get on with it. If someone would only toss him a sword...

*Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;*

* * *

"Are we hot or what?"

"Cut the chatter, Ravyn!" Avalanche snapped. "What about Cowboy? Did he--"

"I saw him and Hickory eject," Scott Nakamura broke in, "and Freya says they are tracking them. Scratch one fighter, but looks like we got lucky."

"Talon, your bird ok?" Avalanche continued her assessment of her troops. "It looks like it's seen better days."

"It has," Ayesha Deveraux replied coolly. "One wing is gone and almost all our primary systems are out of commission, but we are still mostly nominal."

Thank the great ultimate for redundancy, Avalanche considered before she continued her survey. "Ordinance?"

"Fifty percent of our Mark II's are gone," Hawk remarked matter-of-factly. "But we had a seven for eight impact quota."

Avalanche smiled with grim satisfaction. She was about to continue the assessment when she was interrupted.

"Fuck!" one of the fighter officers erupted over the ship-to-ship, "Bogies inbound! Damn, it's a big one... it's..."

"D-7, Klingon design," Avalanche noted calmly. "Looks like an older model, most likely a privateer of some sort. And I see he's brought some of his youngens along as well."

The eight objects that trailed the D-7 into the engagement area were unlikely to be anything less than more Orion Attack Craft.

"Lion-1, this is Black Prince, we will draw away the D-7. The Attack crafts are yours."

"Roger that, Black Prince," Avalanche replied somberly, "and good luck."

"Thanks," the comm officer of the *Clarksdale* soberly acknowledged. "We'll need it."

* * *

Arcadia sought out her husband who was paying extraordinary attention to this play. She could tell that he was carefully following the unfolding scene based on a strange mixture of anticipation and euphoria she felt cascading from him. The few times she had seen him during moments of crisis, he had appeared calm and cool to the point of being aloof. But she also knew that he was capable of powerful emotional expressions. She instinctively sought out his hand.

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:*

* * *

"Orders, Captain?" the XO all but urged.

All eyes immediately became focused on the old man in the center seat.

Trevor considered the situation for a moment. A D-7 might be a bit more than one lonesome PAC could handle, especially if the D-7 was in the hands of a capable crew, which he had little doubt about. In all likelihood, there was very little he *could* do.

And if the time comes, we will fight -- and do ye proud. Trevor remembered those words he had used to sell Captain Argent on giving them a chance. Captain Argent had kept his word. Now it was time for him.

"Helm, intercept course, if you please. Comm, signal the fighters to screen the Attack Craft. Tell *Freya* to bug out. Weapons, stand by phasers and torpedoes. Steady, lads. Steady."

The die was cast.

Trevor had smiled at his comm officer's pronouncement that they would need good luck here. There was no resignation in that young voice, only steely determination. He allowed his eyes to survey his bridge and his people busily at work. What a crew this was!

"Accelerate to full impulse and bring us across her bow. Target command structures or the nacelles. Make every shot count, lads!"

The first disruptor bolt crashed into *Clarksdale* with the force savage enough to toggle safety vents on the bridge. Steam began to erupt and Trevor ignored it, keeping his eyes fixed on the forward viewscreen.

"Steady, lads, steady."

Again and again, the larger craft lashed out at the lone Perimeter Action Craft. Again and again, Trevor ignored the results against his ship. He ignored the explosion at the comm console, which likely killed his comm officer. A fine young lad he was. And he pointedly ignored the pain in his left arm. It was most likely broken and he angrily ignored the warm ooze that began to slowly trickle down towards his hand.

A report from sensors forced him to consider their current situation. "CIDSS is failing. Main shields down to thirty-five percent," Chris reported.

"Steady... just a bit more..." Trevor croaked hoarsely.

He continued to ignore those around him who were continually bombarded him with information: shields were now down under 25% and likely to fail soon. They had lost warp power and never mind the other damage. Through all the chaos, he kept eyes firmly fixed on the tactical display.

So close... so...

Captain Trevor Postlethwaite fought against what he knew was the inevitable. He knew he had to remain conscious until he was certain they'd overcome and... but part of him was trying to seduce his wounded self into giving over... *why not rest a while?*

No! No? *NO!* The battle to stay conscious raged within him for a fraction of a second, until he knew it would be one he could not win. Before giving himself over to oblivion, he simply muttered, "fire..."

As the universe around him began to slowly fade to black, it seemed like the right thing to do, after all. No sense in letting these fine lads die a death without a hope...

* * *

*And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,*

*And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

* * *

Captain Trevor Postlethwaite of the Perimeter Action Ship *USS Clarksdale* was suddenly roused back to consciousness by the screams and shouts of those around him. *So this was it. So this is what death is like...*

They'd fought so well and had deserved better than this. A better captain perhaps, a better ship...

And yet by the sound of it, they were determined to die a joyful death, for their screams were one of joy, jubilation even... Bloody hell! Enough of this bollocks! *What was going on here?*

"Status?" Trevor croaked hoarsely, fighting to stay on focus.

"It's *Freya*, sir!" his weapons officer exclaimed jubilantly. "She came in behind us and let the sucker have it! Look at that freighter go!"

Trevor felt a small smile grace his dry lips, painfully cracking them. Siege guns. Useless on most any ship, but get in close and even *Nexus* itself would stand up and take notice.

"Fire..." he ordered flatly. "Fire until we can fire no more."

"Aye, aye, sir..." the weapons officer replied with grim determination.

It was to the death now and they all knew it.

Though almost everything else around him seemed to lie in a state of waste, Trevor was amazed that the viewscreen had somehow remained active. If anything, the D-7 had taken it about as bad as they had. The D-7's port nacelle was venting plasma, the command pod was more gone, and then present, what normally was a hangar deck was not much more than a twisted mass of charred metal. He refused to contemplate just how badly his *Clarksdale* was hurt. They were so close... So close...

"*Freya* is turning for another run. But we'll be under the D-7's guns before then..." the XO dutifully reported.

Trevor took grim satisfaction from the knowledge that their destruction would herald the end of the D-7 along with them. *Freya's* guns would smash the

wounded cruiser to pieces on their next pass. "Bring us in on an optimal course for *Freya's* weaponry."

"Aye, aye, Captain," the helmsman announced, before he added a sober, "it's been a pleasure, sir."

"Likewise," Trevor replied evenly, keeping the emotion out of his voice and out of his soul.

"We ain't dead yet," Chris muttered from his sensor station.

Trevor grinned. "Steady, lads, steady... it won't be long now and--"

"Hi there."

Trevor pointedly ignored the unknown voice over his comm system keeping his eyes clearly fixed on the forward view screen. The wounded nacelle on Klingon - - no, he quickly corrected himself -- Orion Cruiser suddenly exploded in a nova-like eruption. He knew that a breach like that would surely set off a chain reaction back through the matter/anti-matter exchange system. A full warpcore detonation would follow. And then...

"Black Prince," the unknown voice continued, *"we figured you could use a White Knight right about now,"* Avalanche announced calmly over the ship-to-ship comlink.

He noticed that the bridge of the *Clarksdale* kept their eyes split between their boards and the forward viewscreen. They could all feel the space around them explode in victory.

Captain Trevor Postlethwaite smiled triumph at his people before he gave in once more to oblivion.

* * *

Once the clapping of the appreciative audience had ceased, the hover-banks slowly descended back to the ground. Upon landing, everyone stood up to stretch his or her legs and step down.

"I hope everyone had a good time." The Regent smiled allowing his eyes to sweep the group, focusing in on Arcadia.

"Something wrong, Doctor?" he asked in a concerned tone.

"No sir, it's just that the Saint Crispin's day speech holds special meaning to me."

Even Kyle looked at her questioningly.

Arcadia took a deep breath. "I kept thinking about that speech when my ship was under attack. And seeing it presented here today, complete with a full scale battle, it became a very emotional experience for me," she admitted.

The Regent remained mute then said, "I understand, Doctor Argent."

Kyle placed his hand around her waist and gave her a squeeze. She automatically leaned on his shoulder while they followed the Regent's party towards the waiting carriages.

"Sorry to interrupt," Gavril began, casting an apologetic eye towards Arcadia, "but could I have a word with Captain Argent?"

Kyle gave the Speaker a sharp nod before they moved off to the side to talk.

Arcadia wasn't alone for long because Calandra had joined her.

"I thought perhaps a return trip to the facilities?"

"Since my husband is busy," she glanced back at Kyle still deep in an animated discussion with the Speaker, "and not knowing when I'll next have the chance, I shall take you up on your offer."

Calandra smiled before she suddenly blurted out, "May I ask you a question?"

Arcadia looked over at her young companion. "Of course."

Calandra didn't respond right away. Finally, she spoke. "I overheard. What ship?"

"Oh.... *USS Stellar Wind*, I was her commander."

Calandra was obviously surprised. "Starship?" she stammered.

Arcadia nodded but soon narrowed her eyes in puzzlement at Calandra's stunned expression. "Why do you ask?"

"I never met anyone... a *woman*..." she whispered in a reverent tone, "a starship commander before. Are you a captain?"

Arcadia kept her emotions in check and didn't laugh though she found this line of questioning amusing. "Yes, I am Captain Argent as well, but I prefer Doctor Argent." She laughed, not at Calandra but at a memory. "When Kyle and I first arrived at *Nexus*, I was initially introduced as Captain Argent also. I told the Executive Officer there and then that I preferred Doctor because there was only *one* Captain Argent on this station and that was Kyle."

Calandra remained silent. "Do you work for him?"

She gave the young woman a quizzical look. "You're the second person who's fascinated with in this idea. Yes, I do. Everyone on *Nexus* works for Kyle in some fashion."

"Can you overrule him?"

Arcadia was taken aback by her question. "Yes, the Chief Medical Officer can in some special cases overrule the Station Commander but believe me when I say that I'd better have a bloody good reason to do so."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" she sputtered. "Because the station is run under Federation authority and the authority to run the station is given to the Station Commander. For me to defy that authority is an offense that can have me arrested unless I have sufficient cause. My rationale must be beyond reproach, otherwise, I could end up spending a lot of time in the brig when I would prefer to spend my time with my husband."

"I see."

No more words were exchanged as they walked into the bathroom and attended to their personal business.

* * *

The return to the Residence wasn't as spectacular as their arrival but was nonetheless satisfying. Arcadia spent the time watching the sun beginning to set over the surrounding hillside while Kyle quietly napped beside her. Upon their arrival, the Regent informed his guests that a light dinner would be served in two hours.

Kyle and Arcadia trod back up to their room. Arcadia spent her time with their personal maid unwedging herself from her dress. She briefly considered inviting Kyle to join her for a quick shower but found him huddled over the comlink. She assumed that he was checking with the station and didn't disturb him.

Arcadia was already dressed by the time Kyle walk back into their bedroom with a distinct smile on his face. She was just putting finishing touches on her outfit of a loose fitting shirt and long skirt set.

"Sorry I missed out," he remarked, obviously taking in the aroma of her freshly bathed body and her light floral perfume.

"So am I, love," she purred.

He took a covert look at his chronometer and sighed. He gave her a pitiful glance before he left to clean up so they could both join the Regent for dinner.

Once the meal was over, family and guests drifted into semi-formal groupings. Arcadia became engaged in a deep conversation with Calandra and felt she could talk to her all evening. She overheard Kyle asking both the Regent and Speaker for a private audience and being quickly granted one.

* * *

"Your Admiral Mahan would have been proud of you -- all of you!" the Regent declared.

Both men were totally at ease, sitting in the middle of the rose garden, sipping wine while admiring the last shards of sunlight. The Speaker had to beg off for the moment but had promised to join them as soon as he could.

"Well, given the fact that his views are taught as part of the 'How not to do it' courses at the Academy," Kyle began, "I somehow don't think the idea of proving him right would sit well with most of my superiors. After all, the notion that Jutland proved him wrong in the end has endured for over four hundred years now."

"Did I miss something?" Gavril piped up. He was slightly out of breath having trotted over to join the small but exclusive group.

"Oh, do sit down, Gavril. Captain Argent here was just outlining the significance of today's battles to me."

"You can get several very good histories on the battle of Agincourt at various knowledge banks if you'd like to read up on them, Regent."

Both Kyle and the Regent chuckled at the Speaker's apparent misunderstanding.

"I take it that what you've just told me is not general knowledge?" the Regent asked Kyle.

"No, it won't be, at least for a day or two more. We want to see if we can't snag a few additional units if they come looking for the craft already lost."

"Since I've obviously made a fool of myself," Gavril sighed, "would either of you fine gentlemen care to fill me in on what has transpired?"

"It would seem that while the problem posed by our Orion 'Friends' may not be completely resolved, Captain Argent has given them reason to worry."

Gavril raised his eyebrows in anticipation and appreciation. "Go on," he nearly begged.

The Regent nodded at Kyle.

"It had come to my attention," Kyle began, "that the pirates seemed to prefer engagements in which the numbers significantly favored them. This led to us to conclude that either they were able to tap into our tactical network and receive information on our escort schedule or they were just very, very good at laying in wait and passively scanning all that trotted by them."

"Either would explain their extraordinary good luck," Gavril conceded.

"The former, we addressed simply by encrypting all orders using the standard cipher. Starfleet security seems reasonable certain that all of our ciphers currently are secure and in fact, several weeks ago we instituted more rigorous military encryption for all orders, even the routine ones. With the possibility of leaks not getting any serious airplay, we looked at the idea of them using a passive scanning option. The question then became how to draw out the enemy, considering that any attempt of ours to directly engage them would have been simply ignored."

"Indeed," Gavril agreed.

"Even though it was initially successful, we couldn't continue to provide every freighter with a multi-ship heavy escort. As it was, we had become greatly overextended. We had brainstormed several options but none of them really gave us the resolution we had hoped for. However, Captain Postlethwaite, of the *USS Clarksdale*, recently reminded me of the writings of one Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American Naval Officer who served during the nineteenth century. He wrote extensively on the subject of wars hinging on the outcome of what he termed 'a decisive naval battle' -- massive engagements where each side musters all their military assets then they have a go at it. During our First World

War, the British and German Navies almost had a stab at it but in the end, both sides were too afraid of the devastating consequences that the loss of such a large portion of their respective navy might have and thus never truly engaged each other. The resulting battle was known as the Battle of Jutland. However, with the emergence of aircraft carriers and submarines, Mahan's theories ultimately became irrelevant and were subsequently taught as what *not* to do in a modern naval engagement. "

"Considering most of your battles on Earth seem to revolve around possession of real estate, I can see how truly irrelevant possession of the ocean itself must have been. Quite obviously, your Mahan was wrong."

"Not as off-base as we might think," Kyle pointed out to the Speaker. "In our situation here, a great decisive naval battle could easily have been ideal. Decisive loss might finally have woken Starfleet up to the fact that we have a problem out here. And a decisive victory would have, at the very least, made things a lot easier for us. Be that as it may, we still had a problem -- how to draw out an enemy unwilling to engage in one's decisive battle."

"How indeed," Gavril said wryly, his eyebrows twitching in anticipation.

Kyle quietly mulled over the fact that this was accomplished with the help and cooperation of several of his local trade merchants. He also would omit the fact that a hefty exchange of military technology had transpired to make this all possible. *What they don't know won't hurt them. Besides, they would hardly miss the handful of planetary defense guns he had re-allocated. No one ever did -- worthless energy suckers that they were.*

"We managed to fit three of our Perimeter Action Craft into the freighters' disposable cargo holds. Then they were carried out on what seemed to be normal cargo runs into Red Omega. The weight loadouts of these freighters was a little bit lower than normal, but not significantly to anyone performing a passive scan. We felt that this was a fair approximation of what one might expect from your average heavy lifter."

"But how could you have possibly mounted a whole starship in a cargo hold?" the Regent asked incredulously.

"Most of the PACs are fairly compact and low slung at that," Kyle explained. "As long as the haulers were rigged for bulk cargo, it wasn't a problem. We had to remove the cargo doors and replace them with facsimile plates that could be easily jettisoned, but that was about it. The matings itself were performed at a salvage yard a couple of systems over."

"Your idea, I take it," Gavril asked.

"I wish I could take sole credit for it, but it was Captain Postlethwaite who thought of putting the ships inside the cargo hold. My idea was to simply tether them to the freighter's undersides and rig them for silent running. There was a far greater chance of them being detected that way but it was the best we could come up with until Postlethwaite's suggestion. My Chief of Staff suggested that the operation commence whilst I was here on Galena. He thought that most would never consider anyone mounting a major battle whilst the Station Commander was out of the area."

"Your Captain Postlethwaite sounds like quite the enterprising fellow," the Regent remarked.

"He is, at that," Kyle readily agreed, happy that he had reluctantly put his faith in the PACs and it had paid off handsomely.

"Perhaps I should invite him to dinner some time," the Regent considered.

The thought of Captain Postlethwaite falling over himself at what would be proper protocol at the Galenan court had an odd comical appeal to Kyle. "I'm sure he would enjoy that, once he's recovered, your Majesty."

"There were casualties?" Gavril asked, concern tingeing his voice.

"Yes..." Kyle sighed, "unfortunately. Four of our fighters were damaged or destroyed but with no loss of life. However, three officers died on the *Clarksdale* and twelve were wounded. Despite their losses, they landed the biggest fish of them all, an Orion-owned D-7 plus eighteen attack craft. The two other freighters and PACs we sent out netted an additional thirty-six attack ships and a somewhat elderly D-5 craft."

"*My word!*" Gavril exclaimed. "That *is* decisive!"

"We'd like to believe so, Speaker. I think from now on, the traders will find Red Omega a lot less inhospitable. Despite our apparent victory, the threat is *far* from over. But I'm willing to lay odds that the pirates can't afford any more scums like this last one. In the meantime, I've been told that half a dozen freighters have already filed their flight plans into Red Omega. I'd say this problem is close to becoming a non issue."

"We can only hope so," Gavril agreed heartily.

"I suppose," the Regent, "at the very least you've answered one of Gavril's burning questions."

"Oh?" Kyle responded.

"Yes," the Regent began with a glint in his eyes, "the one where he wanted to know whether the next Station Commander would be someone competent or just another doddering idiot like the rest of them."

Kyle watched the Speaker almost choke on his wine causing the men to chuckle softly at his embarrassment.

* * *

Arcadia was pleased that the Regent had suggested they use the open-air carriage to take them back to their shuttle. It was a beautiful Galenan evening: moderate temperatures, light breeze, not a cloud in the sky, and the last time she'd seen moons this bright and lovely was back on her homeworld. She looked at her husband who seemed to be more relaxed than she'd seen him of late.

Kyle was also quietly enjoying the soft moonlight. With the carriage all to themselves, he scrunched down on the bench, extending his feet to rest on the bench opposite. Not having quite his long legs, Arcadia merely rested her legs on his.

"I do believe that I could learn to love this place. I've always loved twin moons -- even though these moons are on the small side." She emphasized her point by lifting up her left hand and creating a very small "o" with her thumb and forefinger, prompting a laugh from her husband. "They remind me of Vaega and our twin moons which, I assure you, are much larger."

He gave her a warm smile. "Perhaps we can spend some time here and travel about the country. The couple that owns the inn that Gavril took me to also own a B&B near here. Think you'd like to do a short holiday there?"

"I'd love to!"

"I think we've been married long enough for me to have figured as much," he chuckled and was rewarded by a nuzzle from his wife which he duly returned in kind.

"You seem extraordinarily pleased with yourself tonight, Pilot," Arcadia remarked. She had unbuttoned his shirt and was quietly caressing his chest, relaxing him even further.

"You could say that, Milady. We've finally broken the pirate's backs."

"Indeed?" Her voice was full of awe and appreciation. "I'm sure Boffin is pleased!"

"Couldn't have done it without his help."

"And young Lieutenant Wallace..." she added.

"Him too. In fact, he was on the *Clarksdale*. Did a fine job, I understand..." Kyle paused for a moment, "Speaking of young Wallace, how did Ike make it up to him and his ladyfriend?"

Arcadia shrugged. "He never gave me any details but he did say that he'd taken care of it. And I don't doubt him. I've never known Mister Ivanan to ever shirk a duty especially with me hovering over him with a stick."

"You wouldn't?"

"I most certainly would, Mister Argent! The way that he played that poor girl and tricked young Chris into staying was just plain wicked..." she replied angrily but then became mellow. "Granted, it did work itself out in the end. By the way, I take it that I won't be privy to the details?" she chided, poking his ribs for emphasis.

Kyle drew in a sharp breath. "Unfortunately, you will."

"How bad," she whispered, instantly becoming concerned.

"There were several deaths and multiple casualties, including Trevor Postlethwaite who was severely injured."

Arcadia became pensive. "There was a time when I thought that we were getting more than our fair share of business lately. Nothing major, in fact, everything we'd treated because of these Orion buggers was relatively minor... but this... There are times when I really hate our job."

"I know."

"Sending our people out to a certain death... There is no justice."

Kyle reached over and took her hand. "But I count on you to take care of them when they do come home."

"We do our best for you, Captain." She had tried to lighten the mood but she knew that both of them wouldn't allow it. "How badly was Trevor injured?"

"I didn't get all the details, but he seemed to be pretty bad off..."

"I haven't known Trevor all that long, but he'll be back. You can't keep an old space dog like him down for very long."

"That's true." Kyle paused before he became pensive. "I'm glad you were able to convince me that all wasn't lost."

"Some lessons, love," she murmured, burying herself within the folds of his warm body, "are worth passing along, especially if it's to an able student whom I also love very dearly."

He smiled and rested his head on hers so they could continue to enjoy the Galenan moonlight, the peaceful countryside, the gentle swaying of the carriage plodding along the road and each other's company for now and the foreseeable future.

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Next: *An Unexpected Death*

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