

Nights Of Future Past

"Kyle."

"What?"

"Kyle, please. It is time."

"Reesa ... Reesa. What ... Who..."

"I have to go Kyle. Remember, it is time."

* * *

After months of not dreaming those dreams and weeks after he had told Arcadia that he loved her, Kyle Argent was startled awake, drenched in a cold, clammy sweat. The dream was new, but his experience in the waking world had been even worse. He had seen his late wife in his dreams before -- alive, dying, dead -- but this dream was different. This was not a memory revisited, an event relived -- this was new.

It was something that had never happened.

And this led him to reach the only possible conclusion he could: *I was losing my mind.*

It took Kyle longer than usual to dress and have breakfast. He concluded though it was obvious to him that he was going insane, there was still work to be done. His enthusiasm was clearly lacking as he trudged to work and opened the door to his office. His ever-eager maintenance chief tailed him all the while giving him the morning daily update on the progress of the reconstruction effort on the Nighthawk Kyle had recently all but destroyed.

He dutifully half-listened to Virgil's boyish enthusiasm as the engineer prattled on. This was good enough for young Virgil who bounced out of the office once Kyle had dismissed him.

Kyle watched the door shut before turning his attentions to his job only to toss the datapadd he had in his hands to the side. His thoughts drifted to his late Nighthawk. *Was that the cause of all of this brooding?* He'd been through a lot with that bird. The Szatrappi War, oh -- wrong term -- 'Incursion', since it never was a war at all in the eyes of those who weren't there, his years back on Earth, his days as a Pilot Instructor, his assignment here -- and Reesa's death...

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No matter how he tried to approach how he felt, it always came back to her death, their life together, and him losing her.

Kyle remembered Reesa chiding him for not taking time off. She would tell him that he was simply wound up too tight and needed some time to relax.

And he rigidly informed her that a Pilot never rests or stands down, no matter what the medics might say. He told her he'd fly and that's that. Everything in between was simply situational problems and incidents to be dealt with as they occurred.

"Is that the code of the Fighter Corps?" Kyle could hear Reesa ask him in the voice he grown to love.

"No, but it is the code of me," he retorted aloud to the vacant office.

There was no one around to hear his comment and he was thankful for that. No one saw his impending insanity.

And yet, he mused, it was as if I could almost hear her...

* * *

"Commander Argent?"

Kyle groaned. It was just his luck for Captain Devlin to seek him out at a time like this. He'd purposely avoided her, even feigning legitimate excuses over the last few days not to have morning tea with her. He was sure that his deteriorating condition would be plainly apparent to her and she would have ordered him hauled off to the nearest loony bin.

"What is it? I'm busy, you know." He never looked up, keeping his eyes fixed, pretending to shuffle some meaningless datapadds around to convince her of his claim.

"I was wondering..." she began tentatively.

It was an effort not to look up. *Indecision. Nerves. That in short described what I felt Arcadia was displaying. It was something I'd never seen from her before.*

"...if we could have dinner tonight? That is... if it isn't inconvenient for you."

Kyle kept his eyes fixed downward in an attempt to mask his amazement as best he could. For a moment, his emotions played havoc with him and he was nearly overcome with the urge to leap up, take her in his arms, and proclaim his feelings for her. *Dinner? But this was nonsense! I cannot have feelings such*

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as that! I had them once, of course -- but they died with Reesa, and there would be no second chances. But nevertheless...

Kyle felt his insanity was spreading. Besides, he knew that Arcadia deserved so much better than someone who, in his own heart, knew he was insane. After several long seconds, he finally answered her, not even looking up.

"Unfortunately, I am rather busy today and for the next few days to come. The nuggets are about to graduate, after all."

At least he didn't have to lie to her... though it was stretching the truth.

"So you've told me.... Perhaps another time when you aren't as busy..." was her retort as she crept silently out of his office, not waiting for his response.

The sadness in those words spoke volumes to me. I was lost.

As he stared at the empty door, he made a quick decision. He would stay on until the nuggets graduated. Then he would resign, return to Earth, and disappear. *At least that way, I would retain my dignity.*

There. It was all planned out. All he had to do was keep it together for the next few days. If he kept public appearances to a minimum and avoid people...

Reesa...

Reesa, my love... I... I...

"Commander?"

"Uh...uhm... Virgil," Kyle responded his chief of maintenance as he attempted to pull himself together. "What can I do for you?"

"You asked me to update you on the progress of repair on two. I thought you'd like to see it yourself... Sir?"

Though Kyle felt mentally worn out and his body wracked with fatigue, he rose from his desk and accompanied Virgil out to the flight deck.

* * *

After a long day at the office, Kyle dragged himself to his quarters, fed himself and Mac, and then quickly fell into yet another deep, dream-filled sleep.

This was more familiar. The hanger bay of the Kirov, the Szatrappi delegation, the explosion -- my charging across the debris to retrieve her crushed body -- this was more like the dreams I was used to.

Only I wasn't in it. I was observing it. Most curious. Was I...?

"No, you are not dead. Yet. Although, at this rate, you soon could be."

I turned very, very slowly. If this were some sort of sick joke, then I would personally murder the bastard responsible...

"Oh, would you shut up already. So typically you -- when in doubt, destroy, and exterminate first. Ask questions later."

I was now completely lost.

"But Reesa, you are dead. I saw you die on the..." I turned and motioned to the all too familiar scene below. "I saw you die down there. You died in my arms..."

"Oh, Kyle. There is so much I wish I could tell you, but that's not what I am here. I am here to try and make you understand."

"Understand what?" I was simply resigned to go with the flow of things here. I knew when I was in above my head and this was one such occasion.

"Yourself. Or I should say your mind. Your mind is not like others, you know. It is powerful and strong. You should never forget that."

I managed to surprise myself by forming a logical conclusion. "So you are saying that you aren't really Reesa, but a representation of her as conjured up by my mind?"

Reesa smiled and cocked her head slightly to the right, as she usually did. I had to close my eyes so I wouldn't start crying. I missed her so much.

"You could say that -- but in reality, I am much more than that. Our bond, my sweet Kyle, was such that it transcends most rational descriptions. Yes, I am part of you -- but I am also part of her. I am the part of her that she gave to you. I am the part of her that will forever live on inside of you. Even though my body went away, my spirit never did. It was always and will always be with you."

I opened my eyes and found that I could bear the sight of her no longer. I grabbed her body and began sobbing in her arms. "I... missed you so much."

"Oh, Kyle. Please try to understand." She cradled my head in her arms and I suddenly felt as if all the pain that I had accumulated over the years had been suddenly lifted. And yet...

"I will not sustain this representation forever. It is why it is imperative that you understand..."

"Understand what?" I sobbed.

"You function differently than most of your kind. You experience pain much more intensely than most, yet you can mask your pain and your feelings from anyone you choose. When you gave part of yourself to me and I gave a part of me to you, this formed the basis of our bond. Your pain over losing me was severe, but yet you had masked it to everyone else."

"I never felt like putting on emotional displays for the world to see."

"You never had that problem with me, my love."

"I... I..." I was speechless. I had never considered that -- and yet it was true.

"Instead, you went to war. You vented your rage on any enemy you couldn't get your hands on."

"I... wanted revenge. Or death."

"Did you find a solution in your vendetta?"

"No." I had come to that conclusion a long time ago. Unfortunately by then, suicide missions were somewhat out of vogue.

"And of course you couldn't die, much less by your own hand. You are much too dutiful and honorable for that. Which brings us to the events of now..."

"I'm going mad!" I exclaimed with a hazy smile. If anything was needed to convince me, this was surely it.

"Nonsense. You simply won't allow yourself to understand."

"Understand what?" I barked, having decided that this discussion was beginning to annoy me.

"Understand that you are capable of forming a bond much like ours with someone else. It's simply a matter of finding the right person who has the facility for reciprocating your feelings."

I suddenly leapt up, as if thunderstruck. Somehow, it made sense. The words she spoke triggered a maelstrom of thoughts, emotions, and feelings which slowly began to coalesce into a coherent vision -- I finally began to understand.

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"You have a lot of thinking to do, Kyle. You have some important decisions to make."

I felt wondrous. It was a most curious thought indeed -- my mind had known all along what had bothered me, but the rest of me didn't. I had to learn how to understand.

"Precisely. It was a conclusion you had to make yourself. We simply, err... helped you along a bit."

I smiled. "When I first was in your arms, I felt at rest, at peace, but I still felt..."

"Alone. Your memories of me can do much to comfort you, but even so, we can never give you the feelings of physically and emotionally being with someone else."

I took Reesa in my arms and kissed her gently. "I can never forget you or what you meant to me."

Reesa held on to me for a long moment then finally spoke again. "And I will never forget you either, my beloved Kyle."

I looked at her face one last time. Her eyes glimmered with the color of silver as she held back a tear. Suddenly, the scenery around us began to fade and she began to slide from my arms.

I was losing her again. But this time, I felt no pain, no remorse, and no guilt.

"Because you understand."

Because I understood.

"It is time."

I agreed that it was time.

Time to let Reesa go.

Kyle woke with a start. He was still in bed, wondering if what he'd just experienced was real, an hallucination, or simply exactly what it made itself out to be. He rubbed his eyes a few times, and then finally decided that it wasn't important. What was important were the conclusions the admittedly surreal experience had left him.

He did have some tough decisions to make, but he already knew the decision had already been made.

And it was definitely time for him to get back to work.

* * *

Kyle was sitting in his office plowing through the never-ending stack of datapadds on his desk.

"Incoming call from Starfleet HQ" the bridge communications officer announced.

"I'll take it at my office link, thank you."

The viewscreen lit up with the logo of the UFP and he was advised of the secure nature of the link. He grimaced. The Fighter Corps could be so damned paranoid at times.

"Kyle! Good to see you again!" Captain Cordell Naismith began, *"Perhaps you have some good news to report?"*

Naismith was the Chief of Staff, Fighter Corps and qualified as a true Fighter Corps legend. As the highest-ranking Pilot in the Corps today, he had seen more action and served longer then most could remember. He had steadfastly refused to be down-checked from flight status and still logged over 200 hours of cockpit time a year. Even though the CinC of the Fighter Corps nominally reported to Starfleet, this man actually ran the show. And it was this man who had gotten him assigned here in the first place.

"Sir, it is with great sorrow that I have to report the following." *Well, I might as well be a bit melodramatic.* "As of Stardate *(I have no idea...)*, the 618th training squadron will be disbanded." The shocked expression on Naismith's face was well worth the effort. "However, it gives me great pleasure to announce that in its place I will have the honor of commissioning the 924th Tactical Wing."

The face on the comlink relaxed noticeably. Kyle couldn't help but notice his behavior as being somewhat odd. It wasn't all that usual to make wing as minuscule as this one a major issue, but Naismith had asked for updates and the like, and Kyle was more than willing to oblige.

"You have know idea just how good a piece of news that is, Kyle. Did you have any problems at all during training?"

"Not really. All in all, we have a pretty talented bunch here, rookies, and veterans alike. We did have one washout, but we were able to get a permanent

replacement." He opted not to elaborate on Mr. Roscoe and how he ended up as a mission specialist.

"Very, very good. How did you and the squadron interface with the CO and the crew of the ship?"

An odd question to ask. "Quite well, actually. I had no serious complaints about my officers from the ship's personnel. In general, I found them to be readily accepted by most."

"Splendid! Splendid, indeed!"

Naismith looked like a child who had just been given everything on his wish list for Christmas. He certainly seemed to think this was more important than Kyle did -- and Kyle was the one running the outfit.

"I noted that your ship was due to return to Earth in the near future. Please look me up then and I'll conduct a proper debriefing."

Kyle nodded. *Fair enough.*

"Kyle, I know you are getting up there in years of service..."

Which was an understatement, Kyle mused. Naismith had been in the Corps for fully 4 years longer than me. If it wasn't for him, I would be known as the Oldest Living Fighter Jock, which was something I truly could do without,

"But I do hope you consider staying in the Corps a while longer. I certainly do believe that you some future prospects here that are well worth considering. Continue to keep me apprised of any important news, please?"

"Yes, Sir."

And with a visual snap, the link went dead. Kyle leaned back in his chair. Naismith had touched on one of the important decisions that Kyle had to make. And realistically, he thought that it wasn't all that hard of a decision to make anymore. He'd always wanted to fly. It was his wish, his dream, and his motivation. He simply could not quit -- not now, not ever.

Having made his decision, the Squadron Commander settled into a routine that had one purpose -- to graduate his nuggets into a Fighter Wing. He grabbed a padd from his desk and started to work on it when he was interrupted.

"Commander Argent to the Hangar Bay. Commander Argent to the Hangar Bay."

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Kyle dropped the padd he was working on. He'd never been paged to the hangar bay since he had arrived here, but there was always a first for everything.

* * *

The proud Chief of Ground Forces was beaming with pride. "Isn't she a beaut?"

Gareth Roscoe scowled at Virgil. "Kid, you've asked us the same damn question about a dozen times," he grumbled, "and the answer is still 'Yes, she is a beaut'."

Virgil glared back at Roscoe. He was about to issue a retort when and out of breath Skye Masterson came running toward everyone.

"He's coming! He's coming! Quick, everybody hide!"

None of those assembled needed much prompting, except Roscoe who still was grumbling that this was a rather juvenile idea. Virgil had the strong urge to tell him shut up, but it was a bit too late for that, as the main lights went out. They heard the familiar hiss as the doors to the hangar bay slid open and then they were able to make out quiet footsteps. It was odd to hear the hangar bay this quiet -- about the only other sounds they could make out was the quiet hum that the stardrive emitted through the ship. The footsteps were getting closer and closer. It wouldn't be long now...

"Oh my..." Kyle really didn't know how to express his astonishment of what was in front of him.

"Surprise!"

The entire assembled personnel of the soon-to-be-decommissioned 618th Tactical Squadron leapt out from wherever they were hiding and began to fall up in a semi-circle around their Squadron Commander.

"I take it I have you to thank for this little 'surprise', Mr. Taylor?" Kyle began, trying to remain somewhat neutral. He thought that he barely managed to succeed.

"Yes, Sir!" Virgil snapped back. "Care to inspect it?"

Kyle paused for a moment and then replied, "I'd be glad to." *If they only knew just how glad I truly was!*

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He spent forever inspecting every aspect of the craft. He was thorough and complimentary throughout. As they rounded the aft section of the craft, he finally spoke to Virgil directly.

"I'm honored by all the attention you and your fellow crewmembers were willing to give me, but, in all honesty -- a surprise party? A ritual sack-over-the-head kidnapping is more akin to Fighter Corps tradition. Some might see this action as somewhat juvenile, you know."

Upon Kyle's pronouncement, Roscoe's open hand quietly reached over to Skye Masterson. Skye scowled, but promptly dropped a credit chit into it.

"But I personally find it rather touching. I am quite pleased by all of this. Thank you, Mister Taylor."

Skye's hand moved towards Roscoe, along with a winning smile. In the meantime, Mr. Roscoe returned the chit and anted up, all the while cursing under his breath.

Score one for the good guys, Kyle smiled as he had witnessed the events out of the corner of his eye.

Kyle continued to inspect every centimeter of the craft. Nothing was missing. It was all there. To the eye of an experienced Pilot (*and I've been told that I qualify in that category*), it would seem that they were in the presence of one fully functional and rather new looking Nighthawk ASSFV 186 ACE. Just like the bird he used to fly. *It was marvelous.*

"You truly outdid yourself, Mister Taylor. It must have been hard to get the specifications on the A-C-E model, I would think."

"I had downloaded them a while back, simply to have complete documentation on all craft roistered here."

Kyle looked to Virgil with awe. *This kid was worth his weight in gold. If he ever did get his wings, he would leave a big void in the ground personnel department.* He was simply not used to this sort of heads up thinking, as it wasn't exactly common in the less glamorous ranks of the Fighter Corps.

"I had some problems getting the latest spec operating system to be installed into the craft, but I finally got that as well. It integrates several modifications and upgrades over the system you were using."

Kyle was used to having modifications to the OS be carried out by his crew chief and had forgotten about keeping them current. No doubt, Virgil had kept all the fighters aboard up to the latest specs.

"Have you run a systems check yet?"

"Shortly before you arrived, Sir. The monitor is still attached if care to check the results," Virgil declared with a satisfied smile.

Kyle soon saw why. Fighters could run self-diagnostic programs that could detect a loosened bolt or a dirty panel. This data was compiled into the crafts operational readiness status, which on new craft rarely exceeded 97%. Flight readiness was usually certified at 99.8%.

This craft had an operational readiness of 99.999%.

"You are either a magician or a miracle worker, Mister Taylor. Either way, I am impressed... *Very* impressed."

Kyle's praise seemed to have a universally relaxing effect on everyone present. They all began to examine at the craft from all angles to inspect Virgil's handiwork.

"Why don't you try it out, Sir?" a voice rang out from the back.

Kyle climbed happily up the stair pole and took his seat behind the controls. He strapped himself in and frowned.

"Any problems, Sir?" Virgil asked, concern lacing his voice.

"New restraining belts," Kyle sighed. "You just can't appreciate the benefit of well broken in belts until you feel just how stiff new ones were. But I'll live -- somehow." *Well, there were some things even a miracle worker couldn't do.*

"Are you going to name her, Sir?" Skye Masterson asked.

Kyle paused. "I suppose so. But, in all honesty, this really isn't my craft to name." He stopped and glanced down to Virgil. "Mister Taylor, would you care to do the honors for us?"

Virgil just stood there with his mouth hanging open. He shut it quickly and took a few deep breaths. "Well, since this bird rose from the ashes of another like the phoenix in old earth mythology, I think it would be only proper that we call her the *Iron Phoenix*."

"*Iron Phoenix*," Kyle echoed. "Not only appropriate, but quite likable as well. Excellent choice, Mister Taylor." It was more than likeable. All his other crafts had the prefix "iron" for his callsign Ironman. Iron Phoenix was an appropriate name, indeed.

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Kyle began punching the codes and data needed to register the craft with the Fighter Corps. Though a tedious task to most, those around the cockpit couldn't help but notice the almost unending pleasure Kyle took in sitting in the craft. Some people are hard to please, some are easy to please -- but the best way to please a pilot was to give him or her a new craft.

For the first time in a long time, Kyle felt a smile crease his lips as he continued punching the codes in.

* * *

The moment that all the nuggets were waiting for finally arrived -- the day they received their wings. The ceremony was short and sweet just as the Initiation Ceremony, only this time, one and all knew that they had accomplished much and learned the impossible. And they were now designated a Wing.

Once the ceremony was over and they were dismissed, the newly minted nuggets spent most of the time admiring their new gold wings, eating, or just generally enjoying themselves. During a lull in the drinking and backslapping, Skye gathered the pilots around him.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I was challenged the other day to come up with a name for the 924th. I suggest HawkWind."

"HawkWind. Hmmm.... kinda catchy, I like it," Roscoe told the group.

Everyone nodded in assent.

"Now," Roscoe smirked, "who's going to tell the old man?"

The group looked to each other and then zeroed in on Skye.

"Figures. OK, I'll tell Commander Argent..." Skye paused and smiled, "...tomorrow. I want to enjoy myself tonight."

* * *

Despite being tired and somewhat lonely, Captain Arcadia Devlin was having a fine time at the Nuggets' party. It was another fine party and she knew that she had to send a personal compliment to Ship's Services for another job beyond the call of duty. Arcadia had noticed that they are always ready to provide for their comforts be it a party or just a simple midnight snack. She began to make her exit having stayed well past the time she had allocated for this event.

Arcadia admitted to being a bit disappointed that Commander Argent hadn't ask her to dance, but then she noticed that he'd been a bit distracted of late. Between preparing for the ceremony and receiving his rebuilt Nighthawk, she assumed he'd been very busy, too busy, in fact--

"Captain Devlin, could I... uh... walk with you for a moment?" Lieutenant Commander Argent requested nervously, interrupting her thoughts.

She noted that the touch of uneasiness in his voice and demeanor were becoming part of his general behavior these past few weeks and it wasn't pretty. Never mind the fact he'd kept his distance from her. She stopped to turn towards him. "If you wish, Commander," she replied with distinct coolness to her voice.

"The other week, when you came into my office and asked if I would have dinner with you..."

Arcadia felt herself stiffen and felt defensive. "I'm sorry if I made a mistake in asking you that question."

Kyle cringed. "I'd been under a lot of stress lately."

She was stunned at his excuse. *And I haven't?* she thought. *Try running a starship my good man.*

Kyle paused and looked sheepishly towards her. "I wasn't quite myself that day. But the sum total of it all is that I would love to have dinner with you, Arcadia."

His remark caught her somewhat off guard. "You would?" she replied as evenly as she could.

"Yes, I would. But in all honesty..."

Well, here's the catch, she sighed to herself.

"I would like to not only have dinner with you -- I would like to have more... Much more."

What is he on about? "More? More meals?" she stammered.

"Sure," he smiled easily at her. "Sure, more meals -- but more than even that."

Oh, forget about composing myself. What the bloody hell did he mean? she asked herself, still trying to keep calm and composed as thoughts raced wildly through her head.

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"Much more than that," he all but purred as he slowly sought out her hand and grasped it tenderly.

She looked at her hand and then moved her eyes towards his to drink them in. It was at that point that she *finally* understood where *they* were going.

They stood staring at each other and holding hands for a long while until she realized where she was and noticed that a few interested parties were paying attention in them just standing there in silence.

"Are you free now?" she finally asked.

Kyle glanced around towards his people who had suddenly all looked away. "I don't think they'll miss me."

She smiled. "I was just going back to my quarters for a cup of tea. Would you care to accompany me, Pilot?"

Kyle gave her the warmest smile she'd ever seen. "I'd love to, Milady," he murmured softly.

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