((Starbase 118 - Counselor Yael's Office))

Hours passed, walk-in's arrived and left, challenges were faced in various ways. The Denobulan hybrid smiled his way through them all, cheerful and typical. It was a typical day.

It had been a mere twelve some hours since he'd stepped out of the freezing lake waters of the Crystalline Lake in the holodeck. Since he'd told Alora everything he had never told anyone else.

The most he'd ever told anyone was Anthony… and only that he'd been a hostage for two days time, about two years ago on Duronis. The Marine hadn't asked for details beyond that, and he hadn't offered them.

Ashley had gone back to his quarters after Alora had walked with him to the door, and laid there on his bed amongst the pile of pillows and blankets to warm his bones again, staring at the ceiling. He didn't sleep. And though he smiled and kept amethyst eyes on his crewmates and the eclectic mix of persons who came to him in his office through the day… today, atypically, his heart just wasn't in it.

He could go a day without sleeping. He'd done it before. Just smile and get through the day.

His last walk-in disappeared out the door, and his smile melted away, leaving a more tired expression than he'd ever let on.

He wouldn't burden his crew with it.

The faces drifted through his mind. The sneer of the Laudeman drug runner who had taken him hostage. His fathers sudden and rude appearance at the Gratitude Festival. The sharp words *cutting* into his guts like any knife… like the actual knives he'd felt cut into him those years past. The unpleasant thoughts began to run together.

He had told Alora he would go to sickbay after his walk-in block.

However much he was trying to stop doing so… he had lied.

((SB118 Ops - Alora's Quarters - Early Evening))

Music had been wafting through her quarters. After work, Alora had returned and eaten a quick dinner so she could focus on her music. It was piano night, and her fingers had itched to dance over the keys. The smooth surface of the ivories was familiar. Comfortable. Reubke's Piano Sonata in B-flat had been a piece she'd started just a few days prior and she turned to that first. Her fingers were slow, still learning the runs and motions of the notes.

Eventually, her fingers went still and hovered over the blacks and whites. Then, another piece was coaxed from the instrument. In construct, it was far simpler, the notes coming easily. As she moved into the music, her voice joined.

I see your face
in the boy that stands beside me
and I just love the way that feels

I heard your laugh
in the cafe on the corner
but that voice belongs to someone else

And I hoped to find you
standing by my side forever
where we would have stayed
for always

And I'd hoped to feel you
holding my hand in your hand
where we would have stayed
always

Verriar: =/\= Is this blasted computer working? HellooOOOoooo? =/\=

She had been descending. Melancholy had stretched out its hand and taken hold and for a moment, it refused to let go. Alora's own hands had paused immediately, but she had to shake herself out of the depths of thoughts that threatened to drag her down. She finally processed that someone had called her - and that someone was a woman whom she not only liked, but hoped she could consider a friend at some point.

DeVeau: =/\=Verriar?=/\=

Verriar: =/\= Aloooora, darling! Lovely to speak with you dear. =/\=

The four-armed Terellian was her usual dramatically flamboyant self even over the comms, and had somehow worked out how to reach out via the badge comm. system… which was *typically* not for civilian use. But Verriar wasn't one to stand back from little boundaries like that. She headed Verriar's Bar and Tongo Palace, and wasn't one to shy away from what was necessary to get things done.

DeVeau: =/\=Hey...how are you?=/\=

Verriar: =/\= I do hope you're not busy, darling. But if you are, you should consider getting *unbusy* and visiting my lovely establishment. =/\=

DeVeau: =/\=Unbusy? Uh..well, I mean, I was certainly going to come by and see you at some point, but I didn't actually plan to do that today.=/\=

Verriar: =/\= Darling. You *need* to come visit my establishment. =/\=

The tone had suddenly shifted. Gone was the reverie, the enjoyment. And a new tone, one that lacked all question or frivolity replaced it. It was not an invitation being offered. It was a demand.

And beyond that, something more. Alora stood, not because of the demand, but because of the ripple of concern that she heard behind it. That tinge of something else. Something was wrong.

DeVeau: =/\=Are you okay?=/\=

Verriar: =/\= He's *drinking,* darling. =/\=

It took a moment, but then Alora suddenly realised what she meant. Without hesitation, she spun around, knocking over her piano bench and ignoring it as she made a beeline for the door.

DeVeau: =/\=I'm on my way.=/\=

((Verriar's Bar & Tongo Palace))

The shouts of TONGOOOOO were loud and boisterous, the sounds of Andorian Jazz ringing with energy through the Promenade from the large double doorway that hosted Verriars establishment. People coming and going, music playing, scantily clad ladies with flowing drinks… it was a typical night at the strange and lovely place run by the Terellian behind the bar, serving three drinks at a time and waving to her regulars with the fourth. Tonight she wore a flamboyant green frock with frills at the shoulders that, despite her considerable size, did a lovely job of slimming her figure. It was all the rage back on her home world.

One of the voices at the tongo wheel was a familiar one. A Denobulan hybrid, the alcoholic two years sober... with his freshly poured drink.

His *seventh.*

The wheel spun and the clicking ran down, and it was another win. TONGOOOO!

Verriar slid a drink down the bar as she set eyes on her invited guest.

Verriar: Darling! Lovely to see you! You should come more often!

DeVeau: I know. I was going to come see you, I promise.

Alora had come a few times without Ashley, just so she could visit Verriar. The woman was a delight, and didn't seem to mind that Alora, like Ashley didn't drink.

Usually...didn't drink.

Green eyes slipped over to the Tongo table and fell upon the violet hued man. The way he swayed and lurched, even smaller motions exaggerated, gave every indication that he was drop down, loaded up, sick in the bowl drunk.

That wasn't good.

Verriar: I don't *normally* complain when a guest of my establishment starts spending real latinum. But this, I think, is a different kind of moment.

The Terellian glanced to the Tongo wheel where a sizable amount of latinum had been bet for the next spin. The House was winning big, of course she loved that.

DeVeau: How many?

Verriar: It's his *seventh.*

DeVeau: Okay.

Not good.

DeVeau: This...is going to be interesting. Thanks Verriar. I'm glad you called me.

With a small smile toward the Terellian, Alora turned and aimed for the Tongo table. Perhaps it was luck. Perhaps it was providential. Whatever it was, someone gave up and vacated the seat next to Ashley. Alora immediately slid right on it, cutting off another man who growled at her. She turned and flashed a brilliant smile.

DeVeau: Don't worry, I won't be long.

Alora didn't even bother to see if the man accepted that or not. Her focus shifted to Ashley and she leaned against the table, eyes taking stock.

DeVeau: Hey Ash.

Glazed amethyst eyes turned to her and lit up when he realized who it was. Instantly he reached out with the hand *not* holding a drink and embraced her warmly. There was no hint of trouble at the contact, no trepidation at all in the slightest.

Yael: Alora! Did you come to bet? This is no small hand.

He might not have entirely gotten through that without slight slurring, but he was clearly focused on the game.

DeVeau: No. I didn't.

Alora's gaze dropped down to the glass that he held, then back up to his face. He had touched her. He had actually /touched/ her. If he wasn't drunk, he'd gone insane, or worse. He was so far down the hole, she wasn't sure she could pull him out. She was darn well going to try.

DeVeau: How long have you been here?

Yael: Ooooh, five minutes or so.

The Denobulan chuckled in a way that left it clear it had been quite a bit longer.

DeVeau: Any chance you might leave any time soon?

Yael: ::smiling at her, then motioning to the wheel with his drink:: Not when the bet is *this* big.

DeVeau: Is there any way I can convince you to come with me?

Yael: Awww… ::there was actual condescension in his tone::... guys, she wants me to leave!

A chorus of *BOOOOO's* came from the group at the table as the Denobulan laughed, as well as a few laughs from others. He tossed another two strips of latinum in the bowl at the center.

Yael: ::to the dealer:: Leverage the buy-in. Spin for red.

He accented the increased bet by downing the glassful of deep red liquid in his hand. An attentive wait staff instantly arrived to take his glass and offer him a new refreshment… his eighth… this one was a blue liquid that sparkled silver in the light. Apparently he'd been mixing his liquors.

Alora licked her lips, then dropped her voice low, soft, though not too soft so as not to be heard.

DeVeau: Ashley…

Alora rose from her seat slightly and leaned forward. Her chin tilted up slightly, her lips parted, then came to rest just beside his ear, lightly brushing against it as she whispered.

DeVeau: I need you…

To come with me...the thought finished in her head alone.

Amethyst eyes turned to her, clearly hearing the invitation but not nearly cognizant enough to realize it was a ruse. He leaned slightly closer to her, the blue whiskey shifting in the glass in his far hand. He smiled at her in a way he *never* would have had he been sober.

Yael: I'll take you home. ::he paused, leaning in closer, almost…:: … after the game is finished.

He turned back to the wheel as it spun, the loud clacking drowning out conversations. It landed on red. The chorus of TONGOOOOO rose yet again, and the stakes for the game rose.

Yael: High stakes investment!

The rowdy crowd clearly liked a high stakes game, celebrating the large bowl of latinum that compounded with every round. They lifted their drinks, and so did Ashley.

Alora watched, her concern growing by the moment. Ashley was a guy. She had hoped that little hint might encourage him to leave the table. Evidently, she was going to have to go even further. Scooting forward, she closed the distance between them, allowing one hand to rest upon his chest. Sliding it upward, she let it travel over his shoulder, to his cheek, then turned his head. Then, Alora leaned forward, her lips pressing against Ashley's, insistent and unyielding.

A cry of delight and "oooooh's" of titillation rose in the crowd around them, and instinctively Ashley kissed her deeply back, his free hand traveling up to tangle in her hair and pull her closer… several seconds later pulling himself back with a gasp for air, trying to refocus but clearly torn between the high stakes game and the obvious invitation.

Yael: ::sternly, but conflicted::… After… the *round* is finished.

He barely managed to growl the words out before throwing a new strip of latinum with far too much power into the bowl to match the bet of the other players. It nearly bounced out of the bowl and the dealer had to catch it and slip it back into the pool. Meanwhile the Denobulan threw back the blue liquid, halving the amount in his glass, sucking in a deep breath for air after as it burned its way down.

Alora waited, turning to look at the person running the Tongo table, eyebrow arched upward. If only she could find some way to communicate. End the round! Do something! Why didn't Verriar cut him off? Ugh. Was he going to make her go further? While not the bulkiest man she'd ever seen, Alora doubted she could just chuck him over her shoulder and carry him off.

He reached out to drape his free arm around her shoulder as the bets rounded the table, pulling her close to him in their seats.

Yael: Relax! You're in such a *hurry*... have a drink. VERRIAR! ::he motioned to Alora that she should be added to his tab:: Anything you want. It's on me. ::he tugged her tighter:: Then we can go to my place.

He was sharing the love and spending all his latinum, but having apparently a great time doing it. Meanwhile he took an unsteady breath, and his words were nowhere near unslurred.

Alora sighed inwardly. He wasn't budging and she was getting desperate - but she wasn't out of options. Unfortunately, the least drastic of those that didn't involve calling back up wasn't exactly what she wanted to do. But if it got him out of there…

No. No she wouldn't do that. She'd already gone further than she wanted, and she wrestled with what she'd done already. It was too much. Everything had been too much. Resigned, Alora tapped her combadge.

DeVeau: =/\=Hey Tony. It's Alora. =/\=

Meeks: =/\=Go ahead.=/\=

DeVeau: =/\=I need help. Verriar's=/\=

Glancing over at Ashley, she added -

DeVeau: =/\=Hurry.=/\=

Meeks: =/\=On my way.=/\=

He had his head buried in the depths of a good story; a murder mystery written a couple of centruies ago on Earth. While it wasn't on the original paper it had been written on, reading the words on a PADD instead of acting it out on a holodeck still allowed the imagination to create the translation from the written words. It took him a second to answer when his combadge had chirped, but hearing Alora's voice brought him around. There was an emotion carried on her tones, concern and almost panic, and that brought Tony to his feet. With her call for help, Tony was in motion without any further question.

((Only A Few Minutes Later))

The round at the tongo wheel was still going strong when a certain Marine stepped into the establishment.

Verriar: Welcome! Welcome to Verriars! What can I get you?

Looking around the room, Tony searched for Alora among the sea of people in the bar. It didn't take long, and when he saw her the gravity of the situation settled in quickly. Things were bad, and could only get worse.

Meeks: ::Leaning in to ensure Verriar understood him:: You see that little Denobulan right there? ::Pointing at Ashley, and not waiting for a reply:: He's had enough. You get what I'm saying?

Tony looked the bar owner in the eye, and there was a moment of unspoken understanding at the Marine's demand. Without taking the time to get any feedback from their host, he turned toward the table and wiggled past people to get there.

Alora popped up. She had taken that seat far longer than she had said she would, but was grateful the man had simply grumbled and grabbed another when it had come available. While she had waited, her eyes had kept close watch on the entrance, and when Tony appeared, she popped up and waved, calling out above the din.

DeVeau: TONY! Over here!

Meeks: ::Slipping in beside her:: What the hell is he doing?

DeVeau: Hallelujah. I can't get him to stop. He's on his tenth drink and he's going to kill himself at this rate.

The 'he' in question was getting more and more drunk by the minute. That drink to which she'd referred was no no more, guzzled down his gut, leaving the glass pitifully empty. He had also ended a round with great success, winning a pile of latinum which he was now beginning to re-invest in a new round.

Yael: ::to the dealer, tossing in three strips of latinum:: Index the margin!

DeVeau: At this point, I think we're going to have to get physical.

And more than just kissing.

Meeks: ::Leaning in to speak to his friend:: Hey buddy...

Yael: Anthony! ::he finally noticed his arrival, celebrating and lifting his newly acquired bright red Risian Sunrise Tequila to the Marine:: My favorite Marine is here to play!

A shout of approval rose in the inebriated crowd. Even a crowd of degenerate gamblers and drunkards loved their Marines.

Yael: And he plays *hard*! ::he insinuated much, making the crowd chuckle around him, then turned to Anthony in his chair slightly:: Did you bring latinum? The bet's *up* there.

The Denobulan was obviously enjoying himself, delighted to see the Marine, and obviously very drunk by this point, nursing his drink to maintain the high and slurring noticeably. He drank again, the small remaining liquid sparkled a bright red and orange as it swirled in his unsteady grasp.

Meeks: Why don't we call it a night, huh bud?

Ashley didn't even consider it, openly scoffing in fact.

Yael: Evade! ::to the table, showing his cards, then speaking to Anthony with a slur:: You'll have to wait for the round to finish to join in.

A very scantily clad waitress arrived with a single drink on her tray. It was similar to the one Ashley had almost finished and appeared to be it's replacement. From the look Tony gave her when she started to deliver it, she must have understood the libation was not welcome. Without a word, she turned on her heel and retreated.

Meeks: I'm not here to gamble, my friend.

Glazed amethyst eyes flicked over to his Human friend, taking him in almost coldy, a sudden reversal from his joviality prior.

Yael: ::bluntly, slurring:: Then you should vacate the table.

Meeks: ::Seriousness set into his voice:: Ashley, you and I are leaving… one way or the other.

Yael: Sure, sure. ::dismissively, he rolled his eyes:: After this round.

The Denobulan seemed to have no intention of listening, and tapped his empty glass on the table in a sign to the scantily clad waitress that he needed another, clearly annoyed that he had to call for it in the first place and not realizing Meeks had interfered in the flow of drinks.

Meeks: I'd prefer if you were on your own feet when we walk out of here.

Ashley set his gaze on the Marine now, but it was a different kind of gaze.

Yael: Anthony. ::his smile became somewhat predatory:: Alora's already offered to go home with me.

He was very apparently insinuating something more than just being escorted to the safety of his quarters, and was thinking something entirely untoward... and enjoying the thought.

Yael: But I have *NO* problem if you want to *join* us.

Meeks: Don't make me go hands on with you, Ashley.

Yael: ::laughing:: Ohhh, he's gunna get hands-on with me, guys!

An excited assortment of "oooh's" rose from the players at the table, and the drunken Denobulan laughed, abandoning his empty glass on the playing table. When he spoke again it was in a deeper tone, almost as if he was *daring* the Marine to do something.

Yael: Don't threaten me with a good time, Anthony.

Tony was taken back by the audacity of his friend's actions. The man he was seeing tonight was a far cry different from the man who had become his friend. This was a testimony to the way alcohol affected some people and not others, and to some there was a demon in the bottle, waiting to be released.

Meeks: ::To Alora:: You got bail money?

DeVeau: Bail money? For Ashley? Are you going to throw him in the brig?

That wasn't exactly what Alora had in mind, but if that's what it took to protect him, then that's what it took.

Meeks: Not for him… for me.

Alora blinked. What? Uh oh...

Tony didn't wait, but swiftly turned back toward the table and scooped up the extremely inebriated man. He used the little Denobulan's wiggles against him, spinning him around then tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of spuds. Ashley was far too uncoordinated to stop him doing it, but struggled nonetheless.

Meeks: Ashley… don't make me knock your ass out!

Yael: ::sharply:: HEY!

Meeks: ::To Alora:: Grab his stuff and let's go.

There wasn't much to grab except what was left of his latinum. Alora scooped it into her arms and hurried after the Marine who was carrying the sack of Denobulan.

Tony turned, and the swinging and kicking feet caused the ground to part and move away from them. Ashley inadvertently kicked a couple of people in the fray, creating chaos in the crowd. Alora ducked and dodged, keeping pace. Pushing toward the door, Tony walked them through the sea of people. The fuss caught the attention of… well, everybody, but a couple of Verriar's bouncers thought they'd get involved. Apparently they didn't think carrying a paying customer out of the bar was good for business. One of them, a large man with blue-green skin stepped into Tony's path, arms crossed across his chest.

Meeks: Alora! Fix this guy!

Wait, what? Fix the guy? Alora cast an incredulous glance, then turned to the bouncer.

DeVeau: Dude, Verriar called me specifically to take care of him. Don't believe me, ask her yourself.

Alora jerked her head toward the bar, turning to catch the amused Terellian's eye. The multi-armed woman gave the bouncer a stern nod, indicating he shouldn't stop them.

That taken care of, though probably not in the way Tony had imagined, Alora ducked out of the establishment and hurried after her friends. Tony didn't stop, even as they crossed the threshold into the public area. Once in the street, Tony searched for a good place to have a one-on-one with the drunk man, out of view from the rest of the station. There was a small park nearby that would fill the bill. He made a bee-line for there, Ashley still making a lot of noise and thrashing about. Once there, Tony found a spot of grass and unceremoniously dumped the Denobulan onto the semi-soft surface.

Yael: What the Hell is your-...!!

There was venom in those few words, but they halted and his expression turned… and he turned then too down toward the ground, expelling the contents of his stomach into the grass. The sudden motion and activity had been too much. The liquid alcohol that his body hadn't processed yet disappeared into the green grass as quickly as he could wretch it up. It was unfortunately violent and sudden, and left him coughing for air.

Meeks: ::Retrieving a kerchief from his pocket and tossing it onto Ashley's chest:: It's not my problem, Brother.

Ashley crushed the strip of fabric in his grip as he tried to stabilize himself, but his vision was swimming and blurry.

Meeks: You wanna tell me what this is all about?

DeVeau: Uh...wouldn't it be better to go somewhere else? Somewhere more private? Maybe back to his quarters?

Ashley, she was sure, was going to be humiliated after this, and Alora didn't want to make things worse than they already were. Besides, getting him contained somewhere familiar might help things along. Though, maybe they could wait till he stopped retching.

Yael: ::getting control of his stomach for the moment:: Go to Hell. BOTH of you!

He chucked the kerchief back at them, not aiming for one or the other, but it fell to the ground, unable to carry his anger with it. He pushed up unsteadily to his feet and staggered two, then three steps away, then swayed and went back down onto his hands and knees in the grass. He'd been sitting at the tongo table for some time before being kidnapped from it, and the sudden action and motion had thrown what little internal stability he might have had right out the airlock. His stomach rolled, though it was empty.

Alora's arms clenched tighter around the latinum, her teeth gritting.

DeVeau: I've already been there!

She spat out. As soon as she said the words, she realised she was taking it way too personally. It wasn't Ashley talking, it was the liquor. Still, the words hit a sore spot and she went silent instead of throwing something else verbally back. That would only make things worse.

Tony shot a look at Alora, not knowing exactly what she meant. He knew she had been through some stuff in her life, but she had never elaborated on it. That said, he didn't think now was the time to go down that road. Instead, he figured it was best to focus on the issue at hand. For now, Tony listened to his friend's drunken ramblings.

There was a moment… a short moment, where the anger bled out of the Denobulans expression and he just stared down into the grass, fatigued… and lost.

Yael: You don't understand… ::but being so drunk he couldn't form the words to explain it to them, and the alexithymia turned to anger again, his words became biting::... I don't need your help!

Meeks: Let us take you home. We can talk it over there.

Yael: If you want to take me home, I'll expect more than *talking.*

He said this crude thing bluntly, as if he were trying to drive the Marine away. The sober Denobulan knew and was at peace with the fact that they weren't close in that way… that Tony couldn't return those feelings... but the drunken, slurring Denobulan would weaponize it.

Meeks: Um, no. Plumbings all wrong, buddy.

DeVeau: Tony, he's not reasonable. We need to get him somewhere less public. Can we please get him home?

As disturbed by his behaviour as she was, as much as he'd hit a nerve, Alora knew she wouldn't want to be in a public place. Unfortunately, she'd already had that kind of experience. It was definitely best to get him someplace more private. More comfortable.

DeVeau: There's a transporter station just up that way. Let's get him transported as close as we can to his quarters. It'll be faster that way.

Meeks: You gonna walk with me?

DeVeau: Seriously...I'd just pick him up again.

Yael: Don'chu dare… ::the fight bleeding out of him::

Alora waited while Meeks hauled the Denobulan onto his shoulder again despite the feeble protest. Even as he struggled, when Tony whipped him around, the counselor looked more like a doll than a real person. With him disabled, the two made their way to the transporter station.

((Starbase 118 - Ensign Ashley Yael's Quarters))

That did cut off the time it took to get to his quarters. Once they transported to the station closest to the turbolift that would take them straight to the residential area, they hightailed it onto a turbolift. Thankfully, those around them really wanted to avoid whatever was going on with the trio, so they had the lift all to themselves. A few minutes later, they arrived, and the computer recognised the owner and the doors parted for them, revealing Yael's relatively small, spartan-decorated studio quarters, where the coffee table was covered in data pads and the bed haphazardly made that morning… as if someone had tossed and turned, and not cared to do more than throw the sheets up.

Meeks: Home sweet home.

The Denobulan had gone quiet, his rage dispersed. Instead of fighting or kicking, now he more gently tapped the Marines shoulder blade.

Yael: ::miserably:: Put me down… Anthony...

Tony set his friend down, much more gently this time. In fact, he did his best to keep the man standing on his feet as he let him go. Taking a step back, he waited to see how Ashley was going to act now that he was free.

Meeks: We good?

Ashley avoided answering by following the wall and stumbling to the restroom, where he promptly tried to throw up his guts again. Unfortunately he was already running on empty, so it was a bit futile. After a long moment of silence, and the sound of running water, he stumbled back into the living space… and promptly collapsed onto his bed, sideways, a couple of the pillows falling to the floor as he curled in on himself with a groan of pain and discontent.

Alora managed to shove over a couple of datapads on the coffee table to clear enough space to relieve herself of her load of latinum. Straightening, she turned toward the bed and sighed, running one hand through her hair .

DeVeau: Thanks Tony. I tried to get him to come with me, but he was just too far gone, I guess.

Meeks: You're welcome. ::Turning back to Ashley:: I'll get out of here and let you two figure this out. Let me know if you need anything.

DeVeau: I will. Thanks again.

Turning on his heel, Tony left the quarters. When the door slid closed, he let out a long sigh. He was worried about his friend and hoped whatever demon the counselor was fighting would be vanquished without the need of any marshmallow orbs, or fruity drinks.

For a moment, Alora simply hovered near the coffee table, then slowly made her way to the bed. Though in truth he was bigger than she, there he looked so small. Broken. Like her. They were both broken. In different ways, but still broken. Somehow, they were trying to find a way to pick up the pieces, but it seemed like they just kept getting cut and left to bleed.

DeVeau: Ash.

Yael: ::muffled into the duvet, grumbling:: … what…?

DeVeau: Can you sip some water?

Yael: ::dramatically:: I'm g'nna die…

That was likely a "no."

DeVeau: Then you should drink a little water before you die.

Yael: *Fine.*

He started to push up, then looked round slightly, just realizing Anthony had gone.

Yael: ::quietly:: Where'd he… ::but he dipped his head back down again as the room spun::

DeVeau:. He's not far. Stay there, I'll come to you.

Alora strode over to the replicator and requested a small glass of water. Bringing it over, she lowered herself down to sit on the edge of the bed.

DeVeau: Come on, I'll help you. Just one or two small sips, okay?

He accepted the help, more so because he needed something in his stomach to stop it trying to eat through itself. Then lay his forehead on his forearm again.

Yael: ::after a moment of silent suffering:: Why are you…

Here? Doing this? Helping him? He left the question open while drawing a hand up to cover his ridged ear… not so that he couldn't hear, but so that his head would stop spinning.

DeVeau: A friend in need is a friend indeed. Why would I not?

Did Ashley hold such a low view of himself? That he doubted her friendship? How much she cared about him? Had she not proven that? Had he not proven his to her?

Yael: I wasn't *finished.* ::he piped up in frustration, having intended to drink himself into unconsciousness:: … the game was still running.

DeVeau: That was the worst place for you to be.

Alora had not been driven to drink, though there were plenty of times she had certainly been tempted. There had even been a time or two she'd taken enough to leave her a bit addled. When that had occurred, it had been in her rooms. By herself. Not in a position where she was being egged on by strangers to fill herself with poison. And she had never quite descended down into the depths that Ashley had. Even if that temptation had tugged at her.

Yael: ::not nearly as powerfully as he wanted it to be:: Just leave!

DeVeau: No.

Yael: *Fine.* Don't leave. Come here.

He reached out, gripping her wrist and tugging her close, pulling her off balance and pressing their lips together, clearly intent on following through with his previous boasts, and on her fake offer. The glass of water *THUNKED* as it dropped to the floor and spun, spilling the contents.

Alora immediately pulled away, but Ashley expected this. He pulled in return, which was fine by her. Following his motion, she twisted her body, keeping her wrist, and his grip on it, centered, other hand folded over his grip. The result was a full arm lock, his hand spiraling down into his wrist, wrist into arm, arm into shoulder, causing it to cork screw. Although she was careful not to make it go too far, should he resist, he'd likely either break his arm or dislocate his shoulder. Regardless, the position was painful enough without going that distance that it should deter him. She hoped.

DeVeau: Don't even think about it.

Yael: Oww! Okay! OKAY!

The Denobulan felt the pain arc through his frame despite his level of inebriation as his arm was twisted expertly round back at himself, and since he was already almost laying back it sent him flat on his back, his arm gripped painfully and holding him at bay.

Alora released him, not wanting to cause any real damage anyway and then stood, putting some distance between them. Someone had tried something similar before, and he'd gotten similar treatment - only he'd ended up with a broken bone, not just sore tendons.

DeVeau: Try that again and I'll send you to sickbay.

Flinching, he turned to curl up on his side again, clearly having gotten the message, but grumbled something about her leading him on as he crunched the blanket up beneath him in his grip.

Alora inhaled, then let it out slowly. Leading him on, but she had every right to say no at any point, and she'd only done it in an attempt to get him out of there. Turning upon the ball of her foot, Alora stalked back over to the couch and plopped down upon it. She wasn't going to leave, not with him in that state, but she also wasn't going to share a bed with him, even platonically. Hopefully in the morning, he'd be less volatile.

DeVeau: Computer. Alert me if Ensign Yael attempts to leave his quarters.

Computer: Acknowledged.

With that, Alora leaned back on the couch, head resting on the back, eyes staring at the ceiling. She kind of wished she had her PADD. Or a piano. Something. Eventually, her eyes fluttered shut and she fell into slumber.

Ashley didn't take long to fall into an annoyed, fidgety, inebriated sleep, his breathing coming deep and slow as the copious amount of alcohol that had made it to his bloodstream depressed his system. He hadn't even thought to kick off his boots or remove his braces.

((Several Hours Later - In The Early Morning Hours))

Dry. Scratchy. General discomfort and displeasure drove him to wake from his recuperative sleep, but he wasn't happy about it. Groaning, he pushed his face out from the blanket where it had been smushed, and he rubbed his face to clear his eyes. But his blurry vision wasn't from sleep… it was from the hangover. He gripped his forehead and the bridge of his nose, groaning again lightly as the throbbing pain hit him.

He needed water.

Slipping a foot off the side of the bed, realizing he was still wearing his boots, his toe bumped the glass that had been spilled the night prior. Still wearing his clothing. And braces. What the heck had happened that he wouldn't… even bother… undressing...

…. Oh.

Oh no.

Oh NO.

He tried to clear his eyes and looked about his small room, noticing a certain friend-shaped lump on the couch in the low light.

Was she still a friend, though…?

No no NOOOO this was bad. He cringed at the pain, then rapidly tried to think back. He'd been doing walk-in's. He was on his way to sickbay. No… he'd *thought* about going to sickbay, then… gone to Verriar's, and…

It all came flooding back to him. ALL of it. That was yet another problem he had with drinking… it always remained there in his memory, in crystal clarity. He NEVER forgot, and so he always *regretted.* The first drink he'd ordered. Verriar's shocked expression as she mixed it. Every word he'd said, how he'd said them, and who he'd said them to… fighting with Anthony… being all over Alora… his body flushed hot at the rather tragic and fresh memories.

Standing, he slipped off his boots now and tried to quietly make his way to the washroom, then slapped some cold water on his face and brushed his teeth, trying to remove a fraction of the grossness he felt. He felt awful… his guts were rolling. He'd been vomiting, he remembered… his aching stomach remembered most of all.

He came back out of the wash room and found Alora sitting up on the couch. He stopped, frozen there on unsteady legs in the doorway to the washroom. His stomach was knotting up and he barely breathed.

DeVeau: You...look...like crap.

Alora pushed herself up to her feet and rubbed at her neck. She'd fallen asleep on his couch and that meant she'd sort of been put into a position that wasn't exactly the most comfortable. Yet, she'd been tired enough - weary enough - to sleep through that. The night had been emotionally exhausting, but she knew very well that he probably got the worst of it. Making her way back to the replicator, Alora procured another glass of water, then motioned to the couch.

DeVeau: Sit. Drink, just a little. I don't want you taking a lot until we're sure you can keep it down.

The Denobulan hybrid didn't move at first, his feet frozen in place. But he wasn't going to be so rude as to say *no* to her… not *now.* He'd put her through a lot already. Slowly he made his way to the couch, taking a place at its far end from her. He tried to ignore the pounding drums in his head and his angry stomach.

He took the glass in his hands and took a slow, satisfying drink of the cool water, a slow small one, then set the glass on the coffee table next to a data pad. They'd been pushed aside to make room for a small pile of latinum strips.

Yael: ::barely legible:: I…

DeVeau: You should probably get something on your stomach too. Something simple. Easy. Maybe a bit of chicken broth. There are some pretty decent programs with flavour so it's actually pretty good.

Alora eyed him, returning yet again to that replicator, asking yet again for another item. When she made her way back to Ashley, however, she sat down beside him, offering him the mug of hot, steaming broth.

Every touch came crashing at him all at once, and his skin started to crawl… he'd held Alora at the table, hugged her… kissed her… Anthony had thrown him over his shoulder, carried him… he'd tried to follow through on Alora's offer, which he stupidly believed was real... now he refused to move. It took him a solid minute before he could speak, though it was barely above a whisper.

Yael: … I'm so sorry… I'm sorry… I didn't mean…

He dropped his face into his hands, absolutely mortified with his behavior. His failure of all forms of character. And for the violation of his friends' trust.

DeVeau: I know.

Yael: ::his voice cracking:: Please… just go. You don't have to be here…

DeVeau: I know I don't have to be here. I want to be here.

There was silence for a long moment.

DeVeau: You really should sip at some broth. Slowly. Ease your stomach into the day.

After another long moment he finally lifted his head and looked toward the door, a hand still covering his mouth, as if he might say something *else* that was venomous.

Yael: Anthony… ::he took a deep, shaky breath:: … what have I done.

It wasn't really a question. More, a shocked statement at himself. It had been two *YEARS* since he'd taken a drink. Carefully he lifted the mug of broth, taking a slow sip. His stomach was trying to turn over but he kept it down through willpower alone.

DeVeau: Yep, him too. Guess I wasn't sexy enough to entice you away from that table. Had to get physical. And he'll forgive you too. Easy now...if you are feeling like you're going to throw up, just wait. A little at a time. One sip, stop. Give it a couple of minutes, then try another. As for what you've done, you've done nothing worse than any of us. But you have friends who are going to help you through it. Stomach still bugging you?

If he wasn't running hot already, from the hangover and his unpleasant memories, he ran hotter still at her commentary… her kissing him, trying to draw him away from the table. He'd been sorely tempted, then again later when he'd kissed her… and forcefully been rejected. His arm still ached where she'd twisted it on itself.

Yael: It's… not great.

DeVeau: Then let it sit a minute. Try again after that and see how things go. Anything else bothering you?

He drank slowly, more of the broth first, then a couple sips of the cool water.

Yael: ::quietly:: My head is pounding.

DeVeau: I'm not surprised.

But that wasn't exactly what Alora meant. She knew good and well there were going to be physical consequences of what he'd done, but she also knew there were going to be emotional ones as well.

Yael: … I'm such an idiot…

DeVeau: Well, duh. We knew that a long time ago. Anta baka dayo!

He forced a smile now at how easily she agreed with him, not protesting her adding her own flourish to the label.

Yael: ::still rather diminutive:: Thank you, for… for getting me out of there.

DeVeau: You're welcome. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. But I'd better not have to do it again. Just be glad Verriar likes you.

Alora leaned back against the couch again, once more, allowing her head to rest upon the back, though she let it roll so she could look at her companion.

DeVeau: So talk to me.

Yael: Verriar…? ::he glanced at her only briefly:: She… she did seem rather *surprised* when I ordered a Risian tequila sunrise…

He paused to take another sip of broth, his stomach gaining a little stability now that he had a bit down.

Yael: I was going to go to sickbay. Like I told you. I… didn't get there.

Well, Alora figured that by then. At least he hadn't lied when he said he was going to sickbay, but still…

DeVeau: Why?

Ashley shifted in his seat, leaning back into the couch and pulling his legs up in front of him onto the cushion, the broth cupped in both his hands.

Yael: I… don't know.

A lie.

DeVeau: Ash, seriously. Who are you kidding here?

Yael: ::still mouse quiet:: I told you about Duronis. About what happened there. That, since the Gratitude Festival, I couldn't stop… stop thinking about it.

Yes. She remembered that quite well, though Alora certainly wasn't going to dangle it over his head and taunt him with it. Ashley had a troubled past. He wasn't the only one, but that didn't make what happened any less important. That didn't make him any less important.

Yael: ...I didn't tell you that I saw my father at the festival.

DeVeau: No. You didn't.

Alora hadn't been told anything about his family. To be fair, she didn't remember telling anything about hers. Unlike her, it seemed as if there were some hard feelings between him and his parents - or at least one of his parents.

Yael: He was in the area for a medical conference. Stopped by for the festival. And because he knew I was stationed here.

Deveau: I see.

Yael: We haven't seen one another in over ten years. We spoke for a grand total of two minutes.

DeVeau: Two minutes?

So what had happened in those two minutes? Evidently, a lot.

Yael: ::louder now:: They've got *nothing* to do with one another. NOTHING.

DeVeau: Wait...what have got nothing to do with each other?

She wasn't following, and Alora desperately wanted to follow, because she so desperately wanted to help her friend.

Yael: Duronis and my father. They've *nothing* related. At all. So how can *he* be the trigger?

The trigger for the flood of uncontrollable nightmares haunting him since the Festival.

Yael: Nothing else is out of place. Nothing else has happened. I've settled in here like it's *home*. Everything has been *FINE*.

There it was. The simmering anger inside the smiling Denobulan bubbling to the surface. He'd been putting things into place, finally, once again being a functional member of his society. And BAM. His father just shows up out of nowhere.

Alora pondered whether or not she should say something. She wanted to let him know she was listening, but she didn't want to put a bump in the road that he seemed to suddenly find himself on. So, she remained silent.

Yael: ::the floodgates opening:: Oh, he's charming… in public. You'd like him if you met him, he'd make sure of that. Behind closed doors he's the most disagreeable malcontent you'd ever have the pleasure of meeting. And I'm his "genetic dead end."

The last part was a direct quote.

Alora's eyes widened. Is that what Ashley thought of himself?

DeVeau: Did he say that to you?

He said nothing, but the answer was clear.

DeVeau: But...why?

Yael: Denobulans value family above all else. *Having* families. I can't risk having children because… ::he lifted his hands, gazing at the braces::... I might pass *this* on. And if I can't produce children for my family, that means… I'm… a waste of oxygen…

He said it so matter-of-factly, as if he'd been told such a thing for his entire life… and believed it.

Had it been anyone else, Alora would have immediately grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. It was not anyone else. It was Ashley. If she tried to do that, it would only make things worse. Yes, it might distract him from his current train of thought, but it wouldn't help anything.

DeVeau: And you believe him?

There was a pause. Too long of a pause. Alora recognised it for what it was. She was guilty of it herself.

Yael: No. Of course not.

But there was a part of him that was lying.

DeVeau: Try that again.

The Denobulan hybrid went silent for far too long, and appeared to have nothing to say in his defense.

Yael: It's not like I can ever have a family…

And now, he really needed another drink.

For a long time, Alora sat in silence. Her own family, her own parents had been supportive of her all her life. If there was something that interested her, they allowed her to pursue it. Yes, her mother had hoped her daughter would go on to the stage, performing as a professional, but she had also never made Alora feel like she was less of a person for any of the choices she made. Or simply because of who she was. Even if Alora had been born with some sort of deadly disease, making such comments would have never occurred to them. How could someone do that to their child?

DeVeau: You know Ash, sometimes family isn't necessarily related by blood.

He nodded, listening.

DeVeau: And sometimes, who you're related to by blood isn't your real family.

Yael: ::more fondly now:: You sound like my mother. ::he glanced at her for a half second before staring into the mug of broth again:: That's a very Human perspective. And I'm half Human. But… I take so much after my Denobulan side… there's a lot of *programming* that doesn't come undone just because it's irrational.

DeVeau: Yeah. When something is hounded into you, that programming can be hard to shake off.

And if it's repeated over and over and over again. Yeah, eventually you'd start to believe it. What had to happen now was Alora and his other friends needed to start pounding the opposite into him until that programming took over. She was going to make sure she was the loudest among them.

Yael: That's why my parents separated. She spent seven years trying to reconcile my diagnosis with my fathers expectations. Then she left him. I… don't remember him being *that* bad before, but he didn't take the split well...

DeVeau: That's sad. I'm sorry Ashley. But he's stupid. You should know that. I don't hang out with anyone who's a waste of oxygen.

Ashley smiled, but it was a sad one… then offered a little humor at his own expense.

Yael: Even if it means saving them from their own stupidity?

DeVeau: I will save you a thousand times over if that's what it took.

She meant every word. Ashley had become her closest friend on the Starbase, and she wasn't about to give up on him. Alora held on tight to anyone who was willing to be her friend, and she was loyal. Maybe even loyal to a fault.

Yael: ::sighing heavily, he leaned his aching head into the palm of his hand:: I need to apologize to Anthony. ::pausing:: The things I said to you… to him… I'm so sorry, Alora.

DeVeau: You're forgiven.

Yael: So much of *him* comes out of me, when I drink…

DeVeau: But you are not him.

For the thousandth time, Alora wished she could do something physically. Hug him. Take his hand and just hold it. Rub his back. Some physical comfort that also told him she cared. That, however, was impossible without causing the exact opposite emotion, so she let her hands clutch tightly to each other.

DeVeau: And you never will be. You're way, way better than he is.

There was a long quiet now as Ashley took another small sip of the broth, then sat it down on the coffee table.

Yael: I'm going to… ::he paused, thinking through the hangover::... take a shower. And then… I'll go to sickbay.

DeVeau: All right. I'll go with you.

Yael: No. ::not nearly as firmly as he'd meant to say it:: No. I'll go alone.

DeVeau: No, you won't.

Alora didn't want to leave that to chance. Not again. The last time he'd said he was going to sickbay he had wound up in Verriar's. She was not going to take a chance.

Yael: ::wearily:: I *know* I said I'd go before…

DeVeau: Yes. And you're going to go. But not alone. Because you aren't alone. Never alone. I will haunt you for the rest of your days. Or my days. Or both.

Somehow, when he glanced at her, he seemed surprised by the veracity of her statement. But he was too tired and worn down to fight with her about it. Still though, he could *smell* the liquor on his skin.

Yael: ::giving in:: Okay.

He stood gingerly, his every cell crying out for him to stop being so mean to them. He made his way to the wash room and ran the sonic shower, keenly aware of her presence nearby but

unwilling to fight about it. Freshly showered, at least now he could say he didn't stink of liquor, though he felt no better. He paused at the toilet… his stomach was still trying to roll over, but he restrained it and dressed.

And, being only the wee hours of morning, the pair made their way to sickbay. But not very quickly.

****

1Lt. Anthony Meeks
Company Commander
1/292nd TMR D Co.
Starbase 118 Ops/USS Narendra
R238801IG0

&

Ensign Ashley Yael
Counselor
Starbase 118 Ops
C238211TZ0

&

Lt. Cmdr. Alora DeVeau
Chief Science Officer
Starbase 118 Ops
M239008AD0