

My Dinner with Amanda

Arcadia spent most of the morning fussing about the house. She'd no sooner straighten up one pile of pillows than Mac would move them around making a new nest fit for a feline. Kyle was no better. She would no sooner remove an empty glass from the living room than he'd put a new one in its stead. She finally became exasperated enough to tell Kyle to take Mac and himself out for a walk unless he wanted to become the main course.

"Wouldn't that be difficult since I'm cooking the meal?" he asked her.

"Point taken. Am I to gather that you're suggesting that it is that I need the walk?"

"Exactly. Mac can stay and help me cook."

Arcadia looked at the both of them and considered for a moment before she replied, "I'd like to stick around to watch this momentous occasion."

"Well, I suppose you could contribute to the entertainment of the chef. But in all honesty I think our guests would prefer if I were to cook the sausage rather than hide it," he told her as he pinched her bare behind resulting in her giving a most indignant and undignified squawk.

"Honestly Kyle!" she told him in an exasperated voice as she turned to Mac. "What about you, Mac?" Arcadia pleaded to the feline as she obviously lost Kyle's vote of confidence. "After all, who feeds you? He doesn't!"

Mac meowed his disgust at her comment and stalked out of the kitchen. Kyle just smiled and pointed her to the door suggesting that she do likewise.

Arcadia took his recommendation to heart and left the kitchen to find Mac stretched out on the couch. "Care to come out in the garden with me -- we're obviously both not wanted around here..." He looked at her, considered her offer and responded with a loud, "Meow!"

They both took a stroll around the garden admiring the flowers. After what seemed a short time, Mac's ears pricked up and then she heard Kyle call out to her to suggest that unless she wanted their guests to see her in all her splendid glory, she might want to put some clothing on.

"Excellent suggestion, Captain Argent," she called out and addressed Mac as they strolled back to the house, "Come, Mac. You can choose an outfit for me to wear."

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Unlike many women of her acquaintance, it took her no time to dress. She and Mac chose a very simple green summer dress; however, she opted not to wear any shoes allowing at least one part of her body to be liberated from any covering. She went out into the garden with Mac happily trailing behind her.

Arcadia spent the remaining time in the back garden gathering light green and white roses to decorate the living room. Shortly thereafter, she heard a plane land and then a commotion in the front of the house. She assumed and Mac's ears confirmed that their guests had arrived.

She walked into the house just in time to see Amanda Peel hugging Kyle and as usual, Kyle responded to her with uncharacteristic warmth. He'd known Amanda for years and he told Arcadia on many occasions that Amanda's no mere 'secretary'. After her accident, rather than fight the system, she opted to take the desk job as the Administrative Assistant to the Chief of Staff of the Fighter Corps, Commodore Cordell Naismith. Arcadia considered how much help Amanda had been in helping her put on the last minute wedding after the Rigel Cup Competition at Regency Station.

As Kyle was busy talking to Amanda, Arcadia walked up to Cordell and hugged him; "I can't have Amanda getting all the hugs, Cordell."

"Damned right, Arcadia. How are you, m'dear?"

"I'm doing as well as can be expected," she told him as she led Cordell to the living room. "I'm still slogging my way through all my refresher courses. Luckily, I had decided to go back to healing even when I was still a starship commander, so I was keeping up with much of my art, but as you know, education is a never-ending process. I'm slowly but surely gaining all my abilities back." She paused to look at Cordell. "May I offer you a drink?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And how is the Corps doing without Kyle as he prepares for taking over *Nexus Station*?" she asked him as she handed him a glass of iced tea.

Cordell looked back to Kyle, Amanda and Mac engrossed in a deep conversation and laughed, "We're getting along... barely. Just as long as The Usual Suspects don't get frisky and declare war on us overnight, we might just get by." He took a long sip of the drink; "This is excellent!" He stopped and noticed that Arcadia wasn't having any. "Aren't you going to partake?"

"No... I'm afraid not. I prefer my tea warm."

"Oh, that's good. More for me then."

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Arcadia laughed at his remark. Just then, Amanda walked over to her, "Good of you to finally allow me to say hello Kyle."

Kyle said nothing in return, merely giving her a mock scowl as he went over to pour a glass of ice tea for himself and Amanda. Once he came back and handed Amanda her drink, all four settled down to talk while Kyle excused himself several times to take care of the dinner. Before long, Kyle called them to the table so they could eat Kyle's culinary master piece of fresh salad from the garden, cordon bleu, potatoes, fresh green beans, and Black Forest Cake with coffee to round out the evening. While Mac wasn't specifically invited to eat with them, he feasted on food especially prepared for him by Kyle.

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"Excellent meal, Kyle," Cordell Naismith told the small group. "Good thing I'm not wearing a belt or else, I would be presenting you all with the embarrassment that is my gut right about now. How do you keep this fit and this rich, Kyle m'boy?"

Kyle looked to Arcadia and then deadpanned to the group, "Sex -- it's a high impact work out."

The two guests chortled as they turned their attention to Arcadia who, despite her dark complexion, displayed a noticeable flush.

"Kyle is an excellent cook," she replied diplomatically as she regained her composure. "I'm glad I married him. As the Terrans like to put it, I can't boil water. But then, most starship captains or healers aren't called upon to display their culinary prowess," Arcadia replied as she stood up to start clearing off the table.

"So *that's* why you married me then?" Kyle asked her in a mocking tone as he also rose from the table.

"Well..." she paused as she considered, "It wasn't just for your gymnastics..." she allowed her voice to trail off as she looked downward, "but you do have other attributes."

He followed her eyes to where they rested and then Kyle's face began to flush ever so slightly. He quickly decided to change the course of the conversation when he overheard Cordell and Amanda snicker.

"Shall we continue cleaning up, Milady?"

"But of course, Pilot."

With typical military efficiency, everyone pitched in to clean up and in no time, the dining room was back to order as if they hadn't just had a full three-course meal there.

"Say, Cordell," began Kyle as he loaded the last dish back in the cupboard, "I picked up some Napoleon Brandy the other day. As Arcadia doesn't like it and I know you do..." his voice trailed off as he and Cordell left the ladies in the kitchen.

Both women stopped what they were doing to watch the men depart the kitchen, "Why is it," Arcadia told Amanda as she stowed away the last of the glasses. "That despite living in what I think of as a very enlightened culture, the men tend to trot off after dinner leaving the women behind?"

Amanda looked at her serious face and then laughed, "Arcadia, I believe that to be a question that women all over would love to figure out."

"Since the men have abandoned us -- you did note that *we* weren't invited -- are you up for a stroll around the garden? I confess that my expertise isn't in the flora area, but the garden is lovely and there is a beautiful lake that is spectacular this time of day."

"I'd love to," Amanda replied.

Arcadia displayed her limited knowledge of the flora as they continued to stroll through the garden. Mac after having eaten his dinner and taken a nap, decided to join them for their stroll. "This garden is Ariel's. His sister takes care of the place when Kyle is off jaunting around the galaxy. I confess that I really love this part of the country. I grew up part of the time on Vaega and part of the time in London, so having a country garden is something I'm not accustomed to; it's quite a pleasant change."

They finally settled on the settee in front of the small lake with Mac rolling around on the ground and then deciding to take a nap in the fading Oregon sunshine. Arcadia really enjoyed Amanda's company and thought she would take the opportunity to ask Amanda a question that had been on her mind ever since she noticed how Kyle responded to Amanda.

"Amanda..." Arcadia began tentatively, "I'm curious about something."

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure where to begin..."

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Amanda looked directly at Arcadia. "I've never known a starship captain who wasn't direct... besides, you didn't seem to have any problem expressing yourself before the wedding," Amanda added with a grin.

Arcadia laughed, "That's true." But then, her demeanor changed, "It's my bloody own fault. If this was starship business, I would be all business, but as this is personal, I'm afraid I'm not sure how to approach the subject."

"I've always found that the direct approach is best. It's worked for all the pilots I've ever known."

"I agree." Arcadia paused for a moment to find some inner strength before she continued. "Amanda, I've noticed that you're the only person that Kyle seems to respond to on an emotional level." As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she realized what she just said and wanted to clarify her comment, "Now doesn't that come off as just wicked? What I mean is that Kyle is a very private man and most of the time, even with people he knows he still acts very reserved. But with you -- you're obviously in a different category."

Amanda laughed, "We've never slept together if that's what you're asking, but I've known Kyle for a very long time."

If Arcadia was surprised by Amanda's candor, she tried not to display it. Instead, she plowed ahead, "He's told me that you've been friends for years, but that doesn't explain why he considers *you* so special."

Amanda blushed slightly at that thought but she knew it to be true, "Naturally, all men find me irresistible, but I suppose that's not the answer you're looking for."

Arcadia was again taken aback by Amanda's frankness and took a deep breath before continuing, "I must admit that I wasn't quite expecting the answers you've given so far."

"Good! So now that I've got you on the ropes, you'll believe just about everything I say, right?"

Arcadia leveled her eyes at Amanda as she straightened herself up to her best authoritarian position and smiled benignly while calmly telling her, "Try me."

Amanda carefully considered how Arcadia had changed her posture into one that could be described as someone who was about to exert her authority but knew better than to do so.

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"In my position, I deal with a lot of information people would like to know and my job, for the most part, is to ensure they do not." Amanda began thoughtfully, "Being excessively candid about one subject is a good way to camouflage another."

Arcadia considered what Amanda just told her before she replied, "So what is it that I'm not supposed to know about Kyle?"

"In all honesty a very great deal."

Arcadia was definitely surprised by this bit of information. She tried not to show it, instead, she simply stared at Amanda, "Please go on."

"I can tell you about our mutual history." She added with a smile, "It's not classified... yet."

Arcadia visibly relaxed however, in the back of her mind, she wondered about Kyle's "classified" past and wondered if it might have to do with the gambling chip Cordell gave Kyle after they were married.

"I was an upperclassman when he entered the Academy and though we didn't have much contact back then, it was hard for anyone who was doing flight school to not know who Kyle Argent was within a very short time of one's arrival."

"I can well imagine, he made quite an entrance when he landed on the *Stellar Wind*," Arcadia told Amanda, as Arcadia felt more relaxed with the direction the discussion was finally going.

Amanda smiled as she continued, "He took to a fighter like a natural if there ever was one and the two of us had a friendly rivalry going in no time. I'd set a record; he'd break it. I'd reset the record, and he'd re-break it. That's when I first began to respect his abilities. Now you know how cadets can be and how friendly rivalries often times turn pretty ugly pretty soon. God only knows more than one of my 'friends' suggested we take some sort of punitive action against this upstart 'nugget' -- and I don't doubt Kyle received similar advice from his peers. But no matter how fierce our competitions in the sim room were they never went any further than the cockpit. If he found an advantage, he was the first to share and the first to help when you needed it. That's when I began to respect him as a person."

"Kyle is one person that automatically demands respect and receives it even if they didn't know him. That's how he was on the *Wind*," Arcadia interjected, more for herself than for Amanda.

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"True. As for me, I graduated soon thereafter and lost contact for a while. For the most part, my career went from high to high with people predicting great things and whatnot. In due course, I received Wing Command of the Squad on the *USS Kirov* and who should be one of my pilots but still very young and still very gifted Lieutenant Junior Grade Kyle Argent. As his Wing Leader, I saw him into his first combat engagements. Some pilots fold under the pressure and God knows I don't blame them because it honestly wasn't my cup of tea either. But Kyle was different. The more impossible the odds, the more likely he would beat them. His ability to strategize a situation and then make tactical adjustments on the fly was simply second to none. In due course of the conflict, I got my ride shot out from underneath me and had to go on sick leave for a while. We'd been taking it in the teeth pretty hard and my second wasn't up to flying either."

"I know how that is. Lucky for me, I haven't been in the position to have to turn over command to any because I've been incapacitated." *Though during Kyle's incarceration, I came damned close*, Arcadia thought quietly to herself.

Amanda stood up before she continued. "I handed operational command of the Squad to Kyle much to the annoyance of more senior pilots. By the time I got back on my feet, however, all these senior pilots were more than willing to follow Kyle into hell and back if necessary. He knew how to fight and fight to win but he also knew how to lead. I was reassigned to test pilot duty shortly thereafter.

Arcadia stood up to stand next to Amanda, "That must have been difficult for you."

"It was, believe me." Amanda turned to face Arcadia; "Can you believe that the only one who bothered to show up to say goodbye was Kyle? He was a full Lieutenant by then. He told me how much he appreciated the confidence I showed in him and how he'd never forget it or me. That really was my only encounter with the more private Kyle. He is a man of great passion and great sincerity who rarely says a word he doesn't mean. In my point of view, I had done the Squadron a favor by replacing a mediocre at best leader with one who was truly destined for greatness and there he was, standing before me and thanking *me*."

Amanda turned away from Arcadia as she sat back down having finished all that she was going to say. Arcadia joined her on the settee. They both watched Mac as he continued to nap in the waning sunshine. They both sat quietly contemplating both the discussion and the sunset until Amanda broke their reverie with a smile and a question.

"Now that you've pumped me for information, I am interested in the talons."

Arcadia was quite surprised by the sudden change of direction of their conversation. She was speechless for a few moments and then she could only utter, "Talons?"

"Yes, your talons. I hope you don't mind my asking."

Arcadia relaxed and then laughed, "Everyone is just *so* interested in the talons especially when they see the havoc they can wreak..." She added with a wry smile, "Especially on Terran Males. The talons came about purely as a defensive mechanism for the Vaegan women to protect their kit. They are activated during times of stress, triggered by an excess of epinephrine. Until the Great Peace, tribes waged continual war on each other with the Vaegan woman being highly prized by other tribes, hence the necessity for the women to protect their young from marauders. My mother remarked that this worked quite well as the women were able to eventually forge an agreement between tribes."

"And how was this accomplished?" queried Amanda.

"Apparently, one woman found a way of forcing the talons to unsheathe during mating. She taught the other women and eventually, it simply was not safe for the men to come near the women. After a while, the men were quite willing to talk peace."

Amanda laughed, "I'm sure they were."

"Unfortunately, once taught, it was difficult to control, and as a result, all Vaegan women instinctively unsheathe their talons during times of crisis and mating. Fortunately, there are precautions such as gloves and finger-caps that can be used when necessary. There are of course, other methods of constraint also used."

"Out of curiosity, aren't the women afraid of being taking advantage of when they are restrained?"

"Most men realise that Vaegan woman have immense strength during epinephrine surges, more than most species and not even the strongest bond nor man can hold us for long. According to my own empirical evidence, many men have found this out the hard way."

"Painfully, I imagine," Amanda replied with a smile on her face.

"Painfully, indeed. Looks like Roscoe found out the hard way -- my, didn't he look like someone used him as a substitute for a chair leg to shred?" Arcadia raised her eyebrows and looked to Amanda who opted to look away rather than reply because she was laughing so hard.

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"Kyle was rather upset with Roscoe and Ayesha carrying on at the wedding," Amanda finally replied through gales of laughter.

"As if Kyle has anything to talk about," Arcadia replied with her arms folded against her chest. She noted Amanda's eyebrows shoot up. "Do ask him about *the* skirt." Arcadia felt a very wicked grin fill her face. "You should definitely ask him about it Amanda. I'm sure he'll still blush. It's always a treat to cause Kyle to blush."

Amanda thought for a moment and considered, "I may just do that."

"And if Kyle won't tell you, ask Roscoe -- that's assuming, of course, Ayesha's left him in any shape to talk." Both ladies laughed at the same time.

Arcadia stopped laughing long enough to look at her chronometer, "I suggest we get back before the lads organize a search party."

The ladies spent the rest of the time talking small talk as they walked back to the main house with Mac trailing behind. While Arcadia didn't know what Amanda was thinking, she was carefully mulling over what Amanda had told her.

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"Ah... there you ladies are," boomed Cordell with Kyle trailing behind him.

"Anything wrong?" whispered Kyle to Arcadia as they all went into the house.

Arcadia looked at Kyle; "Nothing's wrong, Kyle."

While Kyle didn't quite believe her, he turned towards Cordell and Amanda who were getting picking up their gear to get ready for their trip back to San Francisco.

"I'm amazed that you still have the old girl," Kyle remarked to Cordell as he and Arcadia escorted them to their plane.

Cordell looked fondly at the modified Avenger he called *Arrowsmith*, "We've been through hell together and when the Corps was going to scrap her, I convinced them to sell her to me."

Amanda leaned over to Arcadia, "I do wish Cordell had purchased a shuttlecraft, it would be much more comfortable though not as fast."

"Pilots do tend to become attached to their ships," Arcadia whispered back.

"Cordell," Kyle called out as he finished looking at the *Arrowsmith*. "No matter what you say, I still contend that the Avenger is one ugly ship. And why the hell would you want to continue flying one?"

"Oh?" Arcadia interjected before Cordell could answer, "And just how many Nighthawks do you have in your private stash below?" She emphasized her assertion by pointing her finger indicating an area below the elevator pad they were standing on. Underneath the elevator pad, Kyle had a very nice collection of fighters.

"Well.... err....," Kyle stammered.

Arcadia could only shake her head, "Boys and their toys."

They spent the next few minutes delaying the inevitable until Amanda gently reminded Cordell he had a full docket the next day.

"Duty calls, m'boy. Good to see you again, Kyle." Cordell shook Kyle's hand and then hugged Arcadia while Kyle hugged Amanda.

"Take care, Cordell," Arcadia told him.

While Cordell showed Kyle one of the new features of the Avenger, Amanda turned to Arcadia and hugged her tightly.

"Thank you for inviting us, Arcadia."

"No, Amanda, it is you who I should thank. Take care, Amanda."

"I shall."

Amanda climbed into the Avenger and Cordell expertly piloted off leaving Kyle, Arcadia and Mac who'd just come out to join them to watch the plane disappear into the moonless dark sky.

They returned to the house in uncharacteristic silence. Kyle went to sit down on the couch while Arcadia fussed around the living room, straightening it up. He was going to offer his assistance when he noted the frown on her face.

"What's wrong, Milady?" Arcadia ignored his question and continued to tidy up when he told her in an even voice, "The house can wait."

Arcadia stopped to look at him but continued to fluff up the pillows.
"Amanda and I had a chat."

Kyle leaned back on the couch. "What about?"

Arcadia finally decided she'd cleaned enough and sat down next to him,
"You."

"Me?"

"I was curious as to why you seem to respond to her in a way that you don't respond to anyone else. Rather than continue to wonder about it, I asked her."

"Oh...."

"I now understand why you and she are such close friends. More than just... friends...." When Arcadia noted that look on his face, she quickly added. "She told me that there wasn't anything personal between you, just mutual respect."

Kyle looked off into space, "If it wasn't for Amanda, I don't know where I'd be."

"I can understand why you'd still feel so fondly towards someone who gave you your first command."

Kyle turned to her and asked warily, "What did she say?"

"She told me about how you met at the Academy and how she gave you your first command Kyle. Nothing sinister, I assure you."

Kyle leaned back and sighed, "There's more to it, Arcadia. Our lives intertwined again after the *Kirov* and Reesa's death. I snapped. I was considered a loose canon. The Corps considered me all washed up and was about to kick me out when she decided to take a chance on me again."

Kyle rose from the sofa and began to pace around the living room, "She was recovering from the crash that ended ultimately ended her career as a pilot when she heard they were looking for a pilot to test the new Lynx-class fighters. This was a radically different fighter and any time a pilot hears the term 'radically different', it means that not all of the bugs are out of it. For the Corps, it was a matter of finding the right kind of person -- one who would manage to stay alive as the fighter was refined."

"She recommended you?"

"Apparently, she thought I would be crazy enough to take the job."

"You know bloody well that's *not* why she recommended you!" Arcadia snapped back. "She believed *you* were the best pilot for the job!"

"Yes... you're right," he responded quietly. "Ironically, that's when I first met Cordell. He was Chief of Personnel then. Apparently, he was told that no one wanted me around and they were ready to sign the discharge papers when Amanda told him that I was the man for the job. Cordell told me it was Amanda's belief in me that gave me my chance."

Kyle walked back to the sofa and sat down, "I owe a lot to her, Arcadia. More than she would ever know."

"She knows, Kyle. Trust me, she knows."

"What's bothering you then?"

Arcadia walked over to the fireplace and gently stroked the crystal that the Service's personnel gave to her on the last voyage of the *Stellar Wind*.

"What bothers me greatly Kyle is one comment she made about the fact that she could tell me about your mutual history because it wasn't classified.... yet."

If Kyle felt any concern about the course that this conversation was taking, he didn't show it. He was trained not to show it. "You're an officer of the Federation Arcadia. And as a starship captain, albeit a former one, you had to deal with classified information. You knew on the *Stellar Wind* that I dealt with classified information because you saw some of it." *But not all of it*, he mused to himself. *There was a lot you didn't see.*

"My problem is, Kyle, that I didn't know about Desmond's activity as an undercover agent and that lack of information came back to haunt me and my crew. Perhaps I'm being foolish, but I just hope that your 'classified life' doesn't come back to haunt you or us."

Kyle looked at Arcadia not knowing what to say because, quite frankly, there wasn't much to say. *I hope so too, Arcadia*, he thought but told her, "It is not worth worrying about things we can't change. We both know the risks we take being married to each other and being career officers in Starfleet."

"I understand," she replied as she quickly thought about their mutual losses in the line of duty and how she almost lost him and herself at the Rigel Cup. She then looked to Kyle who was walking towards her and while she felt

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the warmth of love come over her, she found herself hesitating but finally told him, "Kyle, I am in need of some time. Do you mind if I spend it in the hot tub..." She paused and then added quietly, "Alone?"

If he felt any pain by her rejection, he didn't show it to her, "Of course not, I'm going to go to bed. The cook needs his rest." He smiled at her but she knew it was a false smile.

She also feigned a smile as she walked to the solarium where the hot tub sat. Kyle didn't immediately go to bed but sat back on the couch to think.

There is so much you don't know about me, Arcadia. And 'classified' doesn't even begin to cover it.

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