

Back in the High Life Again

"Captain Blair?"

Terrence stopped and tiredly stared at the lieutenant who had just called out to him. He had just spent several days on a liner travelling to *Nexus Station* and thought he was well rested. But once he stepped off the liner, he felt that empty feeling in the pit of his stomach again indicating that perhaps taking this assignment was a mistake.

"Lieutenant?" Terrence nervously replied to the calm young man standing before him.

"I'm Lieutenant Jefferson El Jafeer," he began, thrusting his hand towards Terrence to shake it, "Chief of Staff to the Commanding Officer. Captain Argent regrets his not being able to greet you in person."

Terrence allowed a small smile to cross his lips. "I understand, Lieutenant."

"Please allow me to escort you to the flight deck, Captain."

"Thank you."

They spent most of the walk in silence. Jefferson briefly considered engaging in small talk with the new Director of Flight Operations but opted to allow Captain Blair to take the initiative.

Terrence abruptly stopped walking and turned to Jefferson. "Lieutenant El Jafeer, I want you to level with me."

"Yes, Captain?"

"What is the situation around here?"

"In what regards, Captain Blair?" he professionally replied.

"Oh... where shall I begin? Let's try 'in regards to the Station Commander taking over as the Interim Flight Director'. It would be a good place to start, Lieutenant."

Jefferson paused a moment to collect his thoughts. "Captain Blair, before Captain Argent arrived...." He briefly hesitated before he continued, "let's just say that the station was in less than perfect condition. The previous administration allowed many situations to get out of hand, including a perceived 'war' between the Medical and Flight Branches that culminated in

Captain Argent having to censure Doctor Argent and replace the Acting DFO with himself."

While Terrence knew the whole story, he was interested in the fact that Kyle's Chief of Staff was able to tell him the entire story so succinctly... and so truthfully. *Kyle's running a tight station and it shows*, he quietly mused.

"And what have *you* heard about the Flight Branch?"

If Jefferson was taken aback by the question, he didn't show it, merely answering, "Despite his direct involvement in the escalations of problems between the Medical and Flight Branches, Commander Lysander did a very credible job as the Acting DFO. He was fighting impossible odds because the Flight Branch was left in a shambles from the previous DFO. Captain Argent was able to whip the Branch into shape and instill pride, but what the Branch needs is continuous *leadership* and Captain Argent is quite confident that you can do just that."

"Is he now?" replied Terrence, somewhat surprised by the comment.

"Yes, sir. Shall we continue to the hangar deck, Captain?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

When they finally arrived, Terrence was immediately greeted by the senior personnel and was given a brief tour by LtCdr Lars Lysander. Once the tour was completed, Terrence invited him into his office.

* * *

"Anything else you need to know, Captain Blair?" nervously concluded Lars.

"I think you've covered everything more than adequately, Commander Lysander. I appreciate your candor concerning the problems between Medical and Flight Branches. I'm going to have a talk with Doctor Argent about getting us all back on track. However, first things first. I want you to resume your post of Deputy Director of Flight Operations."

Lars was clearly taken aback. He was sure that he was going to be canned considering how he was partly responsible for the problems between the Medical and Flight Branches.

"Thank you, Captain. I appreciate the confidence you've shown in me and I won't let you or the Flight Branch down."

Terrence looked at his second in command and smiled. "I *know* you won't... Viking."

The use of Lars' call sign relaxed him somewhat. With newfound confidence, he continued. "Any changes to the training schedule, sir?"

"None that I can see for the Nighthawks but we'll need to set up a training schedule so flight personnel can become familiar with the newly arrived Shadowhawks."

Lars looked down at his datapadd. "We received four ships and two trainers. Are you going to assign them to one of the squadrons?"

"They will be assigned to the Thirteenth and the first of the newly trained Shadowhawk pilots will be here in August."

Lars busily made notes. "Anything else, Captain?"

Terrence leaned back and sighed. "Other than the meeting with the other two wing commanders tomorrow morning, nothing else, Commander."

"Very good, Captain Blair," Lars responded. He quickly left the DFO's office only to be ambushed by the Wing Commander of the 503rd.

"So...." began RamRod Colins, "what's the new Old Man like?"

"So far, so good, RamRod. He's keeping me on as Deputy. He wants to meet us wing commanders tomorrow at ten-hundred. He asked me all kinds of detailed questions about the Grandmasters in general. In fact, he rather liked the idea that we use chess as our motif." Lars paused as he felt himself tighten up. "He also wanted to know *all* about the fuss between us and the Medical Branch. Said he was going to talk to Doctor Argent about it."

"Shit."

"That's what I thought too. Damn. It's not as if this isn't unexpected. I just wish--"

"Me too...." RamRod thoughtfully interrupted, but quickly got down to business. "Look, if we're gonna meet with the new Old Man tomorrow, I need to meet with my squadrons."

"Yeah, me too. Catch you later."

Viking watched him trot off to his office. He was about to enter his own office when he saw one of his squadron commanders about to turn the corner.

"Blackie!"

LtCdr Kieran Hawthorne quickly trotted over to where Lars was standing.

"How did the meeting with the new Old Man go?" Blackie asked.

Viking was beginning to think that this was the only question he was going to be asked for the next few days. "Good. I'm still the Deputy and still have the 425th. Tell the other squadron commanders I want to see them in my office in an hour."

"Right-o!" Blackie replied, then rushed off to find the three other squadron commanders.

So far, so good, Lars mused as he walked into his office to prepare for his people to arrive.

* * *

"Yo! Dollface. The new DFO is on the line. Wanna talk to him? I can tell him to buzz off," Sparky suggested.

"No, Sparky, put Captain Blair on," the Chief Medical Officer firmly informed the computer. As usual, she considered putting an end to her misery in the form of a station computer who seemed to her to be down right sassy most of the time.

"Doctor Argent?" Terrence began tentatively.

"What can I do for you, Captain Blair?"

"I just had a talk with Commander Lysander concerning the various incidents between the Flight and Medical Branches and I thought it prudent for us to discuss the matter in person."

Arcadia leaned back in her chair as she raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"Yes, Doctor. Perhaps you and your Chief of Staff might care to join me for a meeting tomorrow at 0900 in my office?"

"I believe we can do that, Captain Blair."

"Thank you Doctor," he replied.

Arcadia snapped off her link and sat back in her chair. Terrence obviously took no time to discern that there was a problem between the Medical and Flight Branch. But what surprised her was how fast he was tackling the problem.

She quickly sent a private message to her new Chief of Staff to join her as his earliest convenience. As it happened, she didn't have long to wait.

"Darce?" Dwight Ivanan asked as he entered her office and took a seat.

"Ike, I know you haven't been here long but we've been invited to talk to the new Director of Flight Operations."

"Fast worker," mused Ike aloud.

"I think so too. However, before we meet him, there are a few things you need to know concerning the Flight and Medical Branches."

"I'm all ears, Darce," replied her old friend as he sat back and listened to the story. When she was done, all Ike could do was whistle.

"This," he began as he stood up to leave her office, "is going to be difficult."

"Tell me about it, Ike."

Arcadia went back to her paperwork, giving the situation between the Flight and Medical Branches no further consideration. She obviously wasn't keeping track of the time because she was unexpectedly hailed by Sparky.

"*Yo, beautiful! Quitting time!*" Sparky brightly interrupted her.

"Is it that late?"

"*Yep. Captain Argent sez that you should hurry home because he's fixing dinner tonight.*"

"He is?"

"*Yeah, said it was your favorite. But he didn't tell me what it was,*" Sparky told her, somewhat dejected.

"Thank you Sparky."

In that case, Arcadia smiled as she shut off the computer link. I'd best be going home straight away.

* * *

Terrence took one last look around his office before he opened the door and greeted his first official non-Flight guests, in fact, they were the first to see him this morning. "Thank you for coming this morning."

"Our pleasure, Captain," Arcadia began. She quickly introduced Ike and Terrence to each other and then all three of them walked over to the conference table and set to work.

"Thank you again for coming, Doctor," Terrence began, falling into 'business' mode with a modicum of trepidation, "I would like to think we can straighten this... unfortunate... situation out, no?"

Arcadia stared at Terrence a few moments before she answered. "I believe so, Captain Blair."

* * *

"...Excellent," concluded the Director of Flight Operations to his three wing commanders during their morning briefing. "Before I dismiss you, just one more item on the agenda and believe me, this is the big one."

Terrence stopped to let his pronouncement sink in.

"As you probably know because news on any Flight Deck tends to travel faster than a Nighthawk at maximum thruster, the CMO paid me a visit this morning. We both realized there are some fences that need to be mended and the repair won't occur over night. Therefore, along with the scheduled meeting of *all* available personnel tomorrow morning at nine hundred hours, some of the senior Medical Branch personnel will also be in attendance."

Terrence paused to stare at his wing commanders and the reflective looks on each of their faces. He decided to allow them to continue their musings in silence until he thought it time to conclude the meeting.

"I know that we can do better than this." Terrence waved his hand over the datapadds that held Branch reports for the last few years. "I know what you Grandmasters are capable of and I aim to bring us to our maximum potential. I believe that tomorrow's briefing will be the start. If there are no questions, you are all dismissed."

As there were no questions, the three wing commanders stood and quietly left their Director's office.

Now, if only I truly believed that myself, considered Terrence as he watched them depart.

* * *

Both Arcadia and Ike were just a bit late arriving at the regular morning staff briefing after their meeting with Terrence ran a bit longer than expected.

"As you know, we had a meeting with the Flight Director..." Arcadia patiently waited for the grumbling to subside, "...and I'd like to get started. As soon as we complete our regular briefings, I'll summarize the meeting with Captain Blair."

The department briefings continued until it was Arcadia's turn. She discussed all the regular items on her agenda and introduced the one they'd all been waiting to hear about.

"The meeting was quite productive." Once again, she paused to allow the groans about the table to subside. "Both Captain Blair and myself realised that both Branches have... and let me be frank here, some residual animosity. I realise that some of you may feel uncomfortable right now. But let me just respectfully point out that I probably received the short end of the proverbial stick on this and if I'm willing to give it a go, you lot might just consider doing the same. After all, our jobs are as healers and we can't very well heal others if we can't heal ourselves. Therefore, myself, the Chief of Staff and the Chief Surgeon will attend the Flight Branch briefing where I will say a few words in hopes of eventually mending this rift." She noted that while they seemed to agree with her there was an aura of skepticism about the room.

"If there are no further items to be discussed, you are all dismissed."

Arcadia remained in her chair and watched them all leave except for her Chief of Staff who remained by her side.

"Gonna be a hard sell, Darce," Ike Ivanan ventured.

"Tell me about it, Ike. But first, let's see what I can do with the Flight Branch tomorrow morning."

* * *

"Quite a turn out..." Dwight Ivanan began sweeping his eyes across the large Flight Branch Auditorium early that next morning.

"Doctor Argent?" intercepted a young lady.

"I'm Ensign Desiree MacRae of the Thirteenth. Commander Lysander asked me to escort you and your group to your seats, ma'am."

"Thank you, Ensign," Arcadia acknowledged following their escort to their assigned seats in the front of the auditorium.

"I don't think I've ever seen an auditorium this large except when it's the *main* auditorium." Ike paused to look around again.

"One thing you'll notice around here, Ike is that *Nexus* doesn't lack space."

"True," added the Chief Surgeon. "Wait until you see the auxiliary hospital, Lieutenant. I just hope we can get the funding to fully staff it."

"You and me both," Arcadia replied, then quickly quieted down as Terrence took the podium. She watched Terrence take command of the audience and instill confidence in them though she noted, he still didn't quite believe in what he was saying himself. While she listened intently to the action on the podium, she mulled over her part of the proceedings until suddenly, it was her time to speak.

"Thank you Captain Blair," Arcadia replied as she walked up to the podium. She stood behind it and then suddenly made a decision. She unlocked the podium and pushed it aside. She moved towards the edge of the platform.

"Computer, please raise the lights to maximum." Arcadia waited patiently while the auditorium brightened allowing her the ability to view the entire room. She spent several moments standing mute while her eyes swept the room.

"I want the opportunity to take a good look at all of you. Because there may come that inevitable time when the next opportunity I see you, you may be quietly resting on a gray slab in my medical lab, your eyes glazed over and your bodies rapidly losing all life. But that isn't the vision I want to remember. I want to remember this one." She stopped and waved her hand over the crowd.

"I remember all too well those pilots who died under my command. I can tell you all about them: their names and what they looked like. I remember the

dead as if they were standing here next to me because I hold them here...." Arcadia pointed to her heart, "and I shall never forget them."

"However, what I want to do this day is remember the living. Something I failed to do when I was a commanding officer with a wing under my command and I don't ever plan to make that mistake again."

Arcadia nervously began to pace.

"Despite what may have occurred here in the past, we are not the enemy. I know all too well what it is to have flight personnel who are ready, willing, and able to lay down their lives to protect all that is dear to us. If it wasn't for the wing stationed on my *Stellar Wind*, I can assure each and every one of you that I would not be standing here today. I understand what your mission is and that's why I'm... we are here."

Arcadia walked towards the end of the stage and stopped.

"You pilots are like brothers and sisters and I'm not here to invite us to your Sunday meal because I know all too well that you would not welcome the intrusion. But consider us your cousins -- but not the cousin that the family never talks about because she won't come down out of the belfry." Arcadia smiled while she allowed the wave of chuckling to subside.

"We are all part of that greater family called Starfleet. And while we may not be welcome at the Flight Banquet, don't turn us away from the occasional meal. We're not here to keep you from flying, we are here to ensure that when you do fly, you are in the best possible condition to do so."

"We are all here to do a job. So I ask you as the Chief Medical Officer to give us a chance to prove our worthiness and perhaps one day, you shall truly believe that we honestly do have your welfare as our priority as we know you have ours."

Arcadia stood silent for a moment while her eyes swept the audience, then walked off the stage. Before she was able to take her seat again, she heard a lone clap that quickly grew into applause as the flight personnel assembled stood to give her an ovation. She stopped and acknowledged their response, briefly looking over to Terrence who appeared to be as touched by her speech as the other personnel. She smiled and sat down.

"Good speech, Darce," Ike whispered.

"Thank you Ike. I just hope they believe me," Arcadia sighed. She considered all that needed to be done when suddenly, she heard Terrence close

out the morning briefing. She watched as he walked over to where she and her group were sitting.

"Very nice speech, Arcadia."

"Thank you, Terrence. You have a fine group here."

Before Terrence could reply, Arcadia's link went off indicating she was needed back at the Hospital. "Sorry I can't stay, Terrence."

She smiled at up at Terrence, then stood, indicating to her people that they were to leave with her.

"Thank you for coming," he softly replied as he watched the medical officers depart the auditorium.

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"*Doctor Argent!*" Melody exclaimed as Arcadia walked into the Command and Control Center later that day.

"Good to see you too, Ms Marlowe," wearily replied Arcadia. She noted that the effects of a long working day never seem to disturb the perpetually perky Command Yeoman. "I thought I'd come and retrieve my husband for dinner. May I go right in?"

"Normally, I would have to buzz the Captain, but in your case, you can go right in." Melody gave her a conspiratorial grin. "It'll be our little secret."

"Thank you, Ms Marlowe," Arcadia replied while forcing a smile in Melody's direction. *And here I was worried that Melody's striking beauty might tempt Kyle. Truth is that Kyle prefers women of more substance... a lot more substance.*

Upon entering her husband's perpetually dim office, she found him standing in front of the sole window in the office gazing out at the station.

"Time to leave already?" he ventured, his back still towards her as he remained fixated on the view.

"I would think so, love."

"That was some speech you gave today."

"You heard about it?"

"I watched it." He turned around and unexpectedly sat down at his desk. "I'd have to say that you and your people are on the right track."

"I think so too." Arcadia walked behind the desk to stand by him.

He suddenly looked up at her and noted the frown on her face. "What's wrong?"

"That *bloody* station computer of yours."

"Sparky?" he asked innocently.

Arcadia glared at him. "Yes."

"He seems perfectly well behaved around me," Kyle smirked.

Arcadia narrowed her eyes at her husband. "So I noticed."

"Well... let me see what I can do for you."

"Oh?"

"Sparky," Kyle began, "please treat Doctor Argent with the same courtesy you treat me."

"*Yes, Captain,*" Sparky sniffed.

"Is that it?" Arcadia asked.

"Try him," Kyle urged.

"Sparky, give me the current location of Lieutenant Ivanan," she cautiously requested.

"Marine Second Lieutenant Dwight Ivanan is currently consuming dinner in his quarters. Would you like a run down of what he is eating, Doctor?" Sparky replied.

Arcadia was clearly stunned. Her eyes darted between the comlink and her husband.

"You made him mistreat me on purpose, didn't you?" she finally concluded.

"You wound me, Milady!" Kyle replied dramatically.

"It's a *bloody* conspiracy. You two are just trying to aggravate me, aren't you?" Arcadia declared while crossing her arms in defiance.

Kyle eyed her carefully then leaned back in his chair. "It's all about proper command authority..... like this....." He suddenly sat up straight in his chair. "Sparky, please rescind my last order."

"*Aye, Captain!*" Sparky replied brightly then spoke directly to Arcadia. "*I think you blew it, Toots!*"

Arcadia glared at the comlink as she considered whether or not she should pound the station computer into oblivion before or after she flushed her husband out of the nearest airlock.

Kyle smirked at her but suddenly became serious. "Having seen him in action the last couple of days, what do you think of Terrence as DFO?"

Arcadia was taken aback by the sudden change of subject. "I believe he's doing quite well..."

"But?"

Arcadia thought for a moment and then looked down at her husband. "Kyle, you're a bloody difficult act to follow for damned near anybody."

"Never mind someone who hasn't had an active command in nearly a decade. I know..." Kyle finished the thought for her.

"Has he done anything to warrant your concern?"

"No... not really. It's more of an intangible factor. It's in the way he sometimes says or does things. He's acting like a man who seems to be very unsure of himself."

"He might just need a few weeks to get settled in. I think the last thing he needs is you looking over his shoulder and evaluating every move he makes."

Kyle leaned back in his chair while Arcadia began to knead his shoulders. "My thoughts exactly," he finally replied. "Let's just hope that this is just a temporary situation, because if not..."

Because you run a tight ship around here, she thought as she continued rubbing his shoulders. And if my personal experience is any indication, being here at all is about all the consideration that Kyle would give him.

"Well, all our senior staff are here now and we're at full operational strength. So far, we haven't had any big crisis, just many, many small ones. Is command like that all the time?" Kyle looked up at the former Commanding Officer of the *USS Stellar Wind* for an answer.

Arcadia stopped massaging his shoulders and looked at him with a faint smile. "It's really no different than being a wing commander only the scope of your job has increased exponentially. Therefore, the extent of any crisis will be commensurate."

Kyle sighed as he stood up. He took her hand, steering her towards the door. "Too bad my command ability didn't grow exponentially along with it."

She stopped walking and looked to him. "Who says it hasn't?"

He stared into her eyes and planted a small kiss on her forehead. "You're sweet. "

Kyle's response told Arcadia that Terrence wasn't the only one still dealing with uncertainty in their abilities. However, Arcadia only smiled at her husband as they left his office for dinner. Time and experience would bring that certainty -- she was sure of it.

Kyle paused at the door. "Sparky, log me out for the night."

"Roger that, sir!"

"And Sparky?"

"Sir?"

"Go a little easy on The Little Woman. She's my Ball and Chain after all, not yours."

"You got it, Captain!" Sparky replied brightly.

"Ball and Chain? Little Woman? Oh.... really now....?" Arcadia growled through clenched teeth. "How about Big Man, Little Couch?"

"You wouldn't?" Kyle whimpered.

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"Try me!" she spit out as she stalked off alone for their quarters leaving Kyle standing at the door.

"I don't think she was kidding, Captain," Sparky opined.

"Naw.... she's cute when she's angry besides, I've got a few techniques to try out with her that are best exercised on the couch anyway."

"Good night.... Captain...." Sparky said with a distinct hint of disapproval.

Kyle couldn't help but smile at the fact that he was in command of station with some decidedly oddball personnel and shepherded by a chauvinistic computer who none the less was a prude to boot.

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Next: *The Best Things in Life Are Free*

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