

## Aftermath

"Sorry I'm late," the Chief Medical Officer sheepishly mumbled to the group assembled in the Hangar Deck auditorium as she tried to keep as low a profile as possible which totally impossible, considering the circumstances.

While Arcadia Argent searched for a seat, her eyes swept over those in attendance. She immediately noted that all of the major players of the Flight Branch, better known as the Grandmasters were present as well as all the senior maintenance personnel. All were patiently waiting for her to take her get settled. She finally spotted her Chief of Staff waiving her over to the seat he'd saved for her.

"Now that Doctor Agent has arrived," began the Director of Flight Operations, "we can start the briefing. Petty Officer Williams, the floor is yours."

Senior Ground Tech SPO Franklyn "Pops" Williams slowly shuffled to the podium. While Pops looked old and feeble -- he was definitely old, but *not* feeble -- he was one of the best Nighthawk maintenance chiefs around. He was also probably *the* oldest. Many of his maintenance techs kidded amongst themselves that Pops was so old that he probably maintained Orville and Wilbur Wright's their first attempt at air flight.

"Thank you, Cap'n Blair," Pops Williams began. "Since we have a few non-flight folks here, I'll keep it simple. The flight deck accident back in June was caused by the proverbial five-credit part."

He paused to allow the groans to subside. "Yeah, tell me about it!" he glared at the audience before he resumed his recitation. "The matrix interchanger -- the device used to pipe-line the power output generated by the matter-antimatter reaction -- never shut down. This overloaded the batteries and that caused the Ever-clear coolant to boil over. The batteries subsequently ruptured which in turn almost instantly dissolved the coolant pipe-lining and then all hell broke loose."

Pops stopped to take a sip of water, dribbling some of it on his maintenance jumper. "Under normal circumstances, the Ever-clear containers are so well insulated that they could basically let the stuff boil off and that would be that. I've seen it where the pipe-lining glowed white hot, but those babies held." Pops shook his head in disgust. "But when the phaser batteries exploded, they basically rocked the pipes hard. It probably created cracks and hit the white hot pipes with superhot acidic gunk. Usually, the solid battery suspension compound is thick and you wear gloves around it. It's not very toxic but it smells like shit and believe you me, you don't want this crap on your hands. But when it's liquefied as what happened that day, it's like a bomb."

Pops took out a bandana to wipe the sweat that had accumulated on his bald head as he shot a glance in Arcadia's direction.

"Honestly, in all my years -- and I've been doing this for a long damned time -- I've only heard of two or three of these kind of accidents happening. They're damned rare. Bottom line is that one of our Nighthawks is toast and we err... had several injuries. I'm done, Cap'n."

"Thank you, Pops," Terrence started but before he could continue, a voice shot out from the back of the room.

"So what do we do about this?"

"We have a few options," Station Commander Captain Kyle Argent interrupted as he walked into the auditorium and onto the stage. All hands immediately stood to attention. "At ease," Kyle commanded then turned to Terrence as the group sat down. "Hope you don't mind the intrusion, Captain Blair."

"Not at all, Captain Argent. And what options are those?"

"We could rattle some cages at Starfleet Fighter Corps HQ for money to upgrade our Nighthawks to the Super Nighthawks. They use the Shadowhawk coolant system and batteries that have plasma vents."

"A commercial fighter, Captain?" wondered the Deputy Director of Flight Ops, LtCdr Lars "Viking" Lysander aloud posing the question that was on everyone's mind.

"That's one option, Viking. Keep in mind that we've got the first squadron of the new Shadowhawk fighters and the rest will be here shortly."

"If I may respectfully point out," Pops began still bristling at someone calling his beloved Nighthawks 'aged', "that doesn't solve the problem of what to do with the old Nighthawks until they are eventually phased out. And how long is that gonna take, Captain? The Vindicator hung around too damned long in my opinion. Fighter Corps kept that damned thing flying until I wasn't able to get parts anymore."

Terrence and Kyle chuckled but then immediately became serious again.

"That's true, Pops," Kyle began, "but let's discuss how to prevent the accident from happening again since we will have the Nighthawks here for a good while longer."

Pops looked thoughtful as he considered. "Well.... Cap'n, we can drain the coolant off almost instantly after landing and hook up some sort of an external radiator but it'll increase operational readiness time by almost twenty percent. And it'll take us nearly twice as long turnaround and prep a bird for re-launch in combat situations."

"Unacceptable," the Station Commander declared. "Any other options?" he addressed both to Pops and the assembled group.

Pops further considered as he shut his eyes. "Honestly, short of converting the fighters to an alternate coolant system, I don't see anyway this can be successfully addressed," Pops opened his eyes and shot a glance in Kyle's direction, quickly adding, "sir."

Kyle gave Pops a small smile. "I can go ahead and request funds for conversion but that will take quite a while at best."

"God *damn* bureaucracy!" Pops exclaimed. "My people are in danger here and all the bean counters back at HQ care about is money."

"Because these fighters are considered part of the Planetary Defense Force, they have a low priority when it comes to upkeep and maintenance," Kyle reminded Pops.

"I know, Cap'n," Pops mumbled.

As the audience grumbled all around her, Arcadia decided now was the time to speak up.

"Captain Argent, if I may?"

"Doctor?"

"I have something to add," she replied.

Kyle raised an eyebrow a millimeter then turned to Terrence who nodded his assent.

"You have the floor, Doctor."

"Thank you Captain Argent," she began while walking towards the podium. Once at the dais, she took out her datapadd and laid it down in front of her.

"While what I have to say doesn't really apply to what to do about the Nighthawks, it does have to do with operational safety. As you know during my

recovery...." Arcadia paused while a soft murmur rippled as everyone remember that she'd almost died saving Lars Lysander from certain death and almost died herself. "...I had ample opportunity to fiddle around with the medical budget."

"As you know, the previous CMO removed the Flight Surgeon off the Flight Deck," she continued. "This was a critical mistake that could have been compounded during the emergency. We most certainly could have had fatalities, had we not been available performing the routine physicals."

Even her pronouncement of the possible fatalities didn't over shadow the fact that the audience was obviously *not* too keen on the notion of having the Flight Surgeon back.

"Flight readiness," Arcadia continued despite the feeling of hostility racing about the audience, "is number one for this station, and Medical Branch can do our part to assist. There is another aspect to this that I don't believe you're aware of but I believe you need to know. Under most circumstances, if it comes down to treatment for a flight officer or a doctor, the flight staff *will* have priority over the medical staff."

"If I may..." Ike stood up to underscore her point. "Had Doctor Argent been injured during war time, she would have been triaged last and probably would have died."

The room was stunned into silence. If there was any opposition, it was soon washed away. Ike looked to Arcadia indicating that he was finished.

"Thank you Lieutenant Ivanan," she picked up while her Chief of Staff sat down again. "That's the cold hard reality of the situation, gentlemen. By having the Flight Surgeon on permanent assignment to the flight deck, there will be a medical staff specifically trained for such emergencies as well as taking care of the required flight examinations. This partnership will benefit both parties."

Arcadia paused as she nervously adjusted her thin gold headband that denoted her status as a Vaegan healer. "The downside," she slowly concluded, "is that this program is funded for six months. So, it is up to all of us to ensure that this works because once the funding runs out, I'm going to have to fight for every credit to keep it going." Arcadia picked up her datapadd and looked towards Kyle. "Thank you for the floor, Captain Argent."

Kyle nodded an acknowledgement in her direction. He turned to Terrence and handed the briefing back to him.

"Any other comments?" Terrence asked noting that just about everyone in the room was still digesting the information from the briefing. Once he found there were no further comments or questions, concluded the briefing.

"We obviously have a lot to look into. As there are no further questions or comments, you are all dismissed."

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"Well?"

"Well what, RamRod?" Lars asked his fellow wing commander as they both walked towards their respective offices.

"Having the Flight Surgeon back."

Lars stopped and stared him. "You heard what Doctor Argent told us. I think it's a good idea," he mumbled.

"They'll be underfoot," RamRod defiantly began, "in our way and--"

"Look, dammit! I almost died. Had it not been for Doctor Argent, *I would have died*. And dammit, *she* almost died saving my sorry ass." Noting the startled look on his face, Lars immediately calmed himself down. "I'm sorry, man...." Lars simply stared at RamRod realizing how much he hated being both another wing commander as well as their superior.

"No," RamRod began, "I'm the one who should apologize. You're right. This is a good idea, but...."

"I know. Avalanche is gonna have a cow and is probably waiting to loudly voice her objection."

RamRod smirked. "Probably? Wanna take a bet? She'd object to the sky being blue just so she can bitch."

"Just what the hell is it with you two anyway?" Before RamRod could lodge a feeble protest on his behalf, Lars rolled right over him. "If Avalanche is waiting in my office, I'm going to give her the same speech I'm going to give you right now. Fact: the Flight Surgeon is coming back. Fact: I'm tired of you two going after each other. Dammit, you're both wing commanders, so how about you start acting like it instead of a couple of buttheads?"

Noting the look of fury on the Deputy Director's face, RamRod opted to take the high road. "You'll not receive any complaints from me on either score, Commander."

"I hope by the Great Ultimate you're right because if I do, one or both of you are going to be sent packing. We have a new DFO and *all* of us are going to *continue* making a good impression. I already got my ass chewed out by Captain Argent and I'm not gonna get it chewed on by Captain Blair. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," the Wing Commander of the 503rd softly replied knowing that Lars meant every word he said.

The Deputy Flight Director simply shook his head in acknowledgement as he continued to walk to his office. *If things don't straighten out around here between the two other wings commanders, he mused, that proverbial five-credit part isn't the only problem we'll have to face.*

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Next: *The Great Game*

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