

## *Shadows in the Dark...*

Special Forces Liaison Marine Major Ayesha Deveraux was surprised to see that Commander Argent had decided to have his general Wing meeting even though she had heard he had taken a short jaunt to deliver some Romulans to their new ship. She imagined that most would be surprised that she knew all about this but then, she knew quite a bit even in the short time she'd been on the *Wind*.

Major Deveraux opted to stand in the back and observe the briefing undisturbed. All the attendees especially the pilots had arrived on time; if nothing else, Argent should be given a commendation. He obviously runs a very tight wing and it shows.

Commander Kyle Argent stepped into the room and everyone snapped to attention. Ayesha noted that his fighter corps uniform looked tailor-made; it fit his broad shoulders much better than the standard issue. He waited until everyone had settled down then opened up with some general remarks concerning the fact they are now permanently assigned to the *Stellar Wind* -- this one statement drew a round of expected applause. Then he gave an overall outline of what he expected to accomplish this tour.

Unexpectedly, his eyes sought her out in the crowd. At first, Ayesha wanted to look away, but found she couldn't escape his gray-green eyes.

"And in the back is our new Special Forces Liaison, Marine Major Ayesha Deveraux."

Everyone turned to look at her. Ayesha gave the crowd a feeble grin and then nodded at Kyle.

"And finally, I expect everyone to be ready for the practice runs I have set up." Not waiting for the groans to cease, he smiled and barked "Dismissed!"

He departed the stage and walked through the milling crowd towards Ayesha.

"Since everyone is here, I thought this would be a good time to introduce you around," he said upon his arrival.

"Thank you, Commander. I'd love to."

Kyle headed towards the exit with Ayesha trailing behind him.

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It was a growing puzzle, one that had come on slowly, infiltrating every known system on the ship.

It was an enigma that had vexed the Engineering Staff. Despite their best intentions, a continuing power drain caused periods of minor instability throughout the ship. And this instability had affected critical equipment to the point that any readings were now considered suspect.

Captain Devlin was not happy at this latest report. "*Boffin!*"

"Yes, Sir?" replied her yeoman over the comlink.

"Please contact the XO and have him get in touch with the Division Chiefs. Have the Chiefs run a low-level diagnostic on all critical equipment. We must track down these irregularities if we are to complete our mission, no matter how unpopular it may be!"

"Yes, Sir!"

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All Aubrey could think about as he dragged his carcass into the office was how the last thing in the universe he wanted to do was chart more gas giants. As expected, Physical Geographer Boris Brown was already in the office, cheerful as ever.

"Good morning, Sir!" Boris greeted Aubrey as he walked into the office.

"Good morning, Boris," replied Aubrey to the. "So we're here," he sighed, glancing at the terminal that Boris was looking at.

"You've got that right, Sir." Boris scanned the data on his terminal. "According to our sensors, this system is comprised of 5 inner planets, 4 gas giants and 2 smaller outer planets. They orbit a yellow-orange star about the size of our sun."

"Nothing unexpected then," absently replied Aubrey.

"We've found what we expected to find."

"Despite the problems with the ship's systems?"

"Until they say otherwise, Sir, we have to use these readings."

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Aubrey shook his head in resignation and went over to the counter. "Are you up for coffee?"

"Yes, thank you, Sir." Boris paused for a moment while Aubrey brought him a cup of the steaming brew. Boris took a long drink of the amber liquid and exclaimed, "This isn't our usual, is it?"

"No it isn't. I purchased some Jamaican Blue when I was on leave and I figured that considering what we're in for this tour, I broke out some of the good stuff." Aubrey stopped, took a long sip and continued, "I don't care what the Services people say, there's nothing like the real thing in my opinion."

"I agree, Sir. Considering how much work we have ahead of us, I hope you bought enough."

"Boris," Aubrey laughed, "There isn't enough real coffee in this universe to make this situation any better."

"That's true!"

The gentlemen had sipped the rest of their coffee in silence when Aubrey broke the quiet.

"Boris, what do you think of some of the new crewmembers."

Boris raised an eyebrow. "The ladies?"

"Of course."

Boris put his cup down and gave the question some thought. "The usual -- some good, some bad, some touchable, some untouchable and some you don't want to touch under any circumstances." Boris retrieved his cup and smiled. "Anyone in particular?"

"Two, actually. That new Surgeon, Dr Fokker and the new Marine, Major Deveraux."

Boris looked to Aubrey with some amusement. "I thought you'd sworn off of Vaegan woman since your divorce."

"I do believe that Ayesha is worth a second consideration, don't you?"

Boris considered for a few seconds and smiled. "Any good looking woman is worth a second look... but I don't know about those claws, Sir..."

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"This time, I'll be ready," Aubrey smirked.

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Commander Kyle Argent strolled onto the hangar deck and cracked one of his ever rare smiles. He was dressed in his full flight regalia, ready to commence the promised training exercise. To his surprise, everyone had arrived before him and was ready to receive orders. *It's amazing what gold wings will do for discipline in a fighter wing*, he mused.

Once his initial orders were given and being in generally good spirits, he casually walked to the staging area when he had noticed Major Deveraux conversing with Virgil and Skye. It was with great effort that he kept the smile on his face and not the frown that threatened to emerge. He decided in the spirit of good relations to indulge in some boring but necessary small talk.

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No matter where she went, Major Deveraux considered with some disgust, pilots seemingly never change. Take Junior Flyboy Skye Masterson here. She just knew that his ability in his cockpit couldn't be matched by his wanting to play 'cock-pit' with her.

By comparison, she thought Virgil Taylor to be quite pleasant and imminently capable. She and Virgil were having a nice discussion on the finer points maintaining a Nighthawk when Commander Argent had joined them.

"Major Deveraux."

"Commander Argent."

"Good to see you again, Major."

"Thank you, Commander."

The small talk continued with all the cordiality and banality one would expect under the circumstances. Even Ayesha was becoming bored with the tit-for-tat exchange besides it was time that something be done about Mister Masterson standing off to the side, leering at her.

"Commander Argent, your chief mechanic seems quite more knowledgeable on the Nighthawks than anyone else in my acquaintance, however am I to understand that your pilots equate prowess in the cockpit with interpersonal horizontal flight maneuvers?" She pointedly stared at Skye Masterson who suddenly turned a lovely shade of crimson.

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Kyle moved his eyes to where Ayesha stared and arched an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you be somewhere else, Masterson?"

"Ah...why... Yes, sir, I should!" Skye Master blurted before fleeing the area.

Kyle turned back and gave her a feeble smile. "I must apologize for his behavior. You know how young pilots can be."

"Indeed I do, Commander. I was an Avenger pilot before I became a Special Forces liaison, so I've seen it all."

"An Avenger, you say? My first assignment out of the Academy was an Avenger. I didn't even know that they were still in service."

"As a Marine aviator, we made due with what we are assigned -- no less, no more, Commander."

Once again, Kyle's eyebrows arched upward accompanied by a slight smirk. "I'm sure you do, Major," He paused. "Do you miss being out there?"

It took her a moment to whisk away her initial painful thoughts. And of the accident that abruptly ended her career as a pilot. He, of all people she considered resentfully, should *know* how she feels. "Wouldn't you?" she finally replied, bitterness having crept into her voice.

He paused for a moment before answering in a soft voice, "More than you could ever imagine."

"Commander Argent. The Tower reports ready," Virgil reported.

"Tell them I'll be along shortly."

"Yes, Sir!" Virgil snapped off before departing.

Noting their impending departure, Major Deveraux gave the nearest 'hawk a long look and turned to leave.

"Major Deveraux, if you'd like, you're always welcome to observe today's proceedings from the tower. As a seasoned pilot, I would welcome any input you might have on the execution of today's exercise."

Ayesha eyed him carefully. "I think I might just take you up on that, Commander." With that, she turned and left, not waiting for Kyle's response.

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Kyle swiftly gathered his pilots and mission specialists and conducted a field briefing before taxing out into space followed by his wing. As much as Kyle relished the idea of being back in the cockpit again, he didn't really enjoy the idea of putting the Wing through its paces.

Much to his surprise, they did quite well; better than he had expected. He didn't have them out there long, but he had worked them hard. Hard enough that he felt some fatigue as he led them back onto the hangar deck. Once everyone was settled, he headed for his office to work on his report.

He managed to work undisturbed for an hour before a rap at the door interrupted him.

"Enter!"

Major Deveraux opened it and stepped into his office.

"Thank you, Commander." She walked over to his desk. "Commander Argent, as by your request, I witnessed your maneuvers from the control center and thought you might want my report."

With that, she handed him a padd, which he began scanning but found himself reading it carefully. It was that was more detailed on the subject than his own report he was still laboring over. He glanced at some of the highlights and frowned. She had noted Red Four for being opportunistic in flight with poor target management but exceptional on-site targeting."

"Didn't take you long to figure out poor Skye just doesn't have much in the gunnery department?" Kyle admitted.

"His mission specialist seems exceptionally skilled though."

"That would be Roscoe. I paired them up because Roscoe is the best gunnery specialist I have whereas Masterson couldn't hit the broad side of a space station with a stick."

"That seemed prudent. They pair up quite well. The other pilots appear to be more or less balanced with some lack of experience and training issues still needing to be addressed. All except for Red Five, that is."

Kyle attempted to keep any emotion off of his face as he read her assessment of Red Five. *'Exceptional maneuverability, superior targeting skill,*

*and great natural flight ability.*' He decided to play it coy. He looked up at her and smiled. "I'll pass your compliments on to him, I'm sure he'll appreciate them."

"Oh? I thought you were piloting Red Five. I suppose the stories I hear of your much-vaunted flying prowess aren't all that they seem to be. Maybe you could do with some simulator time yourself?"

Kyle found that he couldn't help himself and just had to laugh. "Well...I never put much stock into the greatly exaggerated rumor of my flying prowess. I guess you are right." He began to get up and added, "I'd better get to the simulator right now..."

"Oh... I don't think it's *that* necessary," she replied with a slight laugh. She stopped and looked straight at him. "Thank you again for inviting me, Commander."

"You're welcome, Major. Please feel free to join us again."

"I may just do that, Commander."

\* \* \*

Senior Astrophysicist-Astronomer Aubrey Maturin stretched his long legs as the astrolab's morning meeting continued over the next phase of their mission. Yesterday, the Chief Science Officer had broken the group into smaller teams in hopes of coming up with some specific ideas in a short amount of time. This morning, his group's briefing was going at a pace that would lag behind a decrepit snail. His team consisted of members who enjoyed discussing every iota of a problem within an inch of its life. Positive that he wasn't going to miss anything (and if he did, there would be any number of his fellow scientists eager to catch him up), Aubrey switched his attention to more interesting problems -- how to get the time of day from either Claudia Fokker or Ayesha Deveraux.

He decided that Ayesha wasn't going to sniff him even if he was the last tree on the tundra. Her whole manner of conducting herself said, "touch me if you dare." Having already had one run in with a Vaegan woman -- *and* he married her -- he opted to turn his attention to Claudia. The only problem he foresaw was the fact that he found out that Claudia and the CO were old friends and Aubrey wasn't too certain that he wanted to become romantically entangled with someone *that* close to the Old Lady.

The person on his right poking his ribs disturbed his reverie. They had finally come to a decision. After an hour's further discussion, a game plan was

decided and the meeting was concluded allowing Aubrey just enough time to inform the Chief Science Officer of their conclusions. He was really surprised when she not only accepted the plan, but also was told that he'd head the overall mission with Boris leading the scanning portion.

\* \* \*

Communication's Specialist Simone Templar had an important date tonight and hurried to finish her bridge shift. As she entered the turbolift, she carefully considered which dress she was going to wear and what perfume would work best this evening. She was so wrapped up in her contemplation, she didn't notice that the 'lift doors had failed to open.

"*Mon Dieu!* What is happening here?" Simone furiously banged on the doors in an attempt to either open them or in hopes someone would come to her assistance.

"What's wrong?" a voice from beyond called out.

"I can't get the doors to open. Can you help?"

"I'll try." Several seconds later, the doors slid apart.

Simone was surprised to see Virgil standing there. "*Merci.*"

"Simone! Er... I really didn't do much, in fact--"

"You saved me, Virgil." She grabbed him and gave him a very long kiss on the lips. "Thank you again, Virgil."

"Uhm...No problem Simone. Let...let me know if I can help you again."

Simone carefully stared at Virgil, taking in every inch of his body, noting every crease in his uniform, deciding whether or not she liked what she saw. "I certainly will, Virgil. Perhaps we can go out for a drink sometime."

"I'd...like that!"

"*Fantastique! Au revoir,* Virgil."

"Yeah...ah...see you soon, Simone."

\* \* \*

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The usually efficient Chief of Maintenance for the Nighthawks was completely lost in thought, mulling over the events of the previous day. Most of Virgil's contemplation turned squarely to Simone -- how she looked, how she smelled, how she kissed him so lovingly after he had rescued her from the turbolift.

He'd spent most of the day wondering if he had the courage to ask her out. He probably would have continued contemplating Simone except that he now had to spend his time ensuring that he didn't float away like the equipment surrounding him. The gravity had suddenly given way.

In an attempt to retrieve his sonic screwdriver before it broke the window of the 'hawk he was repairing, he bumped his head on the underside of the wing, leaving a gash on his forehead. When the gravity came back on, the pilots, and crews quickly assessed the damage.

"We were damned lucky," Kyle grumbled. He paused and zeroed in on Virgil's head. "Taylor, what happened?"

"Commander...I...well, I wasn't paying attention, Sir..."

Kyle frowned. "Get your butt down to sickbay and have someone look at it."

"Yes, Sir!"

Since no one *dared* disobeyed an order from Kyle Argent, Virgil immediately left to check himself into sickbay, but not before the Wing Commander barked after him, "And when you get back, keep your mind on your work, Taylor!"

\* \* \*

Doctor Claudia Fokker sat back in her chair while she used the napkin -- real linen she noted -- to wipe off of her lips the remainder of the fine dinner the Services crew had specially cooked.

"I have to admit," Claudia began, "that despite all the reports in the various journals that say the contrary, nothing touches the taste of real food. And where did you get this Vaegan wine, Arcadia?"

"Apparently, Services procured some on their leave. Even though I don't drink much as a rule, I have to admit this is excellent *Amakuchi*. Care for some more?" Arcadia asked.

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"No thank you, I don't want the medical crew to think we've had another problem with the ship when I come staggering in for duty tomorrow morning..." Claudia suddenly realized that she *was* dining with the ship's CO and attempted to quickly correct herself. "Opps...sorry, that's really not what I meant."

"Look Claudia, we've known each other too long to start dancing around the obvious. You know and I know that there are some bloody strange events going on around here. By the way, since you started the conversation towards business, anything to report?"

"No, not really. Virgil Taylor had a minor head injury that bled all over the place. Mostly harmless as most surface wounds to the head are. I patched him up and sent him back to work."

Arcadia sighed. "That's good."

"Now that ship's business is over with, tell me about what's been going on with you. Now don't give me this crap about how busy you've been with the ship and all. Scuttlebutt around is that you and that Kyle Argent are quite a pair. Though I must admit I haven't detected any sign of him anywhere in your quarters, office -- your personal space."

"And you won't either. We've decided to keep our personal business as low key as the ship's CO and Wing Commander can be under the circumstances. We have tea in the morning together, some dinners, and attend functions as a couple. Other than that..." Arcadia allowed her voice to trail off.

Claudia picked right up. "That's probably very wise especially with you being the CO. Things could get very sticky, can't they?"

"They already have." Claudia looked to Arcadia with surprise and Arcadia continued, "I hesitated sending Kyle out on a dangerous mission and he was quite...perturbed about it..."

"I'm sure he was," Claudia mused.

"Claudia, he was utterly incensed and stormed out of my office. I just knew it was all over between us." Arcadia paused and laughed. "And if it wasn't for an engineer, mission specialist *and* my yeoman, we probably wouldn't have gotten back together. In fact, the way they did it was quite clever. My yeoman slipped a terribly written love poem in the midst of an official report from Kyle. I, of course, was furious and went marching to his office to demand an explanation. He had no idea what I was on about and since it was obvious that a crowd was forming around his door, we decided to meet in my office after hours. By the time he arrived, I was still quite furious at the whole affair, but he

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managed to convince me it wasn't his idea but..." Arcadia paused with a wistful smile. "He didn't object to the sentiment expressed."

"How sweet."

"And he gave me our first kiss then too."

Claudia laughed. "Was it worth it?"

"Absolutely...though the poem still rotted."

Claudia snickered but became pensive. "It's very evident from the way he looks at you that he really does care a lot for you."

"And I for him," Arcadia sighed.

"But these aren't exactly the best of circumstances, are they?"

"Unfortunately... Neither one of us is going to leave our respective jobs." Arcadia paused to take a sip of wine. "Though I would consider going back to Healing." She paused again and nodded. "Yes, I just might."

"Really? You've kept your skills up?"

"Some. When those damned Romulans invaded the *Stellar Wind* a few years ago, I was put in the position of being the only Healer around at the time."

"You were the best around."

"Thank you."

Claudia checked her chronometer. "Arcadia, this was lovely and I hope we can do this again, but duty calls and I need to be up early in the morning."

Arcadia escorted Claudia to the door. "Thank you for coming. We must do this on a regular basis. I don't have that many people I can talk to..." She paused and added, "So you've just become the Captain's Analyst."

Claudia laughed. "Does it pay well?"

"Of course not!"

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As usual, Kyle had spent a long day on the flight line. Arcadia was having dinner with her friend Claudia, so he was dining alone tonight (only if you didn't count his cat who was cheerfully sleeping on Kyle's bunk after his customary evening bowl of ham with a side of milk).

Kyle was in the process of deciding whether or not to tackle the pile of paperwork or read when he was interrupted by the obnoxious signal from his computer terminal informing him that someone had broken into his secure personnel files.

"What the hell...!" Kyle tapped a few keys on the link to see what had happened. He frowned. Someone had transferred some files to sub-core 206 and now was executing them in a holosuite on deck 6.

Kyle grabbed his hand phaser. Whoever was doing this was in for a rude surprise.

\* \* \*

Ayesha found herself captivated by the images in front of her. Though Vaegans were congenitally tone deaf, she found herself drawn to the rhythm that dictated the motion of the performers. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen.

"May I ask what you're doing with *my* property, Major?" Commander Argent asked from behind her.

Startled, Ayesha sprang from her chair to face Kyle Argent who looked ready for anything with his sidearm drawn and an expression that did not belie pure civility.

*"Commander Argent!"*

"I'm glad you remember my name. Now, about those files of mine you liberated."

"Commander, I assure you. I can explain myself."

Kyle moved to sit down in the seat beside her and motioned her to do likewise. "I'm waiting."

Vaegans as a rule don't usually show signs of embarrassment, but Ayesha was sure that her dark face was beet-red. "Several years back, I rejected the advances of a pilot much like your Mister Masterson. Unfortunately for me, he decided to strike back by composing a decidedly lewd holo program of me that

promptly made the rounds and seems to follow me wherever I go. I now routinely check all computer files for references that might indicate the presence of this program."

"Ouch..." Kyle said as he put his sidearm away. "If you would have asked me, I would have gladly demonstrated this program to you." He paused a beat and added, "All us male pilots aren't alike."

"I know that, but the pain lingers." She replied quietly, and then looked at him. "I am very sorry for what I did here tonight, Commander."

"Apology accepted. You seemed to have been quite taken in by the performance. I didn't think that Vaegans got much out of music."

Ayesha sucked in a long breath, relieved that he understood. "As a rule, we don't, but...I just found myself quite captivated by the movement of the dancers and the rhythms expressed." She stared at him deciding whether or not she would venture down this path. "You seem to be quite knowledgeable on Vaegans, Commander."

"I have a reason."

She continued staring at Kyle deciding what a fellow Vaegan could see in him. He wasn't handsome by any means; in fact, she'd seen much better looking Terrans, even on this ship. But there was a certain manliness about him. And he was a man *she* could appreciate in more ways than one.

"So...I take it that the rumors are true," she ventured.

"I suppose you could say that."

"I see..." she mused. "While I can't speak for all Vaegan women, I find this...this... ballet you call it?"

"Correct."

"I find this ballet to be quite fascinating."

While Kyle Argent didn't answer her verbally, he responded with a slight smile and a look that seemed about as grateful as he was capable of being at this moment. She knew the type well...stoic, quiet, but oozing male sexuality from every pore.

"Now, could you tell me about this ballet?" she asked.

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"The piece in question is called *Ayesha's Song* and is from an almost 400 year old piece by a Terran Armenian composer by the name of Aram Khachaturian..."

\* \* \*

Captain's Yeoman Duchamps Gateway was reading routine traffic when suddenly Commander Kyle Argent's medical dossier appeared on his terminal.

"Blimey!"

Boffin sprang from his chair and dashed into Captain Devlin's office.

"What's the problem, Boffin?" she asked her Yeoman.

"Mam'selle, you need to see this." Boffin ran to stand next to her and tapped a few keys on her comlink. He stepped back once the report had appeared on her screen.

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MEDICAL DOSSIER

The following is Classified Omega 25

**PERSONAL EVALUATION OF LT CMDR KYLE DESCOYNE ARGENT, STARFLEET FIGHTER CORPS  
BY DR. T'USOL, MD, PHD**

The subject has a very interesting personal background in terms of his upbringing. Somewhat of a child prodigy, his intellectual efforts were most likely not just supported, but pushed upon him by his demanding father. His subsequent joining of Starfleet might very likely be interpreted as a gesture of protest towards his Father. His continued contact with his Mother seems to support this, as she encouraged him 'to be whatever he wanted to be' from an early age.

His sister, Ariel, his parents' lone remaining child, lived up to the heritage that the family seemed to be excessively proud of, and became an accomplished historian and lecturer. Currently in residence at the University of the Pacific Rim in Newport, Oregon, she also cares for her older brother's residence and on occasion, his cat, Mac. Though their family is closer to her than any other of her siblings, her family seems to have a most old-fashioned view of her lifestyle, which has resulted in some tension there as well.

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Another issue pertaining to his upbringing was his tenure on Shonen VII. Home of a Federation military research facility where his father worked at for nearly ten years, much of Argent's childhood years were spent on this high-g planet. With the force of gravity being 1.72 times that of the gravity of Earth, it would explain his fabled quickness.

Argent's surprising entry into the Fighter Corps is somewhat of a mystery. As best, as I could ascertain from the subjects I interviewed, he has mentioned a deeply rooted dream of wanting to fly and be near the stars -- and do so as authentically as possible. If this were true, it would provide a somewhat likely explanation of his choice of profession and the deep spirituality that he seems to have towards flying a fighter craft.

However, when asked about it, Argent's only response was that flying seemed to be the profession he enjoyed the most. Answers of such simple and almost semi-cryptically nature are typical for Argent who is very reserved by nature.

Another aspect of influence on his life would be the loss of his wife, Reesa Ostland-Argent, in the waning days of the Szatrappi incursion. Though by all indications their marriage was a source of great happiness for Argent, his reaction to her death was not one of grief, but one of anger. Shortly after learning her death, he flew combat missions and flew even the same afternoon that he buried her. His wing members stated that they felt he became less opportunistic and more calculating after his death. However, the flight records state that after death for nearly a week, he flew more the twice the normal amount of sorties in the same time frame prior and nearly tripled his already prolific amounts of victories per sortie.

It is my belief that whatever grief Argent incurred from the loss of his wife, it still is with him and he has never satisfactorily dealt with it. This is evident by the fact that prior to his marriage and throughout it, Argent was known to be quiet but sociable and given time, quite outgoing. Since Reesa's death, however, he rarely laughs in public, keeps away from most social settings and generally avoids human contact.

There is also the issue of the court martial proceedings brought against him. However as per orders of the Judge Advocate General of Starfleet, all references to it must be kept out of Argent's record, and not available for commentary in this report.

Argent's case history does seem to indicate a personality of profound mystery and his constant refusal to divulge personal information should be suspect indicators of someone who is hiding something. However, throughout

every psychiatric evaluation he has ever been subjected to, he has passed with flying colors.

I recommend that Starfleet order him to submit to further mind probes to further investigate the nature of his psyche. He has flatly refused any personal request to do so, citing the axiom of 'whatever is in my head is private, and I don't care for company'. This is of course, valid, but at this time, if there is to be any more information forthcoming about the nature and stability of his mental condition. I can't see any other way to obtain it.

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Arcadia quickly scanned the document and grew very pale. "Boffin, I'm going to have to stand down the ship to put an end to this nonsense. We no longer have the luxury of time if we are to prevent more occurrences such as private dossiers appearing in public." She refocused on the terminal where Commander Argent's dossier was still on screen. She kept her eyes locked on the dossier as she said, "Please contact the XO and ask him to report to my office at faster than his convenience."

"Aye, Sir."

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Gareth Roscoe's rotten luck had finally turned at cards when he noticed the sudden muffled silence surrounding him. He looked back at the card players and smiled.

"I'm so outta here," Roscoe crowed in triumph.

"What? Lemme have a chance to win it back!" one of them grumbled.

"Not a chance."

Roscoe grabbed his winnings and sauntered on into the hangar deck. On his way to join Virgil who was standing near a 'hawk, he overheard some one yell, "I always knew he was nuts." When he finally reached the 'hawk, Virgil simply stared at him. Roscoe grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "What the hell is going on, kid?"

Virgil handed him his datapadd. Roscoe quickly scanned it and mumbled, "Jesus H Christ..." He gave the padd back to Virgil and sought out Kyle figuring that he might want someone to talk to. Roscoe found him in his tiny office buried amongst vast quantities of datapadds.

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"Say Kyle..."

"Yes, Mister Roscoe?"

Roscoe wasn't sure what to say so he just stared at him.

"Look, Roscoe, I have work to do. What do you want?"

"Ah... well...I just saw it."

Kyle went back to his paperwork. "I see."

"And... ah... I... ah..."

Kyle snapped his head back up at Roscoe. "As far as I'm concerned, this does not change the need to work out drill schedules, assign sim time, or anything else. Therefore, I suggest you return to your duties and inform the others to do likewise. That will be all."

"Yes...Sir..." Roscoe stammered as he backed out of Kyle's office.

\* \* \*

"Thank you for coming on short notice," Captain Devlin began.

The Executive Officer nodded and sat in the chair offered to him.

"After careful consideration, especially after the appearance of Commander Argent's private medical dossier this afternoon, I have concluded that nothing on this ship is safe from interference. Therefore, I have decided that our only recourse is to stand the ship down and perform a low-level diagnostic run on all systems. Please see to it and tell my yeoman that I wish to see him."

"Yes, Sir," the XO replied on his way out of the door.

"Captain?" Boffin asked upon entry.

Arcadia waited until her office doors had closed. "Have Silver Talia here stat."

"Yes, Sir," Boffin replied as he went to put the call out.

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Several days later, Captain Devlin snapped off the link and turned to her Yeoman. "Wonderful. Just bloody wonderful. I stand the ship down for several days. We run full diagnostics and we find nothing!"

"Mam'selle?"

"Boffin, I have the finest crew in the 'fleet and according to this report, the problems that we have experienced over the last few days shouldn't and couldn't have happened."

"That's news to me, Mam'selle."

She tossed the padd on her desk in disgust. "Count me in too." She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Boffin, get me the Chief of Sciences. We might as well continue our survey of the gas giants."

"Aye, Sir."

\* \* \*

Boffin told Roscoe that he had to stop by his office before they went off to Mortimer's for a drink and supper.

"Have a seat, Roscoe, I'll be right with you."

"Take your time, Bof, we have time." Roscoe sat down and waited for Boffin to finish. "Say Bof, what did you think of Argent's dossier showing up everywhere the other day?"

"Well...Mam'selle was really upset about as you can well imagine. She has Silver sniffing up and down the ship looking for clues -- been a regular visitor, that one."

"So, you made the moves on Silver yet, Bof?"

"Considering all the fuss around the ship, who the bloody hell has time?"

Roscoe snorted. "Yeah, right..."

Boffin busily checked the last of the messages when he suddenly said, "What the bloody 'ell is this?"

"What's up?"

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"Some bloody fool has put in a formal protest about the holosuite always being occupied by the same party and..." Boffin stopped to scan the complaint further. "It's not as if this couple is using the 'suite night after night."

"Some people on this ship need to get a life," replied Roscoe.

"Get this, the people hogging up the holosuite are Argent and that new Marine, Deveraux."

Roscoe hopped out of the chair and went over to Boffin to read it himself. "Now that's interesting. Kinda makes some sense. I've seen them around the hangar talking with each other. Yeah...here I just thought it was just professional courtesy but now I wonder... Skye said that Kyle bitched slapped him and--"

"No joke!"

"Yup. Argent told Skye to get lost when Skye was talking to Deveraux. Hmm...I'm sure it's just nothing but a lot of gossip."

"Yeah, but gossip has a way of having some truth to it. You should keep your eyes and ears open, mate, but in the meantime," Boffin began, "I'm done and hungry. Let's get going!"

"Mortimer's, here we come!" replied Roscoe, trailing Boffin out the door.

What the both of them didn't realize was that Arcadia was in her Ready Room and overheard the whole conversation concerning Kyle and Ayesha. She sat back in her chair and carefully considered what she had overheard. It now made some sense to her why Kyle had been suddenly unavailable the other evening -- her first evening free in a long while.

Arcadia shut off her terminal and left her Ready Room to return to her quarters. When she arrived, she decided that she was going to do something different and *not* think about Kyle and their future together.

\* \* \*

"Morning Boris," Aubrey Maturin greeted Boris Brown as he walked into the office.

"Good morning, Sir."

"Coffee?" Aubrey asked as he walked over the replicator. "I figured we should save the good stuff until we really need it."

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"Sir, having to continue to chart gas giants is reason enough in my book."

"True, but we'll be at it for a long while -- might as well save it."

"I agree." Aubrey handed Boris his cup, "Thank you sir." Boris took a long sip and continued, "I assume you heard that the low-level diagnostics found nothing wrong with the ship. News to me, I kept thinking that the ship was about to fall apart at any moment."

"Don't let Chief of Engineering hear you say that, but on the other hand, that thought did cross my mind."

"Think anything else is going to happen?" Boris wondered aloud.

"Please Boris," started Aubrey exasperated, "Let's not trouble trouble unless it comes troubling us."

"Doesn't charting gas giants count as trouble?" Boris asked with a mischievous grin.

"Boris," replied Aubrey with a laugh. "Get to work!"

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Silver Talia stopped by the Captain's Ready Room before she went to her duty watch this morning to deliver her private report to Captain Devlin.

"I take it you found nothing?"

"I'm afraid not, Captain."

"Well, as we haven't had any further incidents on the ship, I think we should go back to charting the gas giants," Arcadia mused aloud. She turned back to Silver. "Thank for the report, Silver."

\* \* \*

*The Shadow in the Dark*

*I perused the current ship logs carefully, and then spent the next few moments browsing through the other classified logs to which I had access, with particular attention to Argent's medical dossier. I should've deduced that business about his having lived in a high-G environment from my own*

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*observations; in retrospect, I see that he displays all the classic "bull-in-a-china-shop" mannerisms of a heavyworlder in an Earth-normal gravity field.*

*Serendipity, that one. My unique talents and privileges gave me free access to all the files of interest to me, but this one had actually been made public. Pure, unadulterated incompetence! What is Starfleet coming to these days? This was precisely the sort of thing that the Master File Plan and its dictates with regard to proper file management were designed to prevent! I reset the file permissions from implicit, based on work group, to explicit, based on ownership, and added a complete review of the applicable regulations to the offending computer technicians' training schedule. Fix the problem, not the blame!*

*As for Argent, well, it couldn't have happened to a more deserving party, now could it? And it would be a valuable lesson to that overly-lax CO. I must admit to some enjoyment in seeing her squirm -- a proper leader doesn't become intimate with any of her crew. I have been waiting for some time now to see her reap the consequences of her personal indulgence. All things come to he who waits!*

*It's about time I tested my control of the ship's power distribution systems.*

\* \* \*

Assistant Chief of Engineer Ian Comprehensible was taking another Bridge tour as the Officer of the Watch. His greatest hope was that it would be a quiet evening; despite his feelings of optimism, given the events of the past few weeks, such was not likely to be the case.

"Commander," the helmsman on duty began, "I'm having trouble with the con. Can you come and take a look?"

"Certainly." Ian reluctantly stood from "The Big Chair," as those on the bridge call the Captain's Chair, and went over to the helmsman's post. "What's the trouble?"

"She seems a bit sluggish."

"Hmmm...you're right." Ian continued to punch up several more commands on the console. Suddenly, the helm refused to respond to *any* commands. The *Stellar Wind* came to a complete stop.

Ian went ran back to the chair and contacting Engineering.

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"Hawke? What's the story?"

*"I don't know, Ian. We're having the same trouble down here too."*

"Damn... thanks, Hawke."

Ian proceeded to perform a few more diagnostic tests before he had to do the inevitable. He carefully toggled the switch and began in a tentative voice, "Captain Devlin?"

"Devlin here," responded the CO in a tired, yet business-like voice.

"Captain, Commander Comprehensible, Officer of the Watch here. We are having a problem here on the bridge. The ship won't respond to any commands. I've had to go to back ups because we've lost all power to the engines."

*"Bloody hell! I'll be right up."*

It took no time for Arcadia to arrive and see for herself that Ian was quite correct. The ship was indeed quite dead and drifting in space.

"Commander, please continue running diagnostics and keep me informed. I'm going down to my Ready Room if you need me."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"So much for the quiet evening," Ian mumbled.

\* \* \*

Arcadia hurried back to her Ready Room and put a call into Silver to come to her Ready Room stat.

"Thank you for coming so quickly and I am sorry to disturb you at this late hour."

"No problem, Captain," replied Silver Talia as she stifled a yawn.

"We *have* a problem, Silver. We have no main power and we're on back up." Arcadia stood up and walked around her desk to the front and leaned against it to face Silver. "We're stuck in space with no explanation -- except the one that I discussed with you not too long ago. I think we have someone on board whose agenda isn't assisting us in charting gas giants or anything else productive. I just hope that it doesn't get any uglier."

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"Not wanting to sound the pessimist, Sir," Silver began, "but I believe our troubles are just beginning."

Arcadia let out an audible sigh. "I'm afraid you're right, Silver."

\* \* \*

### *Music of the Night*

*Ship's power disengaged at 12:00 hours and re-engaged at 12:30 hours, right on schedule, confirming my total control of the ship's power distribution systems. The combined efforts of the entire crew have failed to discern any indication of possible cause, much less the actual one, confirming the efficacy of the spoofing and stealth subroutines.*

*I wonder what the much-revered Dr. Daystrom would say if he ever found out that his long-forgotten engrams were now being used to direct covert operations within the duotronic matrix of an isolinear core? It's such a simple notion, really -- subverting a starship computer system by appealing to its unsuspected baser instincts. No one expects a computer to lie to him or her, much less, that it can be induced to lie to itself. They all take things too much at their face value. No one else takes the time to look beneath the surface of things and understand them the way I do. It's criminal, the way they leave the system so open and vulnerable to attack from within. Is it any wonder that the entire Federation is in decline, when Starfleet itself is so lax?*

*Phase One, operational evaluation and testing, is complete.*

*It's time to begin operations in earnest, I think.*

*Initiating Phase Two. T-minus 47 hours 15 minutes and counting...!*

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