

Nighthawks & Shadows

Ensign Virgil Gordon Taylor walked into the tiny make-shift office on the Hangar Deck and stood at attention. He was surprised when the pilot smiled and stood up to his full 6'8" height to shake his hand.

"Ensign Taylor?" Lieutenant Commander Kyle Argent, Squadron Commander queried in his smooth baritone.

"Yes Sir."

"Ensign, you don't know how good it is to see you. I've done as much as I can in repairing the Nighthawks but what I need is a good engineer. Are you up to the job?" Kyle asked as he sat down again.

"Yes Sir!" replied Virgil, eager for the job. As he sat down to listen to Lt. Commander Argent tell him about the 'hawks, Virgil wondered how long before he could ask the Commander for a recommendation for fighter pilot training.

Virgil longed to be a pilot just like his late brother Scott.

Virgil spent most of the morning reading Nighthawk specs when Lieutenant Commander Argent came over and asked him if he would join him for lunch on the Promenade. Argent thought it would be a good opportunity for him to explain all about the fighters that Virgil would be responsible to maintain.

Once they ordered food, LtCdr Argent began with a short history of the Corps and the Nighthawks. He chose to discontinue the discussion when their food arrived. Virgil opted to ask no questions until they were finished eating. When Argent completed his meal, he pushed the dish towards the center of the table and continued his recitation.

"While capital ships have the luxury of extensive computer cores that make calculations to enter Warp speed a most simplistic exercise, fighters simply don't have the space to house such extensive digital equipment - especially if it might fail at a crucial time during flight - never mind combat. Instead, small and simple was the way to go for fighter craft. Most fighters in the known universe incorporated double or triple redundancy, but Federation fighters of more current vintage were equipped with quintuple redundancy backup systems. It made the prospect of sending a pilot into a 'Hot' zone and recovering him again alive quite plausible, no matter what the odds might be. This, more than anything seemed to give Federation pilots an almost frightening sense of confidence in their craft that other powers seemed to lack." Kyle took a sip of tea and continued.

"To calculate warp travel for fighters, Federation pilots had to rely on the powerful communication systems that their craft were usually built around. The sensors found in larger fighters, such as the F-186 Nighthawk fighter that I currently fly, could often in performance and range rival those of smaller Starships. With these and with their advanced communication gear, the fighters limited computer would interface with virtually any nearby Federation relay station, Starship or other installation. It has sufficient memory to calculate the courses and trajectories for Warp jumps and then relay the data back to the craft which would then execute the maneuvers necessary to go to Warp and promptly warp out."

Virgil considered thought for a moment and then asked, "This must have been frustrating."

Kyle agreed, "You bet. For a pilot this was the most frustrating aspect of flying fighter craft. The computer is in charge of all aspects and the pilot was nothing more than a piece of cargo waiting for his interstellar bullet train to take him where he wants to go. But it is also the time where most pilots slowly begin to get ready for the inevitable horror of going to warp speed. Warp jumps in a fighter craft are not for the squeamish. Many a promising cadet had flunked out of fighter school during their first warp jump in the simulator at Starfleet Academy. It is an experience that no fighter pilot ever seems to get used to or for that matter enjoy."

Virgil smiled at the thought of going into warp.

Kyle took another sip of his iced tea. "Once in warp, flight was quite pleasant. If the craft was pre-programmed with stellar navigation charts of the aspect of space one would be traversing, one could even fly manually and not worry too much about slamming into a nearby Gas Giant. In fact--"

"Sir," Virgil broke in noting the time on his chronometer, "We have an appointment with Lt. Templar in Communications concerning the comm panels."

Kyle took one last sip of tea and then they both left the promenade.

* * *

USS Stellar Wind CO, Captain Arcadia Devlin was reading the formal reports of the scan of planet 11 when she heard a commotion outside the Ready Room door. She distinctly heard her yeoman, Boffin Gateway's voice shouting: "You can *not* disturb the Captain! Captain Devlin is quite busy Commander Th'dor!"

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Arcadia heard the Commander reply in an equally loud voice, "But it's urgent Lieutenant, I must see her immediately!"

Arcadia noted that the last time the Cdr Th'dor needed to see her urgently, it was because there was a message from Captain B'rand, the former CO of the *Stellar Wind* who vanished without a trace in his ship not too long ago. She finally decided that she'd heard enough of their verbal dual. She went from her desk to the door just in time to bump into Boffin as he was coming to get her. "Captain, I was just--"

"Mr. Gateway and Mr. Th'dor. Your voices were loud enough to wake the dead." She turned towards D'ktr and noticed he had a sphere. Arcadia was taken by surprise but quickly regained her composure, "Commander Th'dor, come into my office, if you please." Arcadia paused before going into her office, "Mr. Gateway, see to it that I am not disturbed. Understood?"

"Aye, sir" came the reply from the very puzzled Captain's Yeoman.

* * *

Kyle spent four straight days on the Hangar Deck, not returning to his quarters (which upset Mac no end and meowed his displeasure when Argent finally made an appearance). He spent the last two nights sleeping in his makeshift office on the Hangar Deck, slumped over a computer terminal. The night before he fell asleep while working in the Holodeck.

It seemed to him that he went through all this not long ago -- programming simulation programs, configuring those programs -- and when he wasn't doing that, he helped Virgil bring the fighters up to deployment readiness. He supposed he should be thankful to have anyone at all to help him with this job and especially someone so proficient. Virgil must be devouring the spec manuals given to him -- everyday he comes back knowing more about the specs and stats of the 'hawks. He could make a top notch Crew Chief on any carrier in the 'fleet but then no commissioned officer in their right mind would ever take up a traditional enlisted personnel's job.

Well, according to Mr. Taylor, the last fighter will be fully checked up and ready to go tomorrow. Kyle also finished almost all the data entry for the simulator -- with the exception of his 'custom' touches. Now that he's almost finished, he'll figured he might as well send out his invite to the Captain to have a cup of tea (she's most likely a coffee drinker, so a cup of bean brew for her...) with him for a Command tour of the simulator.

After he sent out the invitation to the Captain, he tiredly staggered back to his quarters, gave Mac some quality time (which the feline didn't appreciate) and crawled into bed.

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The pre-programmed alarm went off at 0500 as usual and Argent awoke from an a slumber that was problematic enough to convince Kyle that it would be best to get up and get going rather than indulge in more of the usual nightmares...

He slipped out of bed, into the bathroom and noted wryly that not having shaved in three days really did nothing for his appearance. He retrieved his shaving kit from his personal belongings that where still more or less untouched in the other room. He proceeded to indulge in a 25-minute shower and use his antiquated manual shaving device and a generous helping of shaving cream to remove the pesky stubble from his face.

"It would help if this stuff wouldn't be so damn expensive," Argent muttered as he stowed his precious shaving cream away along with his other toiletries. He went back to his main room and got dressed, pretty much the same as usual -- black flight jumpsuit, utility belt, boots with survival knife and his treasured Bomber Jacket, which had Squadron Patches all over it -- just like the old aircraft pilots used to do. He skipped the sidearm for once, as he didn't see how he'd need it.

He finally got around to feeding himself and Mac when as he was about to go out the door, he had a foggy recollection of something he was going to do before work today... and at last it came to him. Argent moved back behind his workstation and began keying in a personal note...

INTERDECK MEMO

TO: CdrSG Franklin Updike, Most Superior Executive Officer

FROM: LtCdr Kyle D. Argent, Fighter Pilot Extraordinaire

Thank you for your kind words. I am glad to be serving aboard such with a formidable Captain and an excellent crew and am quite sorry to hear about your concerns about my arrival.

However, the circumstances surrounding my arrival were brought upon us by the complete lack of readiness to safely recover a Fighter craft of any kind. This sort of breakdown of proper procedure on any First line Ship, whether they have fighters or not, is generally frowned upon by Starfleet and the Fighter Corps, and ought to be mentioned in my monthly reports to be filed with the CinC, SF Fighter Corps.

However, due to your kind handling of this case, I will opt to proceed in kind and not make any mention of it in my report.

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With regards,
Lieutenant Commander Kyle D Argent

There... That ought to make Updike unhappy, Kyle considered with a smile. He quickly keyed in his other message to be sent out, ordered up a cup of Darjeeling tea, ate more of his meal and then proceeded to his office.

* * *

Captain Devlin was unexpectedly summoned to the bridge early in the morning. As she walked onto the bridge, she could feel all eyes on her as she stepped down towards the Command chair.

"Sensor ghost you say? Please report Mr. Marcos," she stated in her best command voice.

Arcadia leaned back in her chair as Marcos continued and she assumed that this was the ship that Captain B'rand spoke of in the message that Cdr Th'dor had delivered to her a few days ago. She was in the midst of considering her next move when Lt. Aaron Thornton's insistent voice broke her concentration.

"Captain?"

Annoyed by his interruption, she answered sharply, "Yes!" Momentarily taken aback by her abrupt reply, he looked back towards the console and then to her. "Captain, I detect another ship."

Stunned by this unexpected turn of events, she rose from her chair to look over Aaron's shoulder. It was indeed the silhouette of another ship.

"Yellow alert!" she bellowed as she went back to her command chair to consider her next move concerning this unexpected turn of events.

* * *

"G'morning, Virgil..." This was his second cup of tea already and Kyle still didn't feel quite awake.

"Good Morning, Sir!" Virgil retorted with his ever-present enthusiasm.

Well, at least he was awake -- and hard at work already.

Before Kyle could reply, the ship was put on Yellow Alert Status. When Virgil wondered aloud as to what this was all about, Kyle simply replied, "We'll

know soon enough." Kyle paused to take another sip of tea, "How is Number 6 coming?" Argent asked.

Virgil's normal cheer quickly disappeared. "Uh... That would be telling, Sir..." he finally shot back, trying to pass his answer by Argent with a smile.

Kyle was having none of it. "Having problems?" he asked between sips of tea.

"Yes, sir. But I can't figure out why. I've read all the specifications, all the manuals...and none of them describe this problem..."

"What problem?" Kyle asked quietly. He knew all too well that the manuals covered most of the basics, but there simply were all too many little nuances in a fighter that some how never shows up in the documentation.

"Basically, even after I re-installed everything properly, the readiness status never goes above 82%... and it should be much higher than that..."

"Have you managed to trace the problem?" Argent asked as he moved behind the diagnostic console.

"Yes, Sir. The diagnostic program says that Computer core Number 2 is not initializing properly."

Kyle's fingers flew over the controls and he mumbled "Could it be?" loud enough for Virgil to hear.

"Could what be, Sir?" he asked inquisitively.

"If this is an old enough model it might contain a village box..."

Virgil looked perplexed. "A village box?" he asked, obviously at a loss.

"Don't worry about it," Kyle told him with a smile. "It's really something you shouldn't even have encountered at all... they were pulled out of service several years ago. Before the KAR-120C computer core system that is currently installed, most Nighthawks had one designated 'VLG-N1'. We usually just called them 'village boxes'. When they crated up this fighter, they must have been one short of the KAR core's and just kept the old one in."

Virgil followed every word carefully. He was eager to learn everything he possibly could about fighters and flying, and Argent seemed to be a walking fighter encyclopedia.

"So, do I replace it with a KAR, then?" The procedure was simple enough - Virgil had done it 24 times already and was quite proficient in the speedy exchange of computer cores already.

"Well, you don't really have to... there is nothing at all wrong with a village box. All it needs is a software update, which it can get from one of the other cores..."

"Then what is the problem?" Virgil asked with a noticeable tone of frustration in his voice.

"As I said, it's something you couldn't have known. The cores use different password sequences...." Kyle's voice trailed off as he busily manipulated the controls.

"So what's the number sequence, then?"

Inquisitive, isn't he? Kyle thought.

"It's not a Number...it's *Freeman*," he spoke without paying much attention to Virgil.

"There. It's all keyed in and ready to go. Now lets see what we got..."

"Updating Computer Core Number 2. Please stand by."

Virgil was filled with a certain amount of anxiety. So far, every one of the Fighters he had put together was at 99.7% operational readiness the first time out -- some even higher. Argent had reviewed the data Virgil had given him each time and was highly complementary of his efforts. But this was the first time that Argent himself had witnessed an operational startup of a fighter...now would not be a good time to have been sloppy.

"Update complete. Craft at 99.8756% operational readiness. System initialization complete."

Argent allowed a rare smile cross his face. "*Outstanding!*" he exclaimed, "Excellent work, Virgil! I'm impressed -- and that doesn't happen often!"

Virgil didn't doubt that last part in the least. He felt like a boulder had just dropped from his shoulders, and he couldn't help but smile as well.

"Now, run one last system check on all craft -- mine included. Lock them down for the day and have the data on my desk before noon. After that, take the afternoon off. You deserve it. And we have a pretty big week ahead of us." Argent said with his more standard cool detachment.

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But even that thought of more work could detract from Virgil's joy. He was most pleased with the job he had completed and it showed.

"Yes, Sir!" Virgil snapped back with the exuberance that only young Ensigns seemed to possess.

Well, as long as he does his job, let him have his happiness... Kyle turned and headed for his office.

"Be seeing you!" Virgil shouted after the departing Chief Pilot, who halted in mid stride and slowly turned around, teacup in hand with a slight frown on his face.

"Ah... Uh... *Sir!*" Virgil finally stammered.

Argent turned and walked in. *There -- that's better.*

* * *

Captain Devlin spent the next few hours on the bridge in silent meditation. When the sensors finally reported that the 'ghost' ship had finally disappeared, she rose from her chair, as she took no time to contemplate her next move. She knew it to be a decision that was sure to surprise all on the bridge.

"Helm, lock the tractor beam on the ship that remains and pull her on board." Lt. Thornton was about to offer up a protest when her determined face gave him his answer, "Aye, sir."

CdrSG Updike rose from his seat to stand beside her, "Captain," he began *sotto voce*, "Is this wise?" Arcadia looked to her Executive Officer and replied quietly, "Yes, Mr. Updike, it is." He nodded and walked over to the Communication's Console.

"Captain," began Thornton, "The ship is now on board the *Stellar Wind*, Deck 19, Sir."

Arcadia sat down and banged the comlink to Security. "Security, please secure Deck 19. Allow no one in or out without my express permission. Understood?"

"Aye Captain," responded the Chief of Security.

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Captain Devlin snapped off the comlink and turned her attention back to the helm. "Mr. Thornton, our shadow friends may make a return appearance. Keep a sharp look out for them."

"Aye Sir."

"Mr. Updike, I'll be on Deck 19. Please inform Security."

Though Updike was puzzled, he merely responded, "Yes, Captain."

* * *

Aubrey looked up from the scans he was checking, "Afternoon, Boris."

"Afternoon, Lieutenant. Anything new?"

"Nothing," replied Astrophysicist Lt. Aubrey Maturin as he went to get another cup of coffee. "Coffee, Boris?"

"Thank you, Sir." Boris replied. Aubrey brought the requested coffee to Physical Geographer PO3 Boris Brown who was now sitting at the main console checking over the planet 9 scans. Boris leaned back in his chair as he folded his arms. "Still nothing new, Sir. It would be nice if we had just a *little* excitement around here. I think the excitement on the shuttle deck hardly counts.

Aubrey handed Boris a cup and sat down to drink the steamy liquid, "You mean, there's been some excitement around here and I missed it!" exclaimed Aubrey.

"Yep, it seems the new pilot gave that tight-ass Comprehensible a bad time. However, before that happened, that jackass Cassidy thought that the Romulans were back and caused a ruckus on the bridge. The Old Man heard about and it really gave it to him. Poor man." Boris stopped to sip his coffee.

"Who Terry or Updike?" asked Aubrey.

Boris snorted again, "Cassidy, of course. He may be a putz but he didn't deserve having Updike come down so hard on him. In fact --"

Aubrey cut him off, "Boris, gossip is futile and doesn't add to the ship's morale."

"Yes, Lieutenant," Boris replied as he went back to work.

"Well, don't keep in suspense, what happened?" cried Aubrey in a mocking tone.

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Boris laughed, "Updike called him into his office and dressed Cassidy down as well as giving him some extra practice drills." Boris leaned forward and looked to Aubrey. "That man gives me the creeps. He seems to know everything. No one can fart around here with him knowing about it."

Aubrey thought about it. "I never noticed." Aubrey paused and then continued, "I'm rather surprised that Captain Devlin chose him as her XO."

"Oh, that's right, you weren't around when the Rommies attacked." Boris told Aubrey all about it -- sparing no detail, of course. "...And because of the way that Devlin became CO of this ship, I seriously doubt if she was able to pick her own XO."

Aubrey was about to reply when a sensor beeped summoning both men to halt their idle chatter and set back to work.

* * *

Personal Combat Log:
Lieutenant Gareth Mykel Roscoe
"Tactical Specialist," USS Conquistador

You'd think these bastards would be kind enough to give you fatigue pills just before they stick you into stasis. But nooooo -- be tough and ready for everything they say.

Yeah, well. I was about to kiss off this silly band of misfits off once and for all, and hell knows, I was happy about that. I'd finished my stint as an undercover agent and it was time to adios.

I got out of stasis just a while back to notice that for one, everyone else still was in stasis -- which was good. I could do without their company, for sure -- and for the other, that charming Maniac of a Captain wasn't around. Maybe whoever was out there had finally done the Galaxy a favor and done him in?

"Crew. In my absence you will practice weapons drills..." the voice of our illustrious Captain broke the silence.

Well, so much for that wishful thought! It was just like him to make sure that we would have to drill while he was probably out and entertaining himself by committing mass murder.

"Improve your times... or suffer the consequences." If only I could shut him up. "Especially you, Mr. Roscoe."

Oh, boy -- Something told me that unless someone -- as per my request -- ensured that the targeting software was updated, my

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life would be coming to a very premature end. Take the main weapons systems off-line 'for no longer then 30 seconds' as the Captain would so graciously remind me, and off we go...

"Time for completion of exercise: 22 seconds. Mandated time by the Captain: 20 seconds. Your Failure will be logged and sent to the Captain. Have a nice day!"

Well, so much for this faith in thy fellow man crap.

I, for one, now was a walking dead man. The Captain, most likely to feed his own blood lust, would make yet another example out of me, most likely by slicing my throat open. Unfortunately for him, I was too attached to being alive. So, I resolved to do the only thing I could do in this situation.

Well, the lock on the door was easy enough to pick -- and out I am of the ship. Taking a quick look around I could tell there was a forcefield in place. Well, no one said it was going to be easy!

Where there was a forcefield, there also would be guards -- so much for this being easy. Back into the shuttle. Let's hope I can think something up quickly. Time was a commodity I didn't have in droves.

"Computer?"

"Yes, Mr. Roscoe? Any last requests?"

Very funny.

"Is the holographic imaging system operational?"

"It is."

Excellent -- And I just happened to have the perfect program for the job. "Computer, please access project file GMRX4469 around the known area the shuttle is berthed."

"You do realize that the Holographic imaging system is for Combat-use only?"

"Just do it."

"I need the Captain's permission first."

My patience just ran out. I unholstered my sidearm and pointed it at the various computer interface panels. "Just do it or I won't be the only one to suffer the consequences."

The computer seemed to think about it for a moment.

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"Ok. "

Well, that was a lot better, now wasn't it? I holstered my sidearm and started looking for a way to short-circuit the forcefield. Unfortunately, there was so little space in the shuttle, it seemed to be a futile endeavor. But then my luck took a turn for the better. I found a planetary marking rod used to indicate ones position on the surface of a planet. It had a nice pointed metal tip and was wrapped with rubber insulation. I hope it would be enough.

Out I went again. I hoped that the forcefield would be much like our own and short out completely once the circuitry was breached. Well, no time for 'if's or 'but's -- time for action!

BZZZZZZTTTTT!

Well, something just shorted out for certain. And I was still alive although the molten rubber on my hands was certain to cause a few blisters. I heard voices approaching and opted to get away from the shuttle while I still could. Hmmm....looks like just another Shuttle Bay to me. I wonder...

Egads, I was in for it now. I quietly moved around a bit until I moved out of the holding area where they had parked the ship and into the larger expanse of the bay itself. To my everlasting surprise, I almost bumped into a fighter craft that was quietly parked in front of me. It looked kinda familiar and I was getting the cold sweats -- until I read the decal running along the side: "United Federation of Planets."

Well, how about that! Well, this was my lucky day after all! I found two unsuspecting security guards shortly thereafter.

"Gentlemen," I opened the conversation up. "Could you take me your leader?"

Both were baffled. Well, I could understand that.

"Who the hell are you?" one of them finally asked.

"I am seeking asylum aboard your ship." Hope they'd buy this. "I came from over there...." and pointed where the Connie was moored.

Both guards blanched a bit. "Geez, first a naked woman, then an explosion and now this? We're in for it now!" one guard moaned.

Holographic imaging -- It did work!

The other guard did have the right idea. "We'd better call the Chief. We've got a problem here..."

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Well, the Chief will call the Captain and the Captain probably has nothing better to do than to throw me into the brig, but I won't complain. Better in the tank and alive than being quite dead. And I probably have some vacation time coming to me as is, I suppose.

Before the guards were able to call anyone, a tall, dark woman walked through the door. Who the *hell* is the babe?

* * *

"Captain?" asked CdrSG Updike as he took his usual chair in front of her desk in her Ready Room.

"I've spoken to the prisoner and he seems to be the person I was expecting," Captain Devlin told him. *And if we're using the likes of him as an undercover agent, we are indeed scraping the bottom of the barrel,* she considered wryly. "I've put a message into SFHQ concerning his status and with any hope, we should receive an answer back in a few days. In the meantime, as he is still, as far as I'm concerned, an officer in Starfleet, please have him escorted to officer's quarters. Have a guard stationed outside his door. I'm not in the mood to take any chances."

"I want the Engineering Chief to personally assign staff to get the *Conquistador* back up and out of here. Time is of the essence. Have him contact me personally when they are ready. I want to be there for the launch."

Updike made notes on his padd and then looked at her. "Aye, Captain. Anything else, Sir?"

"No, Commander."

* * *

Captain Devlin sat back in her chair and looked at the science officers assembled in her Ready Room. She found it difficult to concentrate on the lack of progress with the planet surveys. Most of what Physical Geographer PO3 Boris Brown told everyone wasn't anything new to those sitting around the table, but briefings were a necessary evil.

PO Brown finally concluded his portion of the briefing. Captain Devlin felt very pleased with the work accomplished so far but at the same time, she couldn't help but be disgusted. They'd spent all this time on these planet surveys with no tangible results. Even she was becoming bored with it all.

* * *

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It took less than 24 hours for the hand picked '*Wind*' engineering crew to get the *USS Conquistador* ready for an early morning launch. Since the launch window was small, Commander Th'dor, Petty Officer Colin Worth and Ensign Taylor had to hurry with the final preparation. That and the fact that the crew was still in stasis and Captain Devlin didn't want them woken up. Worth saw Captain Devlin check over the ship and then told them that it was time. As soon as they all left the hangar deck, she gave the word and the hangar doors opened to allow the ship to depart on autopilot.

Captain Devlin turned to everyone and thanked them for their help. They then all left for their beds or to other parts unknown.

Captain Devlin herself stifled a yawn as she sat in her Ready Room. The launch of the *USS Conquistador* went well. She was worried that the crew would awaken therefore asking all kinds of bothersome questions. She was also concerned about their 'guest' who told her that he was an undercover agent. Captain B'rand arranged for the ship to be picked up by the '*Wind*' and while she trusted the good captain with her life, she was still wary as to the type of person this Gareth Roscoe may turn out to be. After all, he didn't look much like an undercover agent to her.

She was finishing up her report to SFHQ when a small explosion rocked the ship. She grabbed her desk fully expecting another volley but none was forthcoming.

"Bridge?" she calmly queried over her comlink.

"Captain, our sensor ghost is back and just took a shot at us. We were about to call you when it attacked. Then it just disappeared. We've performed long-range sweeps but so far, nothing has shown up, not even a ghost," replied CdrSG Updike.

Captain Devlin felt her eyebrows knit in obvious confusion. *Why the bloody hell would, they take a potshot and then just run?*

"Very good, Mister Updike. Carry on. Please alert me of any change in status."

"Aye, Captain."

* * *

Aubrey picked up the datapadds that had fallen to the deck. He looked over at Boris who returned his gaze indicating that he was fine. *Well, if we wanted excitement, we certainly got it. That damned sensor ghost that was*

tracking us finally fired on us. Thankfully, our new shields saved us from totally oblivion. We may not be so lucky next time.

"Boris, now that things have calmed down a bit, I'm off to the Scanning Meeting." Boris nodded indicating that he heard his boss.

Aubrey was early and spent most of the time talking to the others sitting around the meeting table. The meeting only lasted 30 minutes, but Aubrey didn't feel that much was accomplished.

Well, that meeting was a waste of time. We all sat around the table with the Chief of Sciences nervously talking about what we discovered. And what we discovered was a big fat zero, which didn't make for sterling conversation.

Aubrey left the meeting and considered how nervous the Chief was. He didn't know the Chief well enough to ask her if there was any problem. He just assumed that the lack of progress in the planet surveys was the core of her difficulties.

* * *

"Commander Updike," Captain Devlin began as she sat back down at her Ready Room Desk talking to her Executive Officer, "These shadow attacks are becoming unsettling to say the least. They've stayed out there on the edge of our sensor range and then one of them comes by for tea. No major damage to the ship. However, if we are to finish our assignment here, something needs to be done."

"I'm in complete agreement, Captain," began the XO, "However..." Updike paused to retrieve a report from his datapadd. "Commander Argent tells me that he's not quite ready to send anyone, even himself out on any mission where, as he put it 'someone might take a pot shot a pilot'."

"*Bloody hell!* We finally get a squadron on board, against my better judgement mind you, and they aren't in any position to render any assistance at this juncture."

"Would you like me to discuss operational readiness with Commander Argent again, Captain?"

Arcadia sat back in her chair to think. "No, Mister Updike, I've read his reports. The Squadron isn't even commissioned as a training squadron yet, so they can't be of much assistance. All we can do is sit and wait and hope they'll stay out of our way."

"Aye, Sir," he replied. Before he could leave, she interrupted him.

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"There is something else to consider," she began.

"Sir?"

"As I put into my report to SFHQ, we have to consider the fact that our friends didn't pay us a call until after Mister Roscoe was safely on board. The *Conquistador* was eventually put back into space, so whatever they want is apparently not on the ship. It is very possible that Mister Roscoe has what they want. We do need to consider that possibility."

"Yes, we do, Sir," he replied as he left her Ready Room.

*

Next: Come Fly With Me!

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