

# Homeward Bound

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INTERDECK HARD COPY

FROM: Captain Arcadia Devlin

TO: Attention All Hands!

I have great news for everyone. We've been ordered back to Earth for a refit. As a result, all leaves are cancelled so we may prepare for departure. Our ETA is Earth standard five days.

Devlin out.

Arcadia finally switched off her comlink after reading the message several times. Usually she was quite upset to be disturbed after she'd retired for the evening, *but a Captain's work is never done as Kyle says. On the other hand, I don't mind being disturbed when it's such good news.*

*We're going home.*

*We're finally going back to Earth. When I left, I was just the Executive Officer. Quite a bit has gone under the bridge literally since then and I'm coming back as the Commanding Officer.*

*I left still a grieving widow coming to terms with my husband's death, now I come back with a new man in my life who promises me a life fulfilled.*

*Home.*

*And for the first time in a long time, I am very pleased to be doing so.*

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"Home..." murmured the *Stellar Wind's* Wing Commander, Lieutenant Commander Kyle Argent as he finished sipping the oolong tea Arcadia prepared for them this morning in her quarters.

Arcadia leaned back against the couch, still sipping her steaming cup of tea. "I can't believe it myself. I spent a lot of time of late thinking about what I wanted to do and..." she paused, "...And should do. At least the ship now is sure to be assigned a new Executive Officer." She paused again, "So tell me, Pilot, how do you think your meeting with Captain Naismith will go?"

Kyle thought for a moment before speaking. "I really don't know." He caught Arcadia's brows arch and then corrected himself. "Well... err...I do have an

inkling of what might be coming down the pike. I think it's my time to take The Long Walk."

"The long walk?"

"That walk you take when you leave the Fighter Corps for the sake of advancing your career." Kyle became pensive. "Time to be booted upstairs and behind a nice, cozy desk... I guess."

"That's always a possibility. It does seem that the higher one goes in rank, the further away from our avocation we become. At least if I was the CMO, I'd still be practicing medicine but I'd also become an expert on paperwork." Arcadia noticed that Kyle had already moved past the subject and now seemed preoccupied with other distant matters. "A penny for your thoughts, Pilot?"

Mustering up all the courage he could, "My sister is getting married and it happens we'll be on Earth at that time." He stopped and looked at her. "I'd like to know if you'd accompany me. You saw the holodeck representation of my home and I would really enjoy showing it to you in person... Assuming, you'd be interested, of course."

"Of course...." Arcadia replied with deadly seriousness. Noting his discomfort, she sought to ease his mind. "I would be delighted to attend. Why did you think I wouldn't?"

"One never knows."

"Indeed..."

Both paused and allowed the silence to envelop them. Finally, each of them looked up at the other and gazed in each other's eyes for what seemed an eternity. Unfortunately, their silent bliss was interrupted by a call for Kyle over the comlink. Kyle kissed Arcadia gently and took the call.

After a few moments, he snapped off the comlink. "Duty calls. Tomorrow morning, Milady?"

"Always, Pilot."

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Virgil carefully looked at the 'hawks he had maintained these last few months and let out a great sigh. He had grown fond of the flight personnel and especially the Old Man. He had never known anyone like Argent and now it looks like things may be changing and not necessarily for the better.

"Say, Virgil?"

## *Volume II: The Stellar Wind Years*

Virgil turned and saw Pilot Redmond Overlake walking up to him. Redmond took no time to start talking to Virgil about his plans for their upcoming leave. Virgil interrupted him knowing that once Red starts talking about anything, there's no stopping him. "I really hadn't given much thought to what I'm going to do on leave other than go home and..." he paused as he couldn't quite get the words out of his throat, "and bring Scott's body back home to be buried."

Red looked at Virgil with a great deal of sympathy. He knew that Virgil's brother Scott died when the Romulans invaded the *'Wind* and how much Virgil missed his brother so. Red suddenly made up his mind. "Virgil, why don't you come with me? I know that you'll be attending Sebastian's commissioning, but once that's over, how about it?"

Virgil took a moment, looked to the padd he held in his hand so he could consider Red's offer. They weren't great friends like himself and Sebastian, but Red was a pilot, "Sure. What did you have in mind?"

Red excitedly outlined his planned tour and Virgil nodded in agreement. "Red, would you mind accompanying me home with Scott's body? We probably need to do that first as Father is expecting me. I'm sure you'll enjoy meeting him. And he'll enjoy meeting you since you are both pilots. Father does enjoy talking about the old days and you're one of the few, other than Scott, that would probably enjoy it."

"Sounds great!" Red responded enthusiastically.

Red waited for Virgil to finish what he was doing and they both left for a meal to finalize their plans for their first holiday in a long, long time.

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Captain Devlin decided that she would take a last tour of the ship now that they were going back home.

"I'm off, Mr. Gateway. Contact me if there is any need."

Boffin nodded his understanding as he watched the Captain leave the office to begin her tour. Since she told him she would be going to the hangar deck first, Boffin put a call to Virgil who, in turn, told everyone that Captain Devlin was coming. Boffin could overhear Argent in the background barking out orders for everyone to get their act together.

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Ensign Overlake and Lieutenant Roscoe were busy running yet another set of diagnostics checks. *Sometimes I truly wonder whether I'm a pilot, mission spec or just a damn mechanic*, thought Roscoe.

"Tertiary hydraulic fluid monitor?" Overlake asked.

"Check," he groaned as he ticked off a spot on his pad.

"Gentlemen, I hope I'm not disturbing you in your performance of duty..."

*Wait a minute... That was a new voice.* Roscoe quickly peeked out of the cockpit only to find Captain Devlin standing below. *But I hadn't done anything!* Roscoe saw Overlake swiftly jumped out of the cockpit and motioned him to do the same.

Roscoe followed suit -- with noticeably less enthusiasm than Red, of course -- and before he even got there a gaggle of mechanics, pilots, and specialists had already gathered around the Captain. This was the second time he saw her, but this time without the burden of having to wonder about his future, which tended to leave little one time for noticing more about the person in question. *So, this was Old Man Argent's doxy. Well, he had taste, to be certain. She was quite the looker but then I always thought Vaegans were pretty, but unfortunately savage as all get out.*

The Captain had shaken most everyone's hand. Roscoe opted to stay in the background, as usual. He noticed that Kyle also had stayed in the background, but unlike the others staring at the Captain in awe, his eyes showed love and devotion.

Captain Devlin had noticed the anxious faces surrounding her and realized it was her time to say a few words to the assembled troops.

"Gentlemen, when I first was confronted with the prospect of having Fighter craft and personnel aboard my ship, I must say I did have my sincere doubts as to why this step was necessary. However, since then, I have been pleasantly surprised by the contribution you have made to this ship. Not only have you added a new dimension to our offensive and defensive capabilities, but you have also added a new flavor to the mix of personnel that one finds aboard the *Stellar Wind*. While I may have had my reservations then, there is certainly no doubt in my mind now about how I perceive the presence of you and your craft here – and frankly, I hope you are here to stay."

Applause rang out, along with various shouts of appreciation. Arcadia smiled as she shook even more hands and then left departed.

*And just how much of this change was due to the charms of one Kyle Argent,* Roscoe mused. Roscoe decided there and then that perhaps he could be of some service to Argent. Roscoe noted that now that Captain Devlin was gone, he had gone back to his office.

*Hmm... I wonder...* Roscoe thought as stood in the entrance of the Wing Commander's office.

"Say, Argent."

Kyle looked up from his paperwork. "What?"

Roscoe walked into Argent's tiny makeshift office and sat down. He looked intently at Kyle's face, noting every inch of it. "You're either really very good or you've opted to take the low road," commented Roscoe.

"What the hell are you talking about?" bellowed Kyle, not enjoying this conversation at all.

Roscoe got up to leave. "I was just noting that your face is suspiciously absent of any markings and I was just wondering if it had to do with the proficiency in avoiding Vaegan claws."

Kyle's face formed into one of disgust. "What the *hell* business is it of yours anyway?"

"Ah... so that's it, you've decided to wait," said Roscoe.

With a look of grim determination, Kyle rose from his chair and appeared about to pitch Roscoe out of his office straight on his can.

Roscoe hurried spoke. "Wait... Look, I'm sorry. I probably should have taken a different tack. I just want to help."

Kyle stopped and sat back down again, momentarily appeased. "What's on your mind?"

"I just thought with you guys going on leave and all, you might like some assistance."

Kyle was becoming more visibly annoyed with this whole conversation. "Assistance with *what*?"

*Looks like I'm going to have to be a bit more direct about this,* Roscoe mused. "Look it's just been my experience that if you don't take care of yourself, you

might end of looking like shredded wheat. I just thought you might like some... ah... hints and precautions to take when you and your Captain... ah..."

It finally dawned on Kyle what Roscoe was talking about. Roscoe hasn't changed; he still beats around the bush when the talk turns personal. "Sit and tell me what you need to tell me," Kyle sighed with resignation.

The gentlemen spent well over an hour discussing the finer points of protection.

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Everyone on the ship was busy getting ready for the eventual return to Earth. And as usual, the Services Department whipped up an End of Tour Party to beat all previous efforts.

As what had become his custom, Lieutenant Commander Argent had arrived at the soiree fashionably late. He considered how parties and celebrations had a way of bringing out the worst in him. He thought that for once, this was the exception to the rule. The people here were happy about putting back to good old Earth and were quite willing to show it. For once, he also was not the only person in the Black and Gray of the Fighter Corps, lost amongst a sea of maroon. Fully a dozen were here, turned out in black tunics with the obligatory gray shirt and pant stripes. Several of the pilots couldn't help but try to use their newly minted gold wings to impress a companion or two. Unfortunately, none of them were even half as successful as Roscoe, who seemed to have a veritable chorus of young women following every word he spoke with almost sensual anticipation. There was little doubt in Argent's mind that he wouldn't sleep alone tonight (*did Roscoe ever sleep alone for that matter?*). Chances are he was busily trying to coerce all of them into spending the night together with him.

Roscoe eyed the women surrounding him. "Ladies, have any of you ever heard of a *menage a trois*?"

His question provoked a half a dozen eyes lit up in eager anticipation.

*Oh, yeah - this would be a night to remember all right,* Roscoe thought happily.

Roscoe's sudden departure, with his personal fan club in tow had even Simone Templar looking after them with a look of disgust on her face. Even though it generally went unnoticed in the general hubbub of the party, Roscoe's departure didn't fail to attract a few stares. Some bemused, others more in anger, like poor Skye Masterson, who probably fancied one of the girls himself and now proclaimed loudly to his comrades, "Alas, gentlemen and kind friends; love eludes me tonight! Let us therefore band together and drink heartily till

the wee hours of the morning!" to the general cheers of the knot of pilots that had formed around him.

*And Arcadia suspected me of writing lousy poetry? Sheesh!* Argent mused as he took the iced tea from the bartender.

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*Show Time!* Arcadia mumbled to herself as she rose from her Captain's table to cut the cake that was being ushered to the middle of the ballroom by the Services Staff. Though Kyle had offered his sword, she opted to use Desmond's sword again as the last time she used it, she'd cut the cake for the beginning of tour party and she felt it was only fitting that she use it again for the end of tour party.

Arcadia recited her few words. *I am saying quite a number of "few words" of late*, she mused. She was pleased report that she didn't make too much of a mess though one of the Services personnel quickly bailed her out and resumed the cutting and passing out of the cake. After sampling a piece -- which was delicious -- she went back to the table to join the others, especially Kyle, of course, to finish out the evening.

Despite Mister Roscoe's amorous entanglements -- most likely despite them -- Kyle noted that everyone in the Wing seemed to be enjoying themselves tremendously as if the knowledge that no one was scheduled for duty the next day had somehow allowed them to make up for months of abstinence all at once. Chances were even money that most every one of them would find their way to the Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. They'd round the few corners and then find themselves at the Wingman's Slot to proudly display their new wings and collect the free mug of Ale or Beer or whatever s/he would drink in celebration. The custom was old when his grandfather flew and lord only knows he was eager to partake in it when he was this young -- which was a lifetime ago it seemed. *Reesa and I had just been married and...*

Reesa...

Normally the very thought of her was enough to make him flee any setting that included company, but this had finally changed. He still felt a twinge of pain at the mention of her name. Reesa was a love worth treasuring for a lifetime and he intended to do just that.

But time marches on. Kyle instinctively sought out Arcadia in the sea of gaiety that surrounded her and found her soon enough -- engulfed in conversation with somebody he didn't recognize. He stepped up behind her and quietly put his arm around her waist, fully calculating that whomever she was talking with would be polite enough not to notice.

His reward was a brief smile from her that more than reassured him that his life had indeed made a turn for the better.

He still did not know why the Fighter Corps assigned him this job, but he now knew that he was eminently grateful for it.

Arcadia was now indebted to Kyle to coming to her rescue from yet another slightly drunken crew member expressing his eternal appreciation to the fact that this was the best voyage he'd ever been on. After accepting yet another "thank you very much," she finally made it back to her table just in time to have the last piece of cake and in time to see participants start to make their way back to their quarters. She and Kyle stayed not too much longer until they decided they were tired and then they made their way back to their respective quarters.

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Captain Devlin rose early this morning. Kyle wasn't coming over for tea as he had too much to do. She quickly dressed and left for her Ready Room. She spent little time there, knowing that she would soon be needed on the Bridge. A quick glance at her chronometer told her it was time. She went up to the Bridge and took her customary place in The Big Chair.

Arcadia listened to the swirl of activity surrounding her, however, to anyone observing her, they would think she was lost in her own thoughts. That is partially the case, as Captain Arcadia Miskinn-Warda Devlin, Commanding Officer on her first, very successful voyage of the 1501A -- a maiden voyage for both of them -- was carefully keeping track of the progress of docking the *Stellar Wind*.

She was also mentally finished off the speech she was about to give to the crew. When she was satisfied that it was time, she turned her chair to the communications station. "Mister Templar, open a ship wide channel, if you please."

"Aye Sir. The channel is open."

Arcadia swung her chair around to face the forward view screen. She punched the comlink on her chair and began the final announcement.

"Attention all hands. We have arrived at the Terran Orbital Space Dock Facility. To those of you who are leaving us, have a safe voyage on your new assignments. To those of you who will be on our next assignment, I look forward to seeing you again. To everyone, have a safe and pleasant leave. Captain Devlin out."



The bridge broke out into spontaneous applause and much to her embarrassment, Arcadia began to blush. She smiled and began clapping herself to salute the best crew in the 'fleet. She rose from her seat and started towards the turbolift door. "I hope that you all have a safe and wonderful leave. I shall see you in a few weeks." She handed the bridge over to the Officer on Watch and then entered the lift up to her Ready Room to secure the last of the paperwork.

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Boffin heard her in her Ready Room finishing up the last of the paperwork.

"There. That's it," the Captain declared as she dropped the holodisc to her yeoman's desk in the out office.

"Well, I guess that is it, Captain. No further orders?"

"None that I can think of though I need to get out my best uniform -- so do you in fact." She stopped suddenly and looked to him when she noticed the look of concern on his face.

"May I sit?"

Boffin nodded.

"Tell me Boffin, what is wrong?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and then he saw the dawning of recognition on her face.

"I take it you aren't interested in taking leave? You seemed pretty reticent in telling me where you are going when I last enquired."

"Mam'selle, look, I'm an orphan. And well... things have changed. I got me life now and I don't want return to East End and to the life I once had."

"I see... There's no reason why I can't appoint you an administrative point of contact for the duration of my leave. I'll supply you with my itinerary so if there are any problems, you can contact me straight away. This gives you a good excuse to be around the ship."

Boffin nodded and smiled. *It's good to have a CO who understands.*

## *Volume II: The Stellar Wind Years*

"So... now that we have that straightened out, care to walk me to the transporter room? I could use some assistance with all this..." she paused and allowed her hand to sweep the room, "Stuff."

"My pleasure, Sir!"

\* \* \*

Starfleet Headquarters, Terra -- Its sheer enormity is enough to strike fear into the heart of every career bureaucrat. Arcadia quickly checked over the ship's complement rosters and noticed a number of promotions for the crew who were reassigned to the *'Wind*. She was finally called in for her debrief. Much to her surprise, she had spent an inordinate amount of time discussing the Fighter Wing and was grilled about even the minutest detail. Finally, she was released spent the remaining time wondering how Kyle's meeting with Captain Naismith was going

*I just hope for his sake, it was going well.*

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Wing Commander Lieutenant Commander Kyle Descoyne Argent thought about the fact that it had been a while since he'd been summoned to the Fighter Corps HQ building. It was located in one of the more nondescript wings of the central complex which Starfleet housed most of its desk jockeys, right in the heart of old San Francisco.

But even so, not much had changed. Amanda Peel still sat at her desk, with a warm smile for him as he strode up to her station. She has been at this post for lord knows how many years, and while most thought of her as a standard issue fleet secretary, some of the older pilots knew better.

Few ever noticed the gold wings she wore with pride even after all these years.

And fewer still remembered the horrific crash that had robbed her of most of her vision in one eye, making her ineligible to fly. She had flown one of the first prototypes of the then-new Nighthawks. Kyle wasn't there, but had viewed the holoivid of the crash at least a thousand times. She was the one that recommended him to fly the prototypes after it seemed to him that he would be washed out of the Corps. They'd served together many years previous and he never forgot the faith she had in him when he had none in himself.

Captain Cordell Naismith had given her the assignment of testing the 'hawks and once again stepped in to make her his Executive Adjutant after she recovered. A glorified secretary position to some perhaps -- but in reality, she was part of the team that ran the fighter corps. The team of two -- her and Naismith, the Chief of Staff, Starfleet Fighter Corps.

Some even suggested that the two of them were lovers, but indulging in idle office gossip wasn't his style (*not that I had much to talk about, anyway...*) -- but if it was true, Naismith was one lucky man.

"Kyle! It's been too long!" Amanda beamed as he walked over to her desk.

"Duty, my dear, duty. If you were anxious to see me, you should have told the Old Man so. He would have had dragged me clear across the neutral zone, I'm certain."

Amanda twisted her lips in a mock frown. "You are so right. I guess I don't love you after all," she deadpanned to perfection.

Kyle couldn't help but laugh, which totally caught her off guard.

"Kyle! I always knew it. You can smile! Will miracles never cease!" she mocked back. "You should do it more often! It suits you. Gives your face character."

*Maybe I had been a bit too dour in the last few years. But nevertheless, there was business to attend.* "I'm here to see Naismith."

"Who isn't? Let's see -- four admirals, three captains and a commodore are all waiting to talk to him," she informed him with a sigh.

*So it was going to be one of those days...*

Amanda looked up to him with an impish smile. "Go right on in. You know the way."

Kyle began walking down the corridor, smiling all the way, against the backwash of the howls of protests coming from the reception desk. His wings might not mean much to most tug jockeys, but around here, they were worth twice their weight in latinum.

Kyle thought that the debriefing more closely resembled an interrogation. Commodore Naismith -- he was unaware of his recent promotion, and belatedly congratulated him -- seemed to want every singular detail about every last diddly bit that had transpired on his latest stint as a nursemaid for a bunch of rough nuggets wanting to somehow earn their Gold Wings.

Kyle glanced at his chronometer and it had informed him that this had now gone on for five hours, which was longer than his debriefing after the battle of Marragha. Kyle's patience was beginning to wear thin, as the barrage of questions simply wouldn't let up.

While Naismith kept pouring over his logs, wanting every detail he could think of, Kyle took the time again to size him up for about the one-hundredth time.

Cordell Naismith was short (not just compared to him -- damn near everyone was that, or so he was told), but he only stood about 175 cm tall and whilst his thin mustache remained jet black, what was left of his hair (a small crown of it anyway) was grayish-white. In his mid-fifties, Naismith was still remarkably fit, as most pilots tended to be. Though his features could make you think of him as a kindly officer who somehow managed to ride the right coattails to his current job, one look into his steel gray eyes could tell you that he *always* meant business. This no-nonsense attitude had made him a Fighter Pilot legend. He was the original Iceman -- cool, tough and just plain deadly in a cockpit. He took this same methodology and turned himself into the premiere Fighter Corps bureaucrat, successfully making the transition from flying a fighter to flying a desk. Though Starfleet appointed someone to actually oversee the Fighter Corps, it usually was one of their own. And the Starfleet officer assigned was usually wise enough to do what was expected of them: let Naismith run the show and s/he reap the rewards.

And in the process, Naismith had become the Gray Eminence of the Fighter Corps and damn near every one knew it.

*But what was all this Stellar Wind hogwash about?* Kyle considered as he stared at Naismith.

"So, you struck the officer in question and threw him in the brig, correct?" Naismith asked for what was at least the tenth time.

"Yes," Kyle replied again in a monotone. *Engaging Auto-pilot...*

"Do you know if the replicator and food services were adequate in the brig?"

"The food service...?" *What the f--*

"Very well. I have had just about enough of this, *Sir*." Kyle snarled the last word. If every man has his breaking point then he passed his two hours ago. "Who gives a good damn about the food services in the brig? Am I up on charges? Is that what this is? *Fine!* So be it. Then charge me, but spare me this bullshit and get on with it. I'm tired of this -- I really am. I think it is time that *I* get some answers for a change."

Naismith put down the datapadd and gave him a wry, tight smile. "Very well, then, Mister Argent."

Kyle noted that he hadn't called him 'Mister' in ages. *I was in serious trouble...*

"Ask away," Commodore Naismith told Kyle as he leaned back in his chair.

*I was in big trouble.* "Why was I assigned to the *Stellar Wind* -- and what is all this questioning about?" *Well, it was a start...*

Naismith, still smiling like a cobra leaned back further. "Kyle," he was back to the more personal form, "without a doubt you are one of the most formidable pilots I have ever known. Your record says as much. Veteran Pilot, Extensive Combat duty, almost one thousand kills, and the most highly decorated pilot active in the Corps today."

The last part was news to him and he had never dwelled much on the other ones, but they were truthful nonetheless.

"Furthermore, you have proven to be one of our foremost flight instructors. The record states that pilots trained by you live longer, fight better, and fly smarter. Four out of five pilots you train state that he or she is a better pilot for having had you as their flight instructor. Incidentally, your nuggets have an eighty percent survival rate."

Kyle felt his ears burning. He never minded praise much, but small doses usually sufficed.

"So, when faced with a mission to drill a group of nuggets, on whose training the very future of Fighter Corps would be decided, I thought it was only proper to bring in the best person for the job -- you. That's why you were transferred to the *Stellar Wind*."

"The future of the Corps, dependent on my group of nuggets? But..." Kyle was unable to fathom this one. Fortunately, Naismith had no intention of leaving him hanging in mid-air.

"The Federation and Starfleet are changing. And we are changing with it. Peace with the Klingons and the... unfortunate" Naismith chuckled, "disappearance of the Romulans along the neutral zone, has provided us with an unprecedented period of peace -- despite the renegades that the *Stellar Wind* encountered a while back."

*Well, if this was peace, then please explain all those scars that littered my body.* Kyle opted to keep this thought a private one.

"And with that, the nature of Starfleet and its relationship with the Fighter Corps is changing as well."

*Oh shit. We have been here before...* Kyle mused silently.

"The last time this happened, Starfleet opted to dissolve the Fighter Corps as an unnecessary remnant of their wartime presence. This led to unfortunate consequences."

They both smiled at the thought.

"So this time they thought better of it. While Fleet Construction is now moving away from large vessels such as the big carriers, for the sake of large exploratory vessels, such as the new galaxy project, our main source of transportation will soon be phased out. However, in order to maintain our current unit strength, we devised a program that would see us deploy smaller units on smaller vessels and spread our units more evenly."

"A sensible notion." Kyle retorted. *Finally, things were beginning to make sense.*

"I thought so too. However, Starfleet wanted proof. Thus, they asked for a trial run. They would supply the ship and pick the cadets. They promptly picked a small science vessel that hardly seemed interested in a Fighter presence. They supplied us with some true problem children as the cadets to be drilled and raided the brigs for the Mission Specialists."

*Well, most of the shotgun riders did have some pretty peculiar records...*

"The odds were against us, but we had one ace left to play. We could pick the person who would be doing the instructing."

"And you picked me?" Kyle asked in an incredulous tone.

"The future of the Corps was riding on this. I wanted the best man for the job. You were the best man. It really wasn't that much of a decision."

Kyle was amazed by all of this. He even began to understand why he wasn't told of all this beforehand. *Look natural -- keep the pressure off...* This was Naismith at his finest -- in complete control of his environment. Argent had to respect his cunning in all this.

"So, how did we do?" Kyle's curiosity was now getting the better of him.

"Starfleet based much of their review on the interviews they gave their own personnel. I have them here if you want to read them, but the essence is that they were glad to have you aboard despite earlier apprehensions. The ship's CO even made a request for a permanent assignment."

"She did?"

Naismith nodded. "Yup. She cited instances where the fighter presence augmented ships' offenses and defenses in a most positive way, thus resulting in a much more efficient operational status. You know -- tug jockey talk."

Kyle wanted to yell out loud, *Hey! Watch it!*

"The program has been classified a success," Naismith continued, "and in no small part due to your efforts. I needed to question you thoroughly to make sure that we could cover every detail in our report. You know -- standard procedure."

Kyle knew that this meant that their report would be better and more detailed than its Starfleet counterpart.

"I noted in your logs that you have decided to make a preliminary request for retirement. Is that correct?"

Kyle shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose so."

"May I ask why?" Naismith was back to being all business.

"You may be content with doing what you do, but I'm a pilot and never wanted to be anything else. It's what I do best and it's all I want to do."

"It is what you do best, isn't it?" Naismith commented with a thoughtful expression.

"I'd like to think so."

"And you don't want to take the long walk, I take it."

"I'd rather not."

"And if you do?"

"Test pilot. Private citizen with a pilot's license." Kyle shrugged again.

"In that case there is only one thing I can do," Naismith said as his facial features went rigid. "Your request is hereby denied. You are an integral part of the ongoing operation of the Fighter Corps and an asset we cannot afford to lose."

Kyle scowled at Cordell. *He could have simply asked me. I most likely would have stayed. Even though it would have dead-ended my career, but this was a bit abrupt.*

"Furthermore, I am also promoting you to full Commander, effective immediately."

"What?"

Naismith smiled, reached into a desk drawer, and tossed a small black box in his general direction.

"I pushed the paperwork through last week."

Kyle couldn't help but admire Naismith at the moment. His complete control of almost any situation and his decisive manner made him a dangerous man to cross -- and not just in a fighter craft. Meanwhile, Kyle was already thinking ahead to tonight and the celebration he'd have.

"I know you are anxious to get out and celebrate..."

*He must be a mind reader...*

"...But I have one last thing I'd like you to consider, Kyle. Actually, it's more of a favor I'd like to ask of you."

"I'm listening."

Naismith explained his proposal. "If you want to take the time, the project is yours for the taking."

Kyle didn't hesitate in his decision. "I'll take it."

"Splendid. Well, I think that will be all for now. Amanda can cut you your new orders now if you'd like. The *Kitty Hawk* will be launched in three months. I think it would make a fine command--"

"Did the *Stellar Wind* get the Wing it requested?" Kyle interrupted.

"Huh?"

Kyle smiled as he had finally caught Naismith off-guard -- first time all damned day.

"The *Stellar Wind*? Why... err... yes. We were simply gonna leave the group already assigned to her. Despite your training, their reputation precedes them and--"

"I think they'll need a Wing Commander then."



"Well... yes... but... It's not the most glamorous assignment, you realize."

"I know. But sometimes flying a fighter isn't everything..."

Naismith paused then flashed a knowing smile. "Indeed! I'll have the orders cut then."

Kyle stood up for the first time in hours -- his back ached accordingly -- and took Naismith's hand when it was offered.

"We all owe you our gratitude, you know."

"I know." Naismith's eyes sparked with puzzlement as Kyle continued, "but you and the Corps aren't the first to owe me something."

"Indeed."

As Argent made for the door, he turned one last time towards Naismith. "By the way, mission specialist Roscoe personally checked on the status of the food services in the brig and assured me of their function. Just thought you wanted to know."

"Oh, go howl!" Naismith chuckled.

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