

This Is Not A Drill!

Lieutenant Commander Argent's review of the Training Squadron's initial practice engagement showed a noticeable deficiency in targeting efficiency. Therefore, he decided to schedule additional hours of sim time for all Pilot Cadets and their respective Mission Specialists.

He also wanted to demonstrate the fact that the squadron was assigned only three mission specialists whilst operating five craft. With five pilots, this was really becoming a detrimental factor to the proper operating efficiency of the Squadron. He was rotating solo flight assignments under the pretense that it was for the practical experience of conditions they might encounter in combat. However, he had to admit to himself, this scenario was highly unlikely. One thing is certain; he couldn't figure a single practical reason for why his mission specialist staff was cut so short.

He looked through all the records and decided that all of the pilots have what it takes to fly, albeit they lacked the right amount of polish. The mission specialists were also doing their best, which was surprising. He knew that he could spot a Bunko Squad when he saw one, and there is no way anyone can ever convince him that these were not in fact rejects with one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. Unless they got a good Mission Evaluation from him, they would be out of the Corps and with that out of Starfleet as well.

One mission specialist though had caught his attention. Ltjg Markus Charles had shown some truly bizarre characteristics in his choices made from the shotgun seat. At times, his firing solutions are creative, daring and almost brilliant -- and yet at the same time, they usually skirted the edge of danger for him and his squadron mates. Either he was a brilliant Shotgun rider that no one has noted before or else he was a careless hack who was gonna hurt someone on his own side before long.

Argent snapped off his terminal. *I rather hope it's the former -- and if it were the latter, he'd best opt to do so elsewhere.*

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After day after grueling day of training, Skye was glad to see the inside of his bunk. It couldn't have been more than a few hours since he sacked out before the alarm klaxon went off in the barracks. Skye was sure that Argent was giving them yet another drill exercise in the hope he could slap yet another demerit or two on those who were late getting strapped into their cockpit.

Fucking sadist. He's already canceled all our duty time -- so you would think he could let us at least have some sleep, Skye sleepily considered as he tried to wake up. He slowly rose from his bunk and began putting on his flightsuit in

slow motion, when Argent's all-too-familiar voice grabbed his and everyone else's attention.

"This is not a drill. You have three minutes to be in the briefing room. There will be no latecomers. Understood?" the comm blared throughout the barracks.

"Not a drill?" Richard Wentworth asked his bunkmate, Ensign Manfred Doolittle as they both struggled into their flightsuits.

"Briefing Room?" replied Manfred as he fastened his flightsuit closed.

Maybe this was more than just a cold strap-in drill after all! Skye considered as he and the others began to suit up at a feverish pace and stormed out of the barracks one-by-one to the briefing room as soon as they were ready.

"Gentlemen," Argent began in his expected calm delivery, devoid of emotion, "due to your abysmal performance during the last weapons practice, I have decided that a second such exercise is necessary. To insure that none of you 'nuggets' decide to slack off, I will be personally accompany the flight to the staging area to supervise the squadron's performance."

Though he noted that all faces were crestfallen, he continued. "All relevant navigation data has been pre-loaded into your fighters. Mister Wentworth will lead the squadron out and through basic formation exercises. After my craft joins up we will proceed to the target areas and proceed to pound asteroids into rubble the likes none of you ever thought yourselves capable of. Please note that your long-range sensors are disabled. Is that understood?"

His voice had been steadily rising and now sounded almost as if it was in cold fury. The effect was fully realized when the Squadron responded in unison with a crisp "Yes, Sir!" whereupon Argent ordered the pilots and specialists to their crafts.

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It all started out easily enough for Skye but then he suddenly realized that things weren't progressing the way he had expected... or had hoped.

I am so very doomed! he sadly concluded.

Skye noticed some of the others move onto the third course when he was barely finishing up the first! He had to loop back twice to require missed targets and by now, the Old Man was sure to have noticed. *Please let me finish the course -- I really don't want to lose my wings.*

Red 2 all but did him a favor by blasting two of his targets almost right in front of him. Their course was awfully close to his section and the weapons man in question just couldn't resist the thought of scoring extra points the easy way.

"Loop around target 4," Skye repeated aloud to himself. "Come up on 5, fire, up to line up 6, fire, then down for a direct line of 4 and 7..."

If only his targeting, would come through just this once -- Skye could sew this course up fast and try and catch up a bit...

The Squadron Commander was sitting in the *Iron Gauntlet* observing the pilots as they went through their maneuvers. Argent was not pleased. Mission Specialist Charles in Red 2 managed to poach one more target since he asked for him to tone it down. He could accept his apparently enthusiasm but he still regarded the action as being more than just a bit insolent. Argent normally expected them to cut it out entirely on one warning.

Red 2 was flying at close proximity to Skye's Red 6, which was still languishing well behind. However, Skye then proceeded to catch Argent's attention by bypassing his fourth target and lining up the fifth instead. A very bold move! Argent smiled. If he could pull it off, he would run out the course in no time and catch up quickly. His senses seemed to be as well developed as his piloting skill.

With a bit of sloppiness Skye managed to eliminate the fifth target and was now beginning to ascend to line up the sixth target. Suddenly another transponder signal caught Argent's attention -- Red 2 was close to Skye's position -- and what was worse, target four was masking his presence. If Charles opted to open fire now for another target of opportunity...

"Red 2! Cease Fi--" The last part of the word got stuck in Argent's throat as he saw the bluish-white discharge of the powerful Phaser One's arc cross the vast darkness of space. This was followed by a picture-perfect explosion of a Asteroid all but being pulverized... followed by a less spectacular explosion of a fighter being ripped with phased energy and small asteroid fragments.

The transponder signal for Red 6 faded from Argent's tactical display to indicate that it was no more. Argent closed his eyes to avoid the images that would begin to flash in front of him for the hundredth or two hundredth time. *It didn't work. It never does.*

"Attention all craft! The exercise is canceled, I repeat, the exercise is canceled. Return to a safe holding pattern outside of the belt and await further instructions!" he barked into his link.

Volume II: The Stellar Wind Years

The fighters quickly checked in with their acknowledgements and Argent began moving them off and out of the belt. Once that was done, Argent began scanning the last known location of Red 6 to see what might be left. What he found stunned him. His sensors read a disabled craft, damaged, and adrift in the vicinity of the blast.

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Skye Masterson had no idea what had hit him or what he had done wrong. The only thing he knew was that one moment he was flying, the next moment he was being tossed about like some old toy on its way to the disposal. Skye thought he blacked out for a moment, but then came around soon enough. The pain in his side told him that he likely had fractured a rib or two. The blood lazily dribbling from the gash in his space suit told him that it too, was compromised. And then he noticed the hissing... the awful, awful hissing -- all the more horrible sitting in the totally dark cockpit.

And the cockpit was leaking air. His spacesuit was compromised. It was only a matter of seconds before the emergency forcefield would break down and he would become one with the infinite...

Skye reached under his seat and tripped the switch that would engage the backup batteries. The display panels came to life once more and he nervously watched how his ship systems rebooted or were re-routed to their various backup modules. He held his breath as the air filter finally initialized from the fourth and last backup core.

Suddenly all the craft's auxiliary systems began to kick on. He never knew that a fighter could be so dark without all the lights that illuminated it.

Power! But there was still the issue of the rather smashed canopy and the internal forcefield that would try to shut down in roughly 20 seconds. He could bypass that and keep it up another minute or two, until it would burn out, but Skye Masterson knew that he still needed help.

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Squadron Commander LtCdr Kyle D Argent felt he was *far* to old and he should know better to try the stunt he was about to execute. Just his luck that the asteroids prevented the transporters from just beaming Skye out. Generally, an extravehicular excursion was something that caused a great amount of dread and anxiety in any pilot. But to try and tether over to a craft that was severely disabled and full of potentially unstable ordinance was just plain suicidal.

But his sensors had read life signs. If Skye were still alive, he would need help. *Only a few more meters...*

His propellant was one of his emergency oxygen tanks, which with great foresight, had been fitted with a proper nozzle for just such purposes. Suddenly, the running lights on the disabled vehicle began to re-ignite -- blinking slowly and steadily. Skye had managed to get main power back on-line! *He was alive!*

Argent gave his canister one more squirt and he landed on the disabled craft with a resounding "thud." He'd had better landings, but at least he was still in one piece. He clumsily sidled up to the cockpit area. *Well, no doubt about it. This was trouble. A whole almost a foot wide had been torn through the transluminium canopy. When the forcefield would collapse, he would be on his own and death would soon follow. And the rescue shuttle was still six minutes out.*

"Masterson? Can you hear me?"

"Commander Argent?"

Blessed be, the communication system still was operable. "What is your status, Masterson?"

"I think I have a broken rib or two, and I my suit is punctured. The forcefield will burn out in a minute or so. I'd say, not good, sir."

"*Shit!*" Argent replied over his comlink. *This just wasn't going to be my day.* "Listen up. You have one chance of getting out of this, but it depends on you keeping your wits about you. Understood?"

Skye could see Argent standing above his broken canopy and he could see Argent's face from the illumination his helmet provided. He seemed cool and collected. *Well, it wasn't his life at risk!* Skye thought to himself. But then, Skye noted, he was on a tethered line with a finite supply of oxygen...

"First, Depressurize and open the aft cockpit. Then retrieve an AEP from your medikit," Argent told him.

It began to dawn on Skye what he was planning to do. Skye complied and then signaled his readiness to carry on. Argent instructed him to seal the tear in his suit with the artificial epidermal patch. *Well, this was a crazy idea, but I'm running out of time and options are running short.*

"I'm done, Commander."

Volume II: The Stellar Wind Years

"I'm going to release your canopy now. After that, I'll guide you up to the secondary. This is your only hope to making it out alive, OK? So don't dick around." The look on Argent's face was one of pure determination.

"Yes, sir." he managed to reply as the canopy blew off. *Good bye and thanks for nothing!* The forcefield shut down and Skye slipped out of his belts -- only to experience a hand grasping his neck and someone yanking him out of his seat. Argent pulled and pulled some more. Skye realized, when he was half way out of his seat what was going on -- Argent was flinging him against the canopy! *He's a mad man!*

Argent saw Skye crash into the opened canopy and quickly recovered from the shock by scrambling down into the seat and buttoning the canopy up. Once the air pressure was re-established, Argent told him the rescue shuttle would be out shortly to beam him out. Kyle hovered around to make sure that Skye was secure then he made his way back to his craft. Once on board his own craft, Argent waited until Skye was safely off in the rescue craft. At that point, Argent felt his nerves kick in; he couldn't get his craft back to the hangar deck fast enough. He made his nerves worse by opting to come in last. Argent watched as all the other pilots safely landed, starting with the shuttle that had beamed Masterson off of his crippled craft. Argent made a mental note to request retrieval of Skye's craft.

Finally, Argent landed and then taxied to his familiar parking zone and he immediately popped the canopy. It had been his first flight in a while. He also felt it was one that made an excellent case for why it ought to be his last one period. He swiftly removed his helmet and began to breathe in the fresh air. Even stale ship's air tasted sweet compared to the amalgamation of sweat and fear that now filled his suit. He felt it was finally over. Masterson was safe and most likely on his way to sickbay.

Then it suddenly hit him. He realized that this was far from being over. One more detailed needed to be taken care of.

With newfound adrenaline, he jumped out of his craft, rushed past Virgil, who was about to ask him a question or two. Argent made his way over to where Red 2 was parked with purposeful and measured strides. Someone was about to face the consequences of their actions. And no matter what happened, Argent knew he couldn't care less of what some of those consequences would mean for him personally.

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Maintenance Engineer Virgil Taylor knew that something terrible had happened out there when he saw the planes land minus one flyer and the appearance of a medical transport. He tried asking Commander Argent about what had

transpired, but his reply was to push him aside while marching straight over to where Red 2 was sitting. Virgil noted with great concern that Argent's features, usually cold and aloof, now seemed harsh, if not downright frightening. His eyes seemed to be ablaze with a jade fire. No announcement was necessary that Argent was coming their way, his eyes were enough to scare everyone out of his path.

Argent slowly made his way up to the crew of Red 2, but went straight for Mission Specialist Markus Charles, all but ignoring the pilot. Finding his quarry, Argent promptly landed a left hook to the jaw that caused Charles to land squarely on his behind. In that split second, the entire hangar bay came to a dead silence to witness the event currently unfolding in front of them.

Argent stood over Charles like a towering giant ready to squash an ant. His fists were clenched and his arms coiled, ready to strike again. Charles was conscious, rubbing his jaw.

"Do you have *any* excuse whatsoever for what you did?" Argent boomed; his voice filled with anger and fury.

"N...n...no, Sir," Charles managed to stammer.

Virgil could see that Commander Argent was still furious. It was obvious that he wanted to settle it right here and now.

"Gentlemen...." Argent began quietly, as he turned away from the still stunned Charles to face the crowd that was forming around them. "This man today, through his own incompetence jeopardized the life of one of his fellow officers. Fighter Corps regulations are very strict on this issue and he will be dealt with accordingly this time." Argent paused and scanned the mass of people surrounding him who were collectedly holding their breath. "If this ever happens again, so help me, what the regulations will do to you will be the *least* of your worries. Worry about what *I* will do to you." He stopped and looked everyone one of us dead in the eyes. "Consider this a warning to you all!"

The determined fury that was written across Argent's face told everyone that he meant every word he said. And it was enough to frighten most quite sufficiently this day.

Argent turned back to Charles, still lying on the ground. "Mr. Charles. You are hereby charged with recklessly endangering a fellow officer and causing the destruction of Fighter Corps property. You are hereby confined to quarters until such time as proper authorities are dispatched to haul your sorry ass off." Argent added some emphasis to his display by grabbing Charles by the neck and bringing him to his feet with one quick motion.

"Now get out of my hangar bay!" he bellowed and emphasized the pronouncement by kicking Charles squarely in the rear, sending him sprawling to the floor once more.

With the floorshow concluded and his anger ebbing off, Argent swiftly left the Hangar Bay, with a multitude of pilots and technicians alike staring after him with blank looks on their faces. No one had quite ever seen him quite like that and all that were witnesses that day sincerely hope they never will again.

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The Squadron Commander was quietly standing near Skye Masterson's medic-bed in sickbay. Masterson was in a healing sleep and would remain so for a day or so more. Argent continued to chew over the spectacle he had caused in the Hangar Bay. He always hated it when his temper got the best of him and worked hard to keep it in check, but sometimes he just couldn't help it.

It was the pilots like Masterson here, that trusted him with their lives, and he did his best to live up to their trust. A "robot," some called him -- for always doing it the right way, never slipping up. He was always coolly efficient in battle. But unlike an automaton, there was a very human heart in this person somewhere and he'd gotten proficient in ignoring his own feelings.

He had these pilots to look out for, to protect. He could not let them be harmed -- and especially if said harm was from within. He looked down to the sleeping Masterson. "I won't let this happen again. I promise," Argent whispered quietly. His contemplation was interrupted by a familiar British accented female voice.

"I was told I could find you here, Commander Argent."

Kyle suddenly looked up. "Captain Devlin? ...Uh... how... may I help you?" he blurted out with some sense of surprise.

"I thought I'd check up on you and your wounded pilot, Ensign Mika Masterson. When I was told both of you were here, I decided I might as well settle both accounts at once," she began with a certain amount of professional detachment in her voice.

"Thank you for the concern, but Masterson is in good hands and I'm doing fine," Argent replied with equal professionalism.

"I thought you should know that we retrieved Mister Masterson's craft."

"Thank you, Sir," he replied, his voice devoid of emotion.

Arcadia looked at the Squadron Commander. "Mister Argent," she began evenly, opting to ignore his curtness, "I heard you saved this man's life."

"His account may differ," Argent replied stiffly.

Captain Devlin frowned slightly. "It is what the ships logs will show, Mister Argent. I also understand you had the officer responsible confined to quarters," she stated as an implied question.

"Fighter Corps takes care of its own. Even in punishing them, Captain." Argent straightened up and looked away from her allowing his eyes to focus on a nonexistent spot on the wall.

Captain Devlin suddenly stopped and stared straight at him. "You care very deeply about your pilots, don't you?" she asked in a quiet voice.

The wall of non-emotion that surrounded Argent chose this very moment to crack. He whipped his head around to stare at her. "Without me, they have nobody to show them just how tough it can get out there. I have seen too many good men and women go out there and get slaughtered because they were not adequately prepared. May I be *damned* to hell if I ever let that happen to one of *my* Pilots!"

The Commanding Officer paused as she continued to stare at the Squadron Commander. Unbeknownst to him, she had overheard his heartfelt words as he spoke them over the injured pilot's bed. Suddenly, a number of misgivings she had had about the 'dumping' of the squadron on the '*Wind*' quickly disappeared. Rather than being a hindrance to his efforts, she decided to help him.

"I do believe they are in a pair of most capable hands. Less for *me* to worry about," she told him as she allowed a slight smile to cross her lips.

He turned around and for the first time in what seemed to be a long while Kyle had to laugh. "Well, it would be a concern of yours as well, now wouldn't it?"

She looked at him quizzically. "But of course... that is my job, Commander," she replied as she made another decision. "I understand that you are short on Mission Specialists, is that not correct?"

"Yes, we are down to two now... out of five required," he nodded.

Captain Devlin thought for a moment knowing that what she was about to do would change the nature of the association between the Squadron and the '*Wind*' from one of adversaries to one of partners.

"I believe I might be able to help you out on this one. Schedule an appointment with Mister Gateway for later in the week, so we may discuss this further."

Volume II: The Stellar Wind Years

"Very well, Captain," Kyle replied in a voice devoid of emotion as he lacked proper motivation to schedule his own office hours right now.

She was about to leave but abruptly turned back to face him.

"You saved this man's life today, Mister Argent. That means that there is one less stripe on the side of your fighter that otherwise would have been there."

Kyle was uncharacteristically surprised by her comment. Either Virgil had opened his mouth a bit too far, which he doubted; or else, she'd been reading up on him.

She turned around and was about to leave when he stopped her. "Captain Devlin?"

She stopped and turned around to face her Squadron Commander, "Yes, Mister Argent?"

"Thank you, Sir," Argent offered as he half-turned to face her, catching the warm smile she flashed his way.

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Next: *Arrival, Redux*

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