

Best Intentions

Science Vessels generally didn't warrant being attacked by unknown assailants, but the *Stellar Wind* was slowly gaining a reputation to the contrary. Scanners had just indicated a wave of small craft heading straight for her but before their identities could be established, they had begun an all out assault on the ship.

"*Captain Devlin!*" shouted the duty helmsman.

"Yes?"

"Captain, sensors picked up several small craft coming towards the *Stellar*--"

The ship going automatically into Red Alert status cut off that response but he recovered and said, "Captain, we've lost power to the shields."

"Bloody hell!" She turned away from the forward screen and towards the Comm Station. "Please contact Commander Argent."

The comm officer attempted to comply with her request but found it impossible to contact the hangar deck. Unbeknownst to the Bridge, the Fighters were having their own problems.

Maintenance Engineer Virgil Taylor was busy tending his 'hawks on the hangar deck, when the power suddenly cut out in the bay and the *Wind* began to shudder as if under attack. Virgil suddenly feared the worse -- LtCdr Argent was out there! He had taken his craft out for a joyride to "blow off some steam" after sitting through all "those fucking fighter tryouts" as he called them. Right now, whatever was out there -- Argent was out there with them.

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While Captain Devlin's background wasn't that of a typical starship of the line commander, she was quickly becoming a veteran at thwarting off alien attacks.

"Shields at full power," she ordered quietly.

"I can't, Captain. At best, I can give you seventy five percent, Sir," helm replied.

Arcadia spun around in her chair. "*Communications!*" she bellowed over the din, "Have Mr. Updike report to the bridge."

"Sir," the comm officer shouted back, "I can't reach the XO!"

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While the Bridge and Hangar Deck were having their problems, the XO was having his. Updike felt the *Stellar Wind* shuddered hard as if something had hit it. Updike started to get up when the ship vibrated again and pushed him right back in his chair. He activated the comm unit and asked politely, "Updike to the Bridge. What is going on?"

The hiss from the unit was not reassuring. He tried it again before trying the other channels. Another shudder shook the ship and even the hissing stopped but at least the inertial dampers were working better. Updike moved to the door to head for the bridge, but it wouldn't open. He tried the manual controls and the door stayed closed as tight as the lips of a civil servant being attacked by a senator.

Updike activated the computer console and requested, "Computer, connect me with the bridge."

The response was a calm, "*Access denied.*"

After a silent "Damn," Updike went to the desk and pulled out a communicator. He flipped it open and tried again. "This is Commander Updike. Can anyone hear me?"

There was no response -- not even a hiss. He had the computer slowly run through all available channels until he finally heard a voice: "...is Commander Argent. Does anybody read me?"

"I do. This is Updike. I seem to be trapped in my sitting room. Send someone to get me out immediately."

There was a pause, almost long enough for Updike to call again, before LtCdr Argent answered. Then Updike heard a faint, "Shit" which made him grin. He heard faint clicks, a phaser being fired, and the sound of shields absorbing energy.

Argent spoke to him in a normal voice. "I don't seem to be able to reach anyone but you and at the moment, I am in my ship fighting off seven vessels attacking the ship. So I can't get you out right now." Updike almost could see the grin on Argent's face. Argent continued, "I could use some backup out here. Can you relay to the Bridge for me?"

"Not unless you have some idea on how I can get out of a locked room. I cannot reach anyone but you on the communicator. We seem to be stuck talking to each other. If you can help me get out, I will find assistance for you."

"Have you--" more sounds of fighting interrupted "-- tried the computer?"

"Yes. It responded with an 'access denied'."

"Try again and enter through the system... *Ugh!* Just a moment..." Momentary silence was followed by the sharp hiss of phasers being fired. "Slowed that one down... tough buggers... but he'll be back. Anyway, access through my own personal terminal channel."

Urdike responded, "And what is your access code?"

"See if you can enter into my own personal terminal, A-R-G-0-0-2."

Urdike turned to the computer console and did as requested. "Computer, connect to ship's terminal A-R-G-0-0-2."

"*Connection established,*" replied the computer, devoid of any emotion.

Urdike turned his attention back to the communicator. "That was successful. What is the access path and what are the codes?"

"Hold on..." Argent replied through clenched teeth. What followed next was a series of explosions and what seemed like warning klaxons. "Damn it... why isn't the ship firing?" Argent mumbled, seemingly to no one but himself. Urdike could hear the staccato sounds of the craft's phasers discharging.

"That backed him off," Argent declared all but grinning into the comlink. "Urdike... listen carefully. Go into my personal files, marked 'private' the password is 'zeitgeist'. In there, you'll find a file marked 'master'. Execute it... *Ack!* Password for... program... 99... Alpha... 4596... Beta... 180671... Omega..."

Their communication was interrupted by another explosion and then another. Then silence as the link went dead.

Urdike wondered if someone had finally gotten the better of Kyle Argent, Fighter Pilot Extraordinaire. But somehow, he doubted it. Right now, he just hoped that the code had come through complete.

Well, let me see what we have here... Urdike thought as he scanned the contents of Argent's personal files. He found logs, personal records, mail, personnel files, miscellaneous files... *Personnel files?* he thought. *Of whom?* Urdike was too curious to resist temptation and accessed them. He was rewarded with a flurry of information that he knew could be of use to him.

"*How very interesting,*" he thought. "Been doing your reading I see, Mr. Argent," Urdike said to himself with an almost sinister undertone. Another shudder

rocked the ship and reminded Updike of his real reason he was accessing the account.

Better read this later. He exited the personnel section to the main menu, found the entry marked "master" and told the computer to execute it. It prompted him for the password, which he keyed in -- hoping it would work.

The screen went blank for a moment and then returned with a top view schematic of the ship. The Master Systems Override was designed to allow the Commanding Officer or the Executive Officer to override any of the ship's systems or functions from one of three remote sites at different locations aboard the ship.

How in the world did Argent ever get a remote connection to that through his computer terminal? Unimportant for now, first things first. Updike hunted down the override feature for the doors. There! He asked for an emergency override - and the computer prompted him to enter his pass code. The Captain had the code -- and so did he. But did Argent have it as well? He silently keyed it in.

"Access Granted."

Updike fell back in his chair with relief as the doors to his sitting room slid open. As soon as the doors opened, Updike rose from his chair and was ready to go to the bridge as quickly as possible, when another explosion rocked the ship. He halted in mid-stride realizing he could control all he needed from the terminal. He sat down again, checked the shields to ensure they were at full power. Another violent vibration, but somehow different, rocked the ship. Updike wondered about the vibration as the doors snapped shut and locked again leaving him trapped in his quarters again. *Oh well, he thought. I can do what is needed from here.*

He was about to enter commands to be sent to the rest of the ship when he noted that Captain Devlin had just ordered the firing of phasers targeting the engines of the attackers. Updike contacted the transporter crews and told them to stand by to beam the enemy crew to the brig and to rescue Argent if necessary which he doubted. He contacted the hanger bay and ordered the other fighters out as quickly as possible. He then squirted a message to the Captain to let her know where he was and his situation.

"Congratulations!" came over the communicator as Argent suddenly came back on line.

Updike was somewhat startled by Argent's sudden reappearance, "Commander, what is going on out there? Did you get the Captain's message?"

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"Well, Sir...you know what they say about war being hell? Well, they were not all that wrong in this case. Any which way... You or someone else finally brought the shields to full power -- which promptly took out the bogey that was pursuing me."

Updike smiled with grin satisfaction. "You have me to thank for that, Commander --" Updike thought he heard the reply go something like 'yeah, whatever' but couldn't be sure.

"Whoever or whatever they are -- they are down to six..." Argent informed him.

Updike heard more phaser fire, a sound similar to a photon missile launch, and then an explosion much like the ones he had heard before.

"Make that five craft. I think they'll conclude this attack here pretty soon."

"Good job, Commander but do not destroy any more. Just disable them. The Captain wants prisoners for interrogation,"

"As soon as you can, please open the hangar bay doors if you could. I took some good hits. All my primary systems are down already. I'm going after this guy, but backup would be nice."

"I already ordered the fighters out. I will relay your situation to them," Updike calmly replied.

Updike had expected his usual sarcastic response to Updike, nothing but static came from Argent's comlink.

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After the ship stopped shaking itself to pieces, Skye and a few other flight personnel were able to respond to the cold scramble order that came in over the hangar comm station. Major Warren Michaels, Ensign Redmond Overlake, and Ensign Skye Masterson answered the call and made for the first available craft. Virgil waved Ensign Overlake off and guided him to another craft, most likely because it wasn't carrying a full load of weaponry. Michaels launched first, with Skye following right after him. Launching without any positioning system, or lights for that matter, was eerie, but Skye had launched dozens of times from this deck, so he knew what it looked and felt like. But he pitied anyone having to land in this mess...

Major Michaels ordered Overlake and Skye to form up and go to Military power to intercept the hostile craft.

As they came to relieve him, Argent finally broke off his relentless pursuit of the enemy and headed in.

"Would you take a look at that! Argent's craft is a mess!" Overlake piped in.

"Pipe down, Ensign!" Argent growled into the ship-to-ship comlink; obviously he'd been listening in. "Take it from here, Major Michaels. Good Hunting."

Michaels acknowledged then broke formation for pursuit as he took a close look at Argent's craft as it passed him by. There was carbon scoring everywhere, with the left support surface having taken the worst of the beating. It looked like it was ready to disintegrate now -- with the rest of the craft a few seconds later.

"The Old Man would be lucky if he made it back in one piece," Overlake muttered on the ship-to-ship. Only this time, Argent obviously wasn't listening in.

Updike contacted Argent again as he made his way to the ship. "Commander Argent. What is your status? Can you make it back in? Can you talk with hanger control?"

"I can fly it all right. But only barely and I don't have contact with anyone but you. My air in here isn't too fresh either."

"We can beam you in and pick up the fighter later," Updike suggested.

"I am *not* going to abandon my ship!"

"That is your choice Commander as long as it does not endanger the '*Wind*.'" Updike's unholy smile spread, "So, it seems it is my turn to assist you." Updike addressed the computer. "Computer, voice relay to hanger control."

"*Activated.*"

"Hanger control. This is Updike. Commander Argent's ship is damaged and he is coming in now and I mean now! Are you ready?"

"This is Ensign Taylor, Sir. The doors are open, but we don't have any landing bay lights, the tractor beam is down and the landing bay is pretty dim. It's only lighted from the observation platform windows."

Updike contacted Argent again. "Commander, did you hear? Does your ship have enough control to handle it?"

"I've landed in worse conditions," Argent gritted out.

Updike didn't doubt his statement. He had seen his files. He contacted the hanger again. "Can you protect the *Stellar Wind* from a crash?"

"Yes, Sir," stated Virgil.

"Then be damn sure you do so," Updike ordered.

Argent bit down the answer he was going to give but merely replied, "I'm going in. Sorry if I am incommunicado for the next few minutes..."

Getting in the hangar was one thing. Landing in the dark was a whole different issue. With the lights out, Argent had to rely on his instruments and the hope that they were perfectly calibrated to the floor level of the hangar bay -- with all systems on their backup cores, no less.

Never mind all the other non-system damage the fighter had taken.

That ultimately was the thing that all the quadruple redundancy in the world couldn't help a pilot -- if the fighter itself was in pieces it had a way of completely falling apart when the pilot least wanted it to. Argent looked at his instruments and noted that structural integrity on this one was down to 72%. A few more percentages and he could officially classify it as a total wreck.

Argent gradually lowered the craft to where the instruments told him the deck ought to be. Meter by meter, he lowered the fighter... until finally his good luck caught up with him. One of the repulsor lifts simply with no warning died on the spot. The left side of the craft fell a final two meters and crushed the wing surface, as the right side repulsor stubbornly refused to join its counterpart, leaving him dangling sideways, and straining against my cockpit belts. Argent finally cut the power to the other repulsor and it dropped the fighter from its awkward position onto the hangar bay deck, which never seemed the harder. He felt the landing struts snap under the sudden stress and finally felt the fuselage rupture and split into two pieces, not half a meter behind his back.

Argent became aware of the complete silence surrounding him and looked at the mess around him. The fightercraft he'd flown for some five years without little trouble was now nothing but a crumpled wreck, ready for reprocessing. He took a moment to look around him and see what he could of the wreckage that now was strewn over the deck. He took a moment to think about what to do next.

Finally, he popped the canopy off, jumped out, and began to walk away -- there was nothing else to do.

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By the time Updike arrived on the Bridge, all was secure. The next wave of dispatched fighters from the '*Wind*' chased off the other alien crafts and all that was left to do was to sweep the area for survivors.

"*Secure from Red Alert!*" Commander Updike's voice boomed over the din.

"Secured, Sir," replied Petty Officer Anderson at the communication's console. Anderson searched the console. "Damage reports are coming in Sir, minor damage though out the ship. Medical teams report that--"

Captain Devlin interrupted him. "Gentlemen," she began, "as all seems secure here, I want to take a closer look at the remains of the alien craft and any survivors. Mister Updike," she paused to look at the new arrived Executive Officer, "you have the bridge."

Now that Updike had finally made his appearance, she felt confident enough to leave the Bridge. She quickly made her way to check on the remains but in the back of her mind, she knew she needed to ensure that all was well with her pilots as well. She checked on any remains of the alien craft and found that nothing but bits was beamed aboard.

Arcadia next entered the hangar deck only to spot LtCdr Argent's ship in ruins and quickly assumed the worst. Spotting no one on the deck to answer her query, she took another rapid glance around then hastily left for her Ready Room.

Virgil was making his way back to the deck when he was almost run over by Captain Devlin. She looked very distressed and tired; no doubt the battle took much out of her. He decided to cheer her up by telling her that all was well and that although the Nighthawks suffered some damage, no one was seriously injured. Virgil noticed immediate relief on her face and she thanked him for delivering such good news.

As Virgil watched her enter the turbolift, he wished he could see her smile again as she did just then.

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After staying for long enough to look like he was in charge on the Bridge and ensured that he spoke to as many of the crew as necessary to keep up appearances, Updike returned this quarters to think. After the events of the day, it seemed quite clear that Mr. Argent required some extra attention. His knowledge of the ships systems and their more subtle intricacies caught him by surprise. Such savvy was not normally found in most space crate flyboys.

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Updike thought for a second longer before he made a decision. *And I have just the person to keep an eye on Argent.*

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After having been interrupted by the recent attack on the ship, Physical Geographer PO3 Boris Brown was finally able to get back to scanning. He scanned all morning and in the afternoon, he was checking the results. Boris looked up from his monitor to see his nominal boss walking in the door.

"Afternoon, Lieutenant."

"Afternoon, Boris." Aubrey stopped and went over to where Boris was working and looked at the scans himself. "Doesn't look like much, does it?"

"No Sir, it doesn't." Boris rose from his chair and stretched. "I could use a break, Sir. May I get you a cup of coffee?"

"Thank you, Boris, I could really use a cup." Aubrey replied. Boris stretched some more as he walked over to the replicator for the coffee. Boris brought a steaming cup to Aubrey who was now sitting at the main console checking over the planet 9 scans.

"Did I miss anything?" Boris asked as he sat down across from Aubrey.

"Not that I can tell, Boris. Doesn't look like there's anything here."

"How long are we going to stay around nine?"

Aubrey sat back in the chair and thought. "Depends on whether or not we'll be able to scan these planets in peace. For a science ship, we are certainly seeing a lot of excitement."

"True, Sir, very true."

Aubrey was about to reply when a sensor beeped summoning both men to halt their idle chatter and check the latest results.

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The *Stellar Wind* was finally able to return to her scientific routine until one morning, sensors indicated that there might be another sensor ghost hovering on the outskirts of sensor range. It was decided that the best course of action was to send the squadron of Nighthawks out to investigate. Captain Devlin was uncharacteristically hesitant to give the order -- she did not wish to send anyone into battle after they had come so close to dying the other day.

LtCdr Argent's demands were made in a voice bordering on insurrection, "*Do we have the Captain's permission to launch?*"

The Executive Officer glanced over at the Commanding Officer who looked as if she wasn't going to reply. Update took over. "Yes, immediate launch," he replied smoothly.

"Aye, Commander," spit back the Squadron Commander.

Updike closed the comlink and looked over to the Captain.

The Captain realised that almost everyone else on the Bridge was either discreetly looking or was paying very close attention to the scene being played out. She sat up in her chair while she tugged on her tunic and casually looked over to the Executive Officer, "Status report, Mr. Updike?"

"The fighters were just launched, Captain."

"Very good, Commander Updike, carry on," she replied in a more subdued voice than usual.

Captain Devlin waited nervously on the Bridge, with the ever present Updike fixed on her ever move, until the Squadron Commander reported that the sensor ghost was just that, a ghost. Argent announced that he and the squadron had swept the area several times and found nothing.

"Thank you for your report, Mister Argent. Report back to base," Captain Devlin ordered.

"Aye, aye.... Captain," he replied icily.

Once the Tower reported all Nighthawks were back, Captain Devlin handed the con over to Updike and she retired to her Ready Room to wait for the inevitable.

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Ltjg Boffin Gateway, Captain Devlin's ever-efficient yeoman knew something was up from the way that his boss trudged into her Ready Room. Once he was able to ascertain what had happened, he busily worked at his desk, waiting for the other preverbal shoe to fall. As soon as LtCdr Kyle Argent arrived, he began listening for the sound of a falling shoe. Argent's had the look of a man who was here on just more than just the usual ship's business. Boffin cordially greeted him and received a grunt in reply. The yeoman took no time in returning to tell Argent that the Captain would see him now.

Boffin bided his time as LtCdr Argent hesitated a second before he entered the Captain's Ready Room. Argent immediately marched over to her desk and stopped, his eyes suddenly falling on Boffin. Argent glared at him, and then shifted his eyes back to the standing Captain Devlin who immediately understood.

"Mister Gateway, that will be all."

Boffin hesitated but realised that he had to leave.

Once Boffin had departed, Captain Devlin indicated that the Squadron Commander was to sit. She waited for him to take a seat and then did so herself.

He sat there for several seconds before he spoke. "Why?" he asked in a quietly subdued voice.

Captain Devlin did not immediately answer his query; instead, she locked eyes with Argent whose eyes, she noted were a deep gray-green and glistening with cold fury.

"*Dammit*, I deserve an answer here!" Argent spat in fury as he grabbed the arms of the chair. "Why did you hesitate to give me launch permission?"

"Lieutenant Commander Argent!" Captain Devlin stated in a quiet but deadly tone. "I *will not* tolerate this tone of voice in my office -- not now, *not ever!*" she hissed at him.

Argent leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms in front of him. "Very well..." he paused for a beat before he snarled a terse, "*Sir.*"

The harshness of how he emphasized the 'sir' sounded almost painful to her, but she had to ignore it for now. She gave no reply but she also defiantly leaned back her chair.

After a short spell of silence that seemed like an eternity to both, she finally spoke. "I know what happened. I hesitated. For one brief second, I hesitated sending you out into battle. I never--"

"Please forgive the intrusion," Boffin interrupted over the link, "but Commander Senior Grade Updike insists it is urgent."

Captain Devlin took a deep breath. "Thank you Mister Gateway, please show him in."

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Both she and Argent continued their silence until it was broken by a third voice.

"Forgive the interruption Captain. Ah... Mr. Argent. I am so glad you are here also." Arcadia carefully watched Updike pull up a chair to her desk placing it next to LtCdr Argent.

"Captain," Updike began as he made himself comfortable, "I am concerned about what happened on the bridge today."

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Next: *Honeysuckle Lips*

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