

Milk Run

Captain Arcadia Devlin had found herself spending more time on the Bridge than usual for her, but, she had to admit, she was enjoying herself immensely. The *Stellar Wind* had just parked itself in high orbit at planet 3 for a survey when all of a sudden, the ship was attacked... again.

"Not again!" someone mumbled.

"What the bloody hell was that?" Arcadia blurted out, wondering all the while, why the *Stellar Wind* was attracting all kinds of unprovoked attacks of late.

The helmsman answered her unasked question. "We've just been attacked by what seems to be a small shuttle craft."

"*What?* Why would a shuttlecraft fire upon a ship that could blow it out of space without as much of a by your leave?"

"Captain?"

Arcadia swung her chair towards the comm officer. "Yes, Mr. Templar?"

"Captain, the shuttle is hailing us and requests assistance. They merely wanted our attention."

Arcadia frowned. "Scan the shuttle."

"The shuttle's engines are disabled and their environmental controls are compromised."

She swung her chair forward. "Helm, any sign of sensor ghosts?"

"Difficult to say, Captain. We are receiving some interference from the planet, but I'm not detecting any."

Captain Devlin leaned back in her chair to think. With the random attacks on the *Wind*, she wasn't happy taking any chances with a ship that decided to get their attention by taking a potshot at them. On the other hand, sensors confirmed that the ship needed their help. While the primary mission of the *Stellar Wind* was scientific space exploration, all Federation ships were under very strict instruction to render assistance when necessary.

"Yellow alert," she suddenly ordered and then pounded the comlink on her chair, "Transporter room!"

"Transporter room here, Sir."

"Lock on to the shuttle craft and beam off the occupants. Have security meet any survivors."

"Aye, Sir!"

Arcadia turned her attention back to the main view screen. She heard the shields being lowered to allow for transport, but just as they dropped, fifty small ships appeared out of the ether. Captain Devlin jumped out of her chair and shouted, "*Red Alert! Raise shields!*"

Shields were raised back up just in time but the '*Wind*' was taking a pounding. Between the constant wailing of the klaxon blaring "*Red Alert!*" and the shuddering of the ship, she found herself having to hold on tight to her Captain's chair otherwise, she knew that she would be flat on the deck in no time. *This is not the time to show the bridge crew that I can't sit in my own bloody chair. In fact--*

Kerbang!

The event she had feared finally happened and she was knocked to the deck flat onto her backside. Luckily for her, no one generally laughs out loud at the CO, so she was safe from ridicule... for the moment. She did notice as she mustered as much dignity as possible to climb back on to her chair that a number of other bridge personnel had also taken a tumble. Arcadia finally swung her chair around towards the helm where she was stunned by the vision before her. The chief helmsman, Aaron Thornton was on the deck with a head gash. Before she could put in a call for medical assistance, she overheard Simone Templar alert Sickbay.

The Physician in her wished to minister to Aaron's wounds, but the Commanding Officer in her dictated that she remained at her post. A replacement helmsman quickly took Aaron's vacated position and reported that the shields were now raised.

"Excellent." Arcadia swung her chair towards the comm officer. "Mister Templar," she began in a quiet voice, "I want a word with the Wing Commander."

"Aye, Sir," Simone acknowledged as she pounded her keyboard.

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Virgil was finishing up the last of the paperwork for the day when he felt the *Stellar Wind* shake violently as if under furious attack. Commander Argent

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bounded from around the 'hawk he was working on towards the comm unit near him.

"All units, man your fighters for possible launch!" Kyle bellowed into the wall.

Virgil quickly scrambled the other maintenance techs to their stations to prepare the pilots for launch.

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The ship shuttered violently from the constant barrage of fire and the news continued to get worse.

"We are no longer in control," helm reported.

"Captain! I can not contact the Hangar Deck!" the comm officer announced.

"*Bloody Hell!*" Arcadia exclaimed. She flicked her eyes towards the foreword screen, and then swung her chair around towards the communication's console. "Mr. Templar, please contact auxiliary control!"

Lieutenant Simone Templar responded as quickly as possible. "Captain, auxiliary control is available."

"Auxiliary control, patch me through to the hangar deck," Arcadia ordered.

"*Aye Sir. You are now patched through.*"

"Thank you Commander," she responded as she quickly tapped open another channel. "Devlin to Argent!" she barked into the comlink.

"*Argent here!*" Wing Commander Kyle Argent snapped somewhat out of breath.

"Fighters -- magnum launch!"

"*Aye, Captain, magnum launch, confirmed!*"

Captain Arcadia Devlin closed the comlink and turned her attention back to the battle at hand. She wanted to get back to work quickly so she didn't have to consider the fact that once again, she had put Kyle's life into danger.

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Being first out of the hangar bay is a skill acquired with experience, Kyle supposed. By the time Kyle had launched, he wasn't too surprised at what he

found. He immediately queried a handful of targets into the computer and proceeded to delve into the chaos that was combat once more.

He noted that the enemy was short on strategy but long on numbers. He was actually pleased with this because strategy he knew. And he knew that numbers can even up -- fast. He brought up the first target on his overhead display and switched to manual targeting. *Tugjockeys are entirely too dependent on computer targeting for their big guns.* In his experience, nothing came close to the speed of the human eye for the acquisition of a new target.

Locked. Fire. Splash one bogey. Query target two. Locked. Fire. Splash another bogey.

This seemed a bit too easy. He began to suspect something was amiss when he noticed nobody seemed to be fighting back. Not all that many enemies opt to be made one with space without putting up some kind of a response.

Locked. Fire. Splash bogey three.

He toggled his main cockpit display and set it for a weapons discharge readout and sure enough, there it was.

Whoever was attacking the 'Wind certainly was putting on a grand show but he never saw anybody defeat a starship with the use of only lighted plasma. On a good day, these weapons would provide a pleasant light show, on a bad day, they could warm a tureen of soup; but even on their best day, they couldn't even begin to penetrate the shields of something as small as his 'hawk. He had the computer acquire all the crafts noted for their colorful but ineffective light shows and removed them from the target query.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Wing saw them as enemies about to destroy their known world and tore into them like the proverbial buzz saw into balsa wood. Generally, Kyle didn't particularly mind this but on the other hand, slaughter of the innocence wasn't exactly something that was part of his creed as a Starfleet officer.

"Argent to 924th Hawkwind, break off all engagements at once! They're incapable of fighting back for God's sake! Here's the data..."

For about a second, five Nighthawks hung quietly in space as their occupants opted to survey this exciting new piece of intelligence and showing that they indeed still knew who was boss by quickly forming up on his wing.

"Uh... *Commander Argent...*" a lone voice announced calmly over the comlink.

"Yes, Mister Overlake?" Kyle replied with a certain sense of indignation that screamed, *now what?*

"Well... *If all these craft are unarmed, then why did I just get shot at by one of them?*"

"What!"

"Well... *one of the alien craft just formed up on my six and arced a disruptor bolt that just barely went wide.*"

Uh-oh. Obviously there were a few wolves among the sheep. "Computer, how many alien craft are left on the target query using current parameters?"

"Seven."

Well... it could have been worse. Kyle called up the target query list and sent it on to the remainder of the Wing with orders to immediately engage and destroy. Promptly all comm channels erupted with calls of "*Talley Ho!*" "*Clambake!*" and "*Cowabunga!*"

Cowabunga? Well, they were still young and at this rate most likely wouldn't get much older, he mused wryly. He queried the sixth target on his list and began a close approach sans any oddball outburst. *Yep, these guys were pros all right.* The enemy pilot opted to fly evasive maneuvers at the first sight of his approach unlike the previous targets that might as well have rented a placard that said, "Please hit me here!" While this enemy craft was light and nimble, the 'hawks were better on top speed and armament. The object of the fight would be too minimize the enemy's advantages and maximize his own.

While Kyle was busy dispatching a few of the bogies, his former nuggets decided it was time to engage in some lighthearted banter.

"*Look, we're...*" a pilot did a dramatic pause before he continued, "*...We're passing the wind.*"

Much to Kyle's disgust, besides the laughter over the channel, someone decided to augment the situation with an audible sound effect. Wanting to restore some sort of order to his Wing, Kyle keyed his link to broadcast and grumbled, "Keep your cheeks together or else I'll force-weld them shut for you!"

Once he issued his command, he turned back to the matter at hand. Unfortunately, any strategy Kyle was beginning to form was made redundant by a rather dick-brained loop maneuver that saw his opponent exit the loop at an angle that left Kyle with a next near perfect shot solution. *Far be it for me to decline such an offering. Lock, fire, and poof.*

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He was certainly better than the others were but not by much, Kyle thought. He opted to see how the rest of the Wing were performing against their "hot" opponents and it seemed that they were equally unimpressed by their opposition having quickly dispatched the bogies and now were ganging up on the sole remaining craft on the list. Their pursuit lasted all of a few seconds.

"Too easy. Too damned easy," Kyle mumbled as he transmitted recall orders and was already beginning to dread the inevitable swaggering and strutting that his once and former nuggets would partake in as soon as they had landed.

* * *

Is it really over? Arcadia thought to herself. She had witnessed the Nighthawks quick disposal of the attackers. She sat back in her chair to listen as Lieutenant Simone Templar monitored the damage control teams and their efforts to commence repair on the *'Wind*. When Simone was done, Arcadia glanced around the bridge satisfied that all was secure and no further danger seemed to lurk in the shadows of space around them.

"Stand down to yellow alert. You have the Bridge, Mister Templar. I'm going to my Ready Room. I'm sure SFHQ wants details on our latest encounter."

* * *

Roscoe picked up his rescue gear and started climbing down from the shotgun seat. All in all, this had been more or less a "milk run," yet it had left him somewhat dissatisfied with the outcome. He noted Kyle climbing out of his craft in much of the same way. From the look on Kyle's face, he was just plain unhappy. Kyle quickly signed off his log and began walking towards the exit.

Roscoe fell in stride with Kyle and couldn't help but ask, "Do you by any chance know what the frag went on out there?"

"In all my years in the Corps, I've never seen something quite like today. This was one for the books, all right," the Wing Commander replied with resignation.

Meanwhile, some of the younger pilots who had just seen "combat" for the first time today could not help but slap each other on the shoulders and begin 'living it up' before they even reached their lounge. Kyle paused for a moment and gave them a scornful look. "Rookies..."

"Some things just never change," Roscoe replied somberly.

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Kyle stopped and looked at him. "Everyone deserves a milk run like this for their first mission, but all it does is delay the inevitable until their next mission." He paused and looked at the deck. "And stuff like this might make them think it's always this easy."

He marched off and left Roscoe without another word.

* * *

"Kyle?.... *Kyle!*"

"Yes?"

"You seem so absent this morning. Is something on your mind, Pilot?"

Of course, there were a few things on his mind, but he figured he'd best not tell her that she was one of them. "Mainly the so-called 'engagement' the Wing was in a few days ago. It's left me with a few errant thoughts."

"Ah, yes. I had to send you into battle once more," Arcadia replied with a somewhat wry smile. "I read you scored more kills than anyone else." She continued with smug grin. "My hero!"

Kyle raised his cup of tea in a mock toast right back at her. "Whatever turns you on, Milady."

Arcadia flashed him one of her warm smiles that she displayed far too infrequently, but just as quickly became more sedate. "But in all seriousness, what's on your mind, Kyle?"

"The battle we were in." Kyle paused to think. "Well... I've been in a few before but none quite as senseless as this one. There was nothing to be gained by being in it in the first place. I don't think I've ever felt sorry for those that I've shot down but in this case, shooting people who are basically firing with high-powered flashlights at you. Where's the challenge in that? What's the purpose? This is as close to cold-blooded murder that I've ever come."

Arcadia's expression changed to one of somber reflection. "I see... You actually enjoy combat?"

Kyle leaned back and let out a prolonged sigh. "Ultimately and finally, I suppose I do. At first, you never, ever can say that you enjoy being out there and being shot at. But in time with and every passing sortie, it becomes a bit more familiar. A bit easier and then one day, you realize that there's almost a thrill to be out there and on someone's six, blasting away and finally, simply doing what I do best." He looked at the ceiling and then to her. "I was born to fly, would

have done anything to get up, and out there, and in the process, became something more. But every time I'm out there, I'm also scared out of my mind because as much as I know I'm capable of, I know that those who are with me who might not be. To me, my sole responsibility these days is to prove to myself that I'm good enough to prevent them from going to the grave because I've already proven to myself that I'm good enough to keep myself out of it."

"You take your responsibilities to your crew very seriously, don't you?"

"Well, don't you? After all, there was a time in my life where they were all I had and I generally like preserving that what is most important to me."

"Indeed. But that implies that there is something else in your life now. Something or someone..."

Kyle took a sip from his cup of tea and produced a smile that was as wry as *he* could muster. "You might very well say that, but I couldn't possibly comment." His comment drew an arched eyebrow from Arcadia.

He put his cup back on the saucer and stood up in preparation to leave her quarters for work. However, before he left, he told her, "Although... all throughout the battle all I really could think of was the fact that you have the most amazing green eyes... if that's of any help."

Kyle saw Arcadia close her eyes and then open them flashing the warmest smile he'd seen her give him yet.

"Indeed..." she murmured.

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