

## *Mixing Pleasure With Business*

### **INTERDECK HARDCOPY**

**TO:** LtCdr Kyle Argent, Squadron Commander

**FROM:** Captain Arcadia Devlin, Commanding Officer

Commander Argent, I have uncovered a most interesting tea. If you were free tomorrow morning, would you care to join me in my Quarters at 0700?

With immaculate timing, the door chimed exactly at 0700. Arcadia took a last nervous look about her quarters before she answered the door.

"Good morning, Captain Devlin," Argent began, still somewhat formal and stiff in her presence.

"Good morning, Commander Argent," Arcadia responded with a shy smile. "I thought I would return invitation and invite *you* to tea this time."

"I ... I'm grateful for your consideration, but it really wasn't necessary, you realize..." he nervously stammered.

Arcadia was somewhat bemused by the Squadron Commander's reluctance but waved off his concerns and asked him to sit.

"As a fellow exotic tea drinker, I thought you'd enjoy this blend. It is a special blend of tea called 'Fireblossom'. It has quite the interesting effect..."

Argent quietly watched as the Captain poured some of it into a crystal clear teacup. In fact, it looked like real Austrian crystal to him. The tea looked dark and strong, much like he preferred. Suddenly the complexion of the tea began to change -- first at the center then an explosion akin to a star going nova. The color shortly changed from very dark brown to a cardinal red before settling into a soft orange glow.

"Impressive..." Argent commented. In reality, he was quite impressed by the display. Some tea this is -- he hadn't seen tea do *that* before!

"Taste it..." Arcadia urged him.

Argent was a bit reluctant, as he preferred his tea sweetened and with milk, but gave into his Commanding Officers request. He was rewarded with a unique experience. The tea tasted sweet and rich in texture, just as if he had made it the way he liked it, yet he had not bothered to add his usual condiments.

Arcadia read his surprised expression and gave him a satisfied smile.

"The tea, depending on how long it is brewed, becomes naturally sweeter and through the fireblossom effect attain a natural consistency as if one were to have added milk to it. I noticed your preference for such tea earlier and thought you might appreciate this blend."

Argent quickly took another sip. It was truly great tea. Rich texture and deep flavor with just the right touch of sweetness -- it was, in essence, perfect. "It is wonderful tea," he finally told her, "I think I will have to get some of my own now," he added with a smile.

Satisfied with her efforts, Arcadia quickly sat down at the other end of the sofa and poured herself a cup, while offering her guest some croissants. After they both chatted over the virtues of a great cup of tea, Arcadia finally arrived at the real reason she had invited the Commander over this morning.

*One's business as Captain of a Starship of the Line simply was never done -- unfortunately for me.* "Commander Argent, there is one thing I have been meaning to discuss with you..."

"I'm listening," Kyle responded evenly as he sipped his tea. He knew there had to more to all this than her just wanting to serve him some tea. *At the very least, the tea was quite exceptional.*

The Commanding Officer reluctantly went on to explain what she wanted of him.

"I see," the Squadron Commander finally responded.

It seemed to Arcadia that he displeased about the matter to say the least. Arcadia couldn't blame him in all reality. She was asking quite a lot of him on this one in her request to add another pilot to his roster.

"I will see what I can do. Have Major Michaels make an appointment with me later this afternoon and we'll set things up properly," he replied with a touch of tension in his voice.

She wondered if there was anything she could personally say to ease his apprehensions, but thinking of none, she simply added a personal 'thank you,' then they continued their meal in silence.

When they were finished, he stood, thanked her again for the tea and left her quarters. As she watched the door close, she wondered why business had to interfere with her pleasure as being commanding officer of the *'Wind'*, she was afforded so few opportunities as it was.

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Squadron Commander slowly walked back to his office. Though he had a pile of work before him, he pushed it aside, sitting back in his chair to ponder what had transpired that morning. As much as he wanted to just sit and think, couldn't sit around in his office and stare at the four walls all day, he had a Squadron to run. After finally tackling that mountain of paperwork, he decided he needed a break. He got up to get yet another cup of tea and then sat down to finalize his decision.

He decided that the nuggets were finally ready to test their wings.

\* \* \*

"All systems checked and signal operational readiness," repeated Virgil aloud as he ran through the checklist. *But of course they did*, thought Virgil. *The fighters had been checked and re-checked meticulously the last few days by request of 'Old Man' Argent -- and just who came up with that epitaph anyway?*

The maintenance chief looked wistfully at the Nighthawk before him. He wanted to fly one of them pretty badly. He thought of asking LtCdr Argent about getting a flight check -- but now wasn't what he thought to be the best of times. He would wait. But at least Virgil seemed to have earned his respect as a maintenance manager.

Suddenly, the hangar bay doors flew opened and an excited group of Pilots and Mission Specialists tumbled into the area. They quickly proceeded to the craft they were assigned to and started buckling up.

"Geez, what got into them?" one of the mechanics asked Virgil.

"I guess Commander Argent must have given them Flight Deck Clearance, after all." Virgil replied evenly. *Well, as if there was any other reason for them to be here! Commander Argent had given strict orders that the bay was restricted until they were given proper permission.*

Virgil walked over to Flight 1, which was the other craft, besides Argent's, that Virgil personally maintained. Skye Masterson, with his usual wide grin in place, was finishing up his 'strap in' procedure and was going start the pre-flight check. Virgil climbed up to the cockpit and ran down the pre flight procedures with him.

"Gonna go up and out?" Virgil asked when they were done.

"Yeah ... our first flight! And the Old Man made it a good one! We're near a planetary system with an extensive asteroid belt -- and the Commander has been given instructions from above to make sure the belt is cleared. He told us to make sure that 'nothing more then the size of a pebble make it back!' I can

hardly wait! We have to be careful though, the sensor ghost showed up again and luckily, someone on the bridge recognized it as being a hostile. Maybe we'll be able to shoot at more than asteroids!" It was hard not to notice that Skye was practically bursting at the seams with enthusiasm and couldn't wait to get out there.

"Neither can I, neither can I," Virgil mumbled as he gave him the 'thumbs up' that cleared him for launch. Skye swiftly taxied his craft onto the platform and proceeded to launch. The deafening roar of the take-off disturbed some of the personnel. But to Virgil it was the sweetest sound of them all.

*I wanted to fly. I wanted to make that noise taking off myself someday. Someday...*

\* \* \*

When the Squadron Commander returned from the practice, he went into this office to complete the necessary paperwork. His personal data assistant reminded him that his appointment with Major Warren Michaels was up next. Argent had given brief consideration to asking for a yeoman again, but after seeing what a heartless mantrap of a creature the Personnel Officer on this ship was, he really had no interest in asking for one. He had done well without a yeoman in his career so far, and he thought he could do without one for many years to come.

Major Michaels arrived on time wearing a crisp and fresh uniform. He quickly sized Argent up as Kyle was dressed in his usual flight jumper. Michaels looked slightly dismayed at what he saw. Kyle knew the 'less than I expected look' when he saw it. *Well, he had better get rid of that attitude if he wants to fly around here.*

"Major Michaels," Argent began evenly, "by Captain Devlin's request you have been assigned to my Training Squadron as a Pilot. As this is a Fighter Corps detachment and not a Marine Corps Fighter unit this is somewhat of an unusual arrangement, you understand..."

"I do indeed," he added slightly bemused.

Argent shot him a quick glare but continued. "I've gone over your record and you seem to have proper qualifications and credentials to be assigned to fly. You'll be able to use Fighter Corps equipment, providing you are willing to undertake the Accelerated Flight Status Course on the holo-simulator that will earn you a Nighthawk flight rating. Have you had any experience flying a Nighthawk, Major?"

Michaels looked somewhat uneasy. "No, Sir. I haven't."

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*Well, that was to be expected. Marines generally weren't as diligent about learning to operate non-Marine Corps equipment as the Fighter Corps was. We usually were asked to have and maintain Flight Proficiency on virtually all vehicles in the Starfleet inventory. It's bothersome to do all the flight checks, but being able to pilot anything from a Workbee all the way up to an Excelsior class Starship does have its advantages.*

"Well, given your considerable experience with the Super T'cat..." Argent almost scoffed as he spoke. The Super T'cat, pride of the Marine aviators, was one bird Argent personally never enjoyed flying. "I think you will be able to adjust rather quickly to the Nighthawks. You are currently in duty status with Starfleet, rather than the Marine Corps, correct?"

"That I am."

Argent overlooked his lack in proper addressing. "I'll register you as a Starfleet Officer on temporary assignment, then. Should make things much easier."

"I'd appreciate it."

"As you might have been told, the six-eighteenth is a training squadron. Our primary goal is to finish training the Pilot Cadets and bring them to full operational readiness. As such, and given the limited amount of fighters available to us, I can't offer you a full-time assigned fighter. For now, the Pilot Cadets have priority over the more seasoned pilots aboard, such as you and myself. However, with the completion of the training mission and with the full installation of an active combat squadron aboard the *Stellar Wind*, I will be able to assign duty shifts to various pilots, rookies and veterans alike. At that point in time, your services as a pilot will be of considerable use to us. However, for the meantime, and while you complete the Flight Proficiency Course, I see no reason why I shouldn't make use of your considerable experience as an instructor. As it so happens, I could very much use a gunnery instructor to help the Pilot Cadets targeting skills along. Interested in the job?"

Michaels eyes lit up. He seemed excited by the prospect. "I most certainly am!"

"Good. It's settled then. Report to Ensign Taylor who will show you around the hangar bay and set you up with your necessary course materials." He seemed a bit taken aback by being asked to report to an Ensign. "One last thing, Major..."

"Yes?"

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"Though we are of equal rank, I will advise you that I am your senior officer and your superior as well. As such, you would be well advised to address me as 'Sir' and show me the deference due to my position. And this goes for anyone else I assign to work as your superior as well -- in and out of the cockpit. Is this understood?"

"Yes, Sir!" Michaels snapped off with precise military tone.

*Well, he seemed to be a quick learner.* Argent quickly dismissed him and went back to evaluating the data from the nuggets first flight. So far, their targeting skills seemed to be atrocious. Having a dedicated Weapons instructor ought to help them some, he hoped.

\* \* \*

"Good Afternoon, Virgil."

Commander Argent had entered quietly and was now looking up at him as he continued trying to re-adjust the emitter coils on the hawk's forward weapons emplacement. Argent seemed to be a bit more relaxed than usual although his customary cup of tea was in hand steaming away. How the man could drink that much tea was beyond Virgil.

"Is Major Michaels all settled in?"

"Yessir... I believe so," Virgil tiredly replied.

Kyle looked at him quizzically. "Having problems, Ensign?"

*Yes, was I ever having problems, thank you! Michaels is OK but different than the other pilots. But that's not bothering me -- I best not be that overt about it.* "Nothing I can't handle, Sir!" he responded with a shy boyish grin.

"I see. So why are you a full day behind in the maintenance schedule?"

Virgil inwardly sighed. *Time to fess up.* "Well, Sir, all the other maintenance personal were requisitioned away to do other things for the Engineering department. Since I, in fact, have no power to countermand those orders, I've been left to do all the maintenance myself and it has been taking a bit of my time. And with the other duties I have been given..."

Argent silently cursed himself. He had asked Virgil to take care of Michaels personally. That certainly had taken a bit of his time.

"You could have come to me and asked me to intervene, you know," Argent told him.

"It wouldn't have helped much, Sir. The paperwork, the haggling -- it would have taken a day or two to get that sorted out and by then I could have finished the job myself."

Argent had to admit that Virgil was right. He had to do something about this. He couldn't have his maintenance personal be called away every other day. This was no way to run a proper ground crew.

"Get me a list of the personnel you need and I'll get you the proper authority to get their assignments to stick. One hitch, though."

"Sir?" he replied cautiously.

"I'd have to induct you into the Fighter Corps as the Senior Grounds Technician. If you'd rather not make that move, I would understand."

*Not make that move? Was he kidding me? Being in the Fighter Corps... I would be one step closer to actually flying one of these birds someday! Of course, I would do it!*

"I'd be honored if you were to do so, Sir!" he replied, perhaps a bit too emphatically.

Argent nodded quietly and continued to observe Virgil as he continued his work.

"Tell me, Virgil -- what is your motivation for doing all this?" Argent suddenly spoke up. "Don't get me wrong -- I am very pleased with the superior effort you are putting into taking care of my birds, but I doubt that anyone is truly as motivated to be a grounds chief as you are. Especially as a promising young Ensign -- Ground's Chiefs are usually non-commissioned officers, after all."

Virgil was taken aback by his frankness. This was something he didn't quite expect and was initially at a loss for words. Virgil considered for a moment and decided to tell him the truth, for the lack of any other good excuse.

"Someday I hope to fly one of these fighters, Sir," he replied quietly.

Argent arched his right eyebrow. "You certainly are taking the unorthodox method of becoming a pilot, you realize. I can't recall any Grounds Chief turned Pilot in all my years in the Fighter Corps."

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"Then I'll be the first!" he answered with a newfound sense of dogged determination.

"Very well. Your record shows no flight Training. Do you know how to fly any small craft at all?"

"I most certainly do! My Father saw to that..."

"Ahh!... Your father," Argent broke in. "I had been wondering about him. So how does old Jackson Taylor fit into all this?"

"You know my father?" Virgil asked somewhat astonished by the question.

"He was my first Small Vehicles Management Instructor and my Pilot Instructor in Basic Flight Training at the Academy. And a very good one, I might add; so how does he figure into this?"

Virgil considered for a moment before he continued. *Well it would figure that Argent was one of Father's students. He was just about the right age after all.*

"In all honesty... I think my dad would disapprove of my decision."

Argent was somewhat startled by this as it wasn't the answer he expected.

"Why would he disapprove?"

"You might know that my Father once was a pilot, much like you are now. He made the switch to shipboard duty and subsequently became a Starship Captain. Scott and I..." Virgil found his thoughts turning to Scott and his recent death. "We were eager to follow in his footsteps. We both wanted to go to the stars. Father gave us a pair of skimmers early on and we would spend hours flittering out and around earth orbit. Scott was the natural pilot -- he had the guts, the skill -- he had everything. I was good at repairing the skimmers when they broke down. So when it was time to go to the Academy... Scott was the gifted pilot. He went to Basic flight Training and then went to Navigators' College -- I went to the Engineering School."

Argent nodded quietly.

"Scott wanted to join the Fighter Corps, but Father asked him to reconsider. He explained to him that his future would be brighter if he sought an assignment in regular fleet duty... with his good grades and all."



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Argent winced. He himself had been a top honors student in the Academy and he certainly didn't feel like his career choice was a waste.

"And so he did," Virgil continued, "I continued along with my schooling, always in the shadow of the legend that was my brother..."

Argent broke in again. "Virgil, if this is about trying to do better than your brother, or stepping out of his shadow, then I think you are making a mistake... "

"No!" he emphatically shot back. "Scott wanted to be in the stars -- and the means of doing so were pretty inconsequential to him. I always wanted to be *with* the stars. I always have felt that way. Being on a starship is nice, but it can never compare to the feelings I had under the canopy of my flyer. Scott may have been happy with his assignment and his career choice, but I am not. I want to be out there again!"

Argent quietly took a sip of his cup of tea but found it had gotten cold. Virgil's words forced him back in time. Back to his youth -- when his sole dream in life was to be up there, *with* the stars, in the cockpit of a fighter, as close as one could possibly get. That was his dream of flying. Could it be the same for Virgil? Argent quickly looked at his chronometer and noted he had no time left right now to continue the discussion.

"Virgil, I have an appointment coming up, but I think we ought to continue this conversation later. My shift ends at eighteen hundred hours. Meet me back here then?"

Virgil was caught a bit off guard by his sudden need to leave, but Virgil simply nodded his assent and Argent walked off without saying another word to him.

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Kyle opened his comlink and noted there was yet another invitation to yet another reception and he was coming to the conclusion that he was beginning to dislike all these official engagements. *God knows I hate having to pour myself into my formal uniform once in a blue moon -- but twice in less than two weeks was just a bit much. Thank heavens the duty saber had finally been removed as part of formal Fighter Corps attire.*

He despised having to go through the usual laborious ceremony of smiling, making small talk and putting on a good show for the troops. *I really would never miss this aspect of the service when I retired.*

*Retiring...*

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The thought was figuring more and more on his mind these days. The talk with Virgil for one reminded him just how he was in his younger years. But now, that he was pushing forty and not exactly a spring chicken, the writing seemed to be on the wall. How long could he avoid the possibility of fate catching up with him? So maybe one day someone would get lucky and that would be the end of the Ironman. And then he and Reesa would be together again at long last...

Suddenly, his personal terminal came to life with the logo of the United Federation of Planets.

*"Incoming personal transmission for Lieutenant Commander Kyle D. Argent, Squadron Commander, USS Stellar Wind, 1501A."*

He quickly brought up the comm screen and noted that the communication originated from Earth. *Well, that was odd. Who could it be now?*

Kyle opened the message and quickly thought how nice it was to see Ariel's face again. She told him about upcoming nuptials and she asked him to be her best man. She asked him about his work here on the ship. And he noticed how uncomfortable he became when she mentioned that the wedding invitation was for two.

Argent sat back in his chair and sighed. He assumed his father would probably not show up but he'd likely see his mother again. He rose from his chair and walked over to the sink to splash water on his face. He thought about the fact that he hadn't seen his younger sister Ariel in three years and considering how close they'd always been, he could understand how hard it was on her. He picked up a towel to wipe the water streaming down his chin.

*I have a career to think of. For how much longer though? Maybe this downtime on Earth would be a good time to put in for retirement, play the civilian field, become a test pilot... or something,* he considered as he tossed the towel on the sink.

\* \* \*

Virgil arrived for his appointment on the hangar deck early and spent his time just staring at the planes surrounding him. With a purposeful stride, LtCdr Argent finally walked in and quickly moved over to where he was quietly waiting.

"Come with me, Virgil," he suddenly stated, quietly tense.

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Argent lead him to his personal Nighthawk nicknamed the *Iron Gauntlet*. He pointed to the tail fins and asked him to note the black stripes that wrapped around them.

"Do you know what they stand for?" he asked him somberly.

"No, Sir."

"Each stripe indicates one hundred confirmed kills."

Virgil quickly counted them. "You... you have fifteen hundred kills, Sir?"

"Plus the change that is recorded on the side of the fuselage under the canopy," he stated as walked around to the other side of the fighter. He pointed out the two red stripes that wrapped themselves around the other tail fin and again asked if Virgil knew what they indicated. Virgil still had no answer, and told him as much.

"Each stripe indicates one hundred wing men and pilots, who have died under my command." Argent moved his arm so it now pointed to the fuselage again underneath the canopy. "And these are their names -- all two hundred and thirty four of them. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?"

Virgil looked at Argent with a puzzled expression. "I'm.... not certain, Sir."

"I have no real clue how many kills I have -- fifteen hundred twenty-something... I think. They matter precious little to me. But I do remember quite clearly every single person I watched die. Every pilot I sent to an early grave. Every time I go out in this craft, they are all with me. That is part of the job. Do you know how many of those names were young men or woman with nothing more then a dream of flying? Do you?"

"No, Sir." Virgil added somberly.

"Perhaps all of them at one time. It takes more then a desire to fly to become a pilot. It takes a desire to learn, to work hard, to sleep little, to sacrifice ones social life to pull odd hour shifts -- and it takes a very real understanding that someday you might be asked to sacrifice your life so that others might live on. And then you'll become a name on somebody's fighter, if you are lucky. If not, then you'll be just a memory to some. I'm the exception, Virgil. I have survived two thousand combat sorties. Some of these people didn't survive their first engagement. This is a risky profession you want to enter into and one where you stand to lose your life in all likelihood. For me to recommend you to Basic Flight School without telling you the risks would be wrong. The sole reason I am here right now, as a Flight Instructor is to insure

that the five pilots assigned to me right now don't become a name on this list their first or their fiftieth time out -- do you realize that? I've seen enough good people die, and I don't care to see any more names to be added to this list... least of all, yours."

Virgil was very surprised by his frankness. He'd never really understood his stern and taciturn behavior towards the pilots until now. To him, his pilots were more than just his subordinates -- they were his charges, almost like his sons or daughters.

*And yet I wanted to fly. That was my dream and it still is.* "Sir," Virgil cautiously probed, "what would it take for me to satisfy your requirements for a recommendation to Basic Flight School?"

Argent sighed. "So the prospect of dying a lonely death in space does not frighten you?"

"Yes, Sir it does." he answered truthfully. "But I do believe with the proper training I can beat the odds like you did. I think with some help -- like yours -- I won't have to be one of those names."

The veteran pilot sized him up. "Very well. I can arrange for you to have sim access. You can begin your basic training by using the programs for smaller craft, akin to your skimmer and work your way up. I'll periodically check up on your proficiency and advance you if you excel. I will give you a list of required reading and I would advise you to study up on small craft maneuvers and tactics. If you excel to the point where I think you can equal anyone in this Squadron in terms of skill and ability, then -- and only then will I recommend you for Basic Flight Training. And realize that all this will have to be done outside of your regular duties. This might take some time."

Virgil considered what Argent had just told him for a moment. It hardly sounded fair to him. After all, all the pilots here had already completed Basic Flight School. All he was asking for was Basic Training -- the first step. But this was his decision. And he knew this was the only chance he would likely get.

"Agreed," Virgil finally replied.

"Very well, then. Back to your regular duties, then. And I'll see about getting you installed as Grounds Chief...." Argent added, his voice sounding distant as it trailed off as he walked away from him.

Virgil also left the deck feeling anxious because he knew that he was finally being given the opportunity to fulfill his dream.

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Commander Argent went back to his office to do more paperwork and then gave up. He decided to go back onto the hangar deck and quietly climb into the cockpit of his Nighthawk, the *Iron Gauntlet*. He felt the ease of the well-worn seat under him, the familiarity of the controls -- everything just like it used to be.

And yet, he could not help but feel very badly right now. He had this nagging feeling like he'd just sent another promising young man, full of life and enthusiasm, into an early grave inside of a cockpit.

He had no doubts Virgil would do everything he would ask of him -- and then some. He would even probably succeed. Virgil would be a pilot someday. But was whatever Argent could show him in whatever time left to him enough?

*Maybe I am getting too old for this. With my years of Combat Duty factored in, I would have enough time in grade to retire on full pension soon. Maybe it was time to hang up the helmet and consider a career in civilian life. I'm not sure how many times I can send someone like Virgil into an uncertain future before it would finally be too much for me.*

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Next: *This is Not a Drill!*

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