

Old Wounds

By Bill Wolfe

Aphelion-II

Lieutenant-Commander Ophelia Dunsirn didn't believe in intuition. She had earned her way to second-in-command of Ap-Two through hard work, intelligence and perseverance. She'd flown strike missions in Iran and Tibet, and had scored the highest ever on the EuroNASA physical/emotional fitness exam. She had complete trust in herself and didn't worry about her place in history. She'd earn that too, eventually. But the butterflies in her stomach since Captain Al-Hassanieh had made the announcement just wouldn't seem to go away. No other way to say it, she had a bad feeling about this.

She'd been wearing her Com-Officer hat when the priority, eyes-only, encrypted message had been recorded by Ap-Two on its way to Ap-One, nine light-seconds ahead on their trajectory to Mars. It was only the second such message she'd heard-of in the three months they'd been underway. The first was when Roberson's mother had died. Within ten minutes of this latest transmission, however, the Captain had issued a communications blackout with Earth. The computers would continue to record but the entire crew was completely locked-out until further notice. This was unprecedented. All ten members of the Martian All My Children Fan Club were going to throw a fit when the signal was interrupted from the 'Live' broadcast.

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"Relax Ensign." the Captain's manner was grim. Ensign First-Class Archana Yarlagadda, was trying hard to float at attention. It wasn't working well.

"You have my word that this conversation is both completely confidential and quite necessary. Clear?"

"Yes, Captain!"

"You were at The Academy with Lieutenant-Commander Dunsirn, were you not?"

"Yes Captain."

"Tell me about her pregnancy, Ensign. Everything. I want facts, rumors, anything you overheard and anything you suspected. That's an order."

"Sir?"

"Shall I repeat myself, Ensign?"

"No Sir!" The Ensign paused, collecting his thoughts. "It surprised us all, Sir. She never so much as flirted with anyone—man or woman—when she was a Middy. She just didn't seem interested.

"Continue."

"Well, Sir, she started showing during our last semester but she refused any special medical restrictions on the physical part. She never spoke to anyone about it and my understanding is that she gave the child—uh, boy?— up for adoption after graduation."

"Speculations, Ensign." He wasn't asking.

"Several, Sir. There was the usual, of course. Admirals and Commodores and even the pizza delivery guy, but nothing really believable." The young officer took a deep breath. "And then there was some scuttle out of the civilian sickbay staff that she might have been raped."

The Captain didn't flinch, but his dark complexion seemed to blanch. "Explain."

"My roomie was dating a civilian nurse and he claimed that he'd heard that Ophelia—uh— Lieutenant-Commander Dunsirn, came-in about oh-five-hundred one Sunday morning, she was scratched-up and bruised and asking for a morning-after pill. There was no physical exam but the nurse said she'd worked plenty of ER's and knew a rape victim when she saw one. If she'd reported an assault, we would all have heard about it."

Aphelion-II

". . . Sidney Barnes? I'd have a lot of trouble believing that, Captain. For one thing, Ophelia's one of three people that ever knocked Hideki Yoshizawa out-cold in his own dojo. If ten Navy Seals went after her at least three of them would be dead before they could subdue her. I'd stake my career on it. And Barnes, Sir? If you'll pardon the expression, my ten-year-old niece could kick his scrawny geek civilian ***. Captain, there must be some mistake. I don't care if he was working in Annapolis at the time. And furthermore, Captain, Barnes is still a member of my crew and Ophelia would never disobey an order to leave him alone. I strongly advise against confining either of them to their quarters. Over."

Commander Alexandru Macridin released the transmit button and decided to review the news clip that the Captain had forwarded to him on the secure laserlink. He had a minimum of sixty seconds to burn until he received an answer from Captain Al-Hassanieh aboard Ap-One. The decryption/encryption time for these super-secure links was nineteen seconds.

It was a TurnerFOXTM International Report and he had fast-forwarded to the salient part. Atop the screen was the headline, "Sex and Scandal in Space" and there were two, stock EuroNASA head-shot photos side-by-side. One was an excellent, professional shot of a bespectacled young man, pale and gaunt, with thinning blonde hair and a toothy smile. The other might have been a mug shot but even the poor lighting, lack of make-up, and severe hairstyle couldn't mask that this was a striking woman. Of African-Armerican/Pakistani lineage, she was dark, exotic, fit, and didn't give a flip about anything but the mission.

". . . has now confirmed that medical genetic testing done on all the Mars crews and their families prior to launch has indicated that Doctor Sidney Barnes, the only civilian on the

mission, is the biological father of Lieutenant-Commander Ophelia Dunsirn's illegitimate child who was born shortly. . ."

"Al-Hassanieh to Macridin on squawk-two-fiver-nine-orange. Mac, I understand your concerns and I trust your judgment. Just go—and I mean personally—and order Barnes to his quarters until further notice. No explanation. And let's get Ophelia in your office for a little chat, shall we? Blackout will continue until we sort this out. Thanks Mac. Over."

According to the duty log, Barnes should be at his station on the aft reactor.

When the Commander approached the little den next to the Pu-Be/Thermocouple Generator bay, he heard a voice.

"Barnes! Wake-up, Barnes! Awwwwww—Crap!"

He had just turned the corner when a bloody hand reached for the com panel and Lieutenant-Commander Dunsirn's stern, calm voice began to echo throughout the ship.

"MEDICAL EMERGENCY IN AFT-FIVE-C. REPEAT. MEDICAL EMERGENCY IN AFT-FIVE-C. WE HAVE A MAN DOWN. SLOW PULSE, RESPIRATION ZERO."

When she looked-up and saw Macridin floating there, she released the button and lowered her voice.

"There's been an accident, Commander. I'm starting CPR."

". . . just how it is, Captain, we simply won't know until he wakes-up. And Doc says that will take a while. Over." Macridin paused. Damn that turnaround time. Barnes was in sickbay, hooked to monitors feeding information back to Earth; five-minutes delayed, of course.

The three remaining crew were all with him. Mac hated having to admit it, but he didn't know who to trust. The odds that all three were in on it were as slim as he could make it. Now, at least, it was possible that the perpetrator wasn't even on his ship. He hoped so. He might even have prayed it was so.

"Al-Hassanieh to Macridin on squawk-one-fiver-nine-deuce. Mac, it's official. Everybody on Ap-One managed to circumvent the blackout order. I got two who built their own radios and heard it on NPR, one who's been getting CNN Live-Feed on a jury-rigged monitor, and two that have been in contact with a high-school on Earth where the kids built their own laserlink. These were all in place before the blackout. Worst part is, I knew about that last one. I just forgot. Over-and-out."

Macridin sighed. It was the same story on his ship. These were all very clever people or they wouldn't be here. They also had a lot of time on their hands. The only person who hadn't built or rigged some kind of com system was Lieutenant-Commander Dunsirn. Maybe Barnes, of course, but he wasn't talking. They all knew now that Barnes was the father of Ophelia's child. Which meant that if the rumors of her assault were well-known, there were four suspects on his ship and

five on Ap-One. Mac disregarded the Captain. He didn't have the technical expertise. Macridin knew he was innocent, and Barnes, of course.

It looked like a panel overloaded when Barnes logged-in for his daily checks. It damn-near took his head off. Oh yeah, these were all very clever individuals. Control had informed the Captain that anyone—on either ship—could have hacked that panel. Everybody had the codes and inter-ship telemetry wasn't affected by the blackout. Control also said that it may have been a malfunction. It was time to talk to Ophelia and—hopefully—get this mess sorted.

". . . You could say, Commander, that I got just what I asked for. Sidney Barnes. What are the odds?"

The wistful smile on her face was both a puzzlement and a relief for her commanding officer. Regardless of the rumor mill, she was no longer on his suspect list.

"For what it's worth, the incident in the infirmary was true. Do you remember Gunny Jones? Tenth-degree black belt in Aikido, super-marathoner, took the Gold for Decathlon in the twenty-eight Games? I trained with him weekends while I was at the Academy. I had a real crush on him. He told me that if I could catch him, I could have him. Took me six weeks running through the Virginia countryside and some strategically-placed barbed-wire from an old fenceline, but I managed."

"And you never told anyone?" Macridin was trying very hard not to show how stunned he was. You never know about people. You just never know.

"None of their business, was it?"

"No, Lieutenant-Commander, it wasn't." He paused for a deep, focusing, breath. "So he wasn't the father of your baby."

"Commander. . .Mac?" her eyes asked for a variance in formality. He nodded.

"My sister can't have children. I wouldn't tell you why if you ordered me to do so, let's just leave it at that." Macridin nodded again, she'd given him fair warning.

"And I was about to embark on a career that was going to take me into harm's way, Big Time. You know me, Mac. Do I strike you as the kind likely to have an 'accident,' when it comes to something like this?"

"No, Ophelia, you don't. You plan everything and execute your plan with precision."

"Thank you, Sir. Well this was no accident, either. We hear a lot on this mission about our place in history. Well, I wanted to leave something of myself behind if I got blown out of the sky over Tehran."

Macridin was beginning to see where this was going, but he let her go at her own pace.

I asked the sperm bank for a donor with blue eyes, blond hair, in excellent health, and brilliant.

His face must have given him away because she answered what he dare not ask.

"My sister's husband—David—is a blue-eyed blond, that's why. Achmed—my grandfather's name—looks like he could be their son. I wanted a stranger, however, because imagine how awkward things could get if David was the biological father. This was my child, my shot at immortality, and the father forever anonymous. Or so we thought. . ."

"I could see Barnes making a . . .uh. . .donation."

"Yeah, he's got the arrogance for it, I agree." Again that wistful smile. "But you know? I really did get what I asked for. Lock, stock, and genius IQ. I have to admit, I've wondered. He's a really great kid."

"So much for my suspects." He was incredibly relieved.

"Oh? Commander?" He didn't know what it was, but something had changed. She was his exec, again.

"No motive. It must have been an accident."

"I agree with you there, Sir. It has to have been an accident, if you get my drift, Sir."

"Explain, Lieutenant-Commander."

"Twelve people, two years crammed together. If someone did this, they'll soon find out they had no cause. Barnes won't be in danger."

"But if. . ."

"Are you going to lock someone up? Where? Twenty-four hour guard? Who can we spare for that?"

"So you're saying. . ."

"It was an accident, Sir. Plain and simple. We're on a mission and we just can't spare anyone to be guilty of attempted murder."

"It's not on the duty roster, is it, Lieutenant-Commander?"

"No Sir, it's not."

The End