

Winning is Easy, Living is Harder

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Winning is Easy, Living is Harder

by [SevereAnnoyance](#), [squireofgeekdom](#)

Summary

“You cannot mean,” says Tanek abruptly, “to expect me to believe that that is anything but a warship. Even if I had not seen its specifications—what little Starfleet saw fit to make available to your allies—I would not believe that was a vessel meant for peaceful exploration. I am not blind.”

Well, at least he’s making conversation. “The Armistice-class was built to be warships, yes,” Captain Chester says. “It doesn’t mean they have to remain warships.”

The Romulan liaison officer huffs, like an affronted cat. “Why would you not use something so evidently purpose-built for a lesser aim?”

“Because it’s not a lesser aim,” she says, and starts walking again.

Notes

It's always a good time to hang out with friends and play with your Star Trek OCs :D As always, credit and appreciation to our fellow Interpreter rp-ers, whose inventiveness and humor are the basis of this story.

This chapter: Discussions of past violence and death in the Dominion War

Chapter 1

“It’s a very tempting commission, but you know you don’t have to take it.”

Diane Chester has her head and shoulders inside the industrial oven—the crummy, temperamental one—in the family bakery. It is a bad time to be startled, doubly so because she is in no way a short woman, and even the slightest twitch brings the back of her skull into sharp contact with the top of the oven. She bashes a shoulder trying to put a hand to her head.

But at least it gives her an excuse to hide her expression from her grandmother. At least until she figures out how exactly she feels about said grandmother—one of the Federation’s greatest (retired) warp scientists—figuring out about the message from Starfleet Command Chester hasn’t mentioned to any of the family.

She puts down the old fashioned screwdriver that the antique oven demands, and glares at the blackened heating element she’s been trying to unearth for the last twenty minutes. She should have counted on this. Dr. Chirou Zhai isn’t just foremost in her field—she’s an incurable snoop.

Chester also should have known better than to come back in from the roof deck, but she’s spent so much time feeling useless over the last eight months that she had to do *something*. Besides, watching the shuttle traffic coming into Starfleet Command hardly put her in the right frame of mind to make this decision.

She wiggles around to frown at her grandmother, who’s twirling a microwelder around her fingers, obviously just *waiting* for Chester to give up on the repair and let her take over. Her iron-gray hair is pulled back in the tight regulation bun just like it is in the pictures of her when she was the chief engineer of the *Excelsior*, but now she’s tiny and birdlike, and the usual mischief in her dark eyes is replaced with worry. “I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to be reading my correspondence, grandmama.”

A snort. “Who said anything about your correspondence? Nimura told me. She heard it from—”

Chester prods the dead heating element with a tentative finger, and reflects that the fastest communications known to science aren’t subspace transmissions, but the gossip network of retired Starfleet engineers. A network her grandmother keeps well primed with a steady stream of homemade bao and shameless flattery. In this case, it’s paid off—apparently the source here was the commanding admiral’s *mother*.

How grandmama knows Admiral Ross’s *mother* is a mystery, and Chester, for once, isn’t overly inclined to investigate. She starts picking at the socket of the element. Yep, completely fused. *Again*. Updating the oven’s been one of grandmama’s little projects, but ovens are not warp engines. This one might be dead for good now—and if they get a new one, grandma will want to ‘stress test’ it.

All else aside, being on the other side of the quadrant for that sounds pretty good.

“Whatever you do, we’ll be proud of you,” her grandmother is saying. “It’s not that I’m not proud to have my granddaughter following in my footsteps—even if you didn’t go into Engineering like anyone with *sense*—but well.” She pauses, and behind her, Chester can all but *feel* the cheerful little bakery cloud up, like it has every time the war’s mentioned. “Significantly *less* of my granddaughter came home from her last mission, and I’d prefer that to not happen again.”

In the privacy of the oven, Chester makes a face. Okay, it’s in line with her own humor about her injuries, and she appreciates grandmama matching her tone, but that doesn’t mean she wants all her decisions to come down to said injuries. “The artificial eye works fine, grandmama. I don’t even have to worry about getting eyelashes in it anymore. And they grew back everything else important—” which was a lot of things that she’d really prefer not to think about, the whole experience seems a lot more horrible now than it did then, with a knife actually in her guts, “so really, it’s just the eye. Regenerated livers are supposed to be 3% more efficient, did you know?”

“For all the wild binges you don’t do,” her grandmother says wryly, and there’s a brief silence after that. Grandmama did *not* just mean the physical injuries. They both know it. Chester doesn’t need to look behind her to know the worry is back.

“It’s soon,” says her grandmother, and there’s a quiet tap as she sets the tool she’s fiddling with on the counter. “It’s *very* soon. There will be other ships, with different missions. Ships that aren’t so new the controls still squeak, missions not in the Gamma Quadrant. We’re proud of you. That’s not going to change.”

Now Chester *really* hesitates. Grandmama has always been encouraging. Almost too encouraging. This, right now? Sounds like Mom. Mom who grew up on a starship, and decided to hell with the whole space exploration thing, she was going to stay on Earth and open a bakery, where the gravity stayed on and subspace anomalies hardly ever ate anyone. Grandmama offering her an out feels like a betrayal.

It’s the depth to which that hurts her feelings that makes her realize she’s already made up her mind. She’s taking the commission. The ship. She wants it like she’s not wanted anything since—well, since Cardassia. She’s not been letting herself want things since then. She’s not dared. She feels like she walked away with far too much.

Because she nearly died there. She *should* have died, all of them should have died. Fishing a hundred thirty survivors out of the wreckage of the USS *Bedivere* is supposed to be the crowning glory of Chester’s career. A hundred thirty, out of seven hundred.

It’s horrible enough for Chester, but worse is how it’s scared her family. They’ve been trying not to bring their own feelings up too much over these months of medical leave, but it slips out anyway, in how her mom’s been snatching heavy things out of her hands, how her dad reaches to steady her when she doesn’t need it, how sometimes there’s a lapse in conversation at the dinner table and she looks up to find all of them looking at her like she’ll slip away if they don’t keep an eye on her. She even found her mom looking in on her like a child one night—that only happened once, because she’d bolted awake asking for a status report. During the war, someone opening your door in the middle of the night meant something very, very wrong.

And now, with the commission in hand—it’s all going to come up again, only much, much worse. Because they know exactly how bad it can

be, and she's still heading back into it.

She sighs. No way she's finishing this conversation in the oven. No way she's fixing the oven herself, either. She carefully backs out, wincing as she straightens up and stretches. Six one, all her dad's fault if you ask mom or grandma.

"The heating element is completely fused," she says, and takes the opportunity to re-tie her ponytail, getting strands of long black hair out of her face.

Her grandmother gives her a totally unimpressed look. "So you're taking it."

"Who said anything about..." Chester looks at her grandmother's face, and gives up. "Did the admiral's mother tell you that, too?"

"No. You're not upset." Her grandmother is not particularly given to emoting strongly, but the uncertain and mixed pride and fear are there all the same. Chester abruptly remembers arriving home, a compression bandage still tight around her abdomen, supporting the new tissues, and her new eye occasionally resetting, still integrating with her nervous system, and her grandmother with the exact same expression hugging her carefully and saying, "*A lot of officers have lost ships like you—not a lot walk away with as many people alive as you did,*" which had been outright laughable at the time. The majority of the *Bedivere's* crew had died within the first forty minutes after Chester took command; the two-hundred odd who'd survived the crash on Cardassia had been steadily winnowed down by Jem'Hadar attacks before the Klingon front line had reached them, six hours later.

A lot of Chester's time with Starfleet Recovery Services has been spent reviewing that crash and the forces involved. She can, intellectually at least, accept that none of them had had any business at all walking away from the wreck.

But it's a lot of death. A lot of death, on top of many others. When she takes this commission, Chester will become one of the youngest captains in Starfleet history. And because of what the war had done to Starfleet, she'll have plenty of company.

"So you're taking it," her grandmother says. "Why? And remember, we're going to have to get this past your mother." She offers a smile, suddenly all mischief, and Chester can't help grinning back, relieved. The expression brings the similarities of their faces to the forefront; round, coming to a sharp point of a chin, wide dark eyes with an expression of pleased surprise in them, even at rest.

"Because..." Chester looks down, leaned against the oven and then shifts to the counter when the entire thing lurches, and hesitates, because she hasn't said it out loud yet and abruptly, it seems stupid. She's not sure she has the words—strange for someone whose entire training has been words. "I told you when I came home that I turned out to be a very good soldier during the war. I realized I was very good at killing." She stares down at her feet, seeing not her bright sandals on the scuffed restaurant floor, but boots on Starfleet-issue carpet. "I don't like that, and I especially don't like being called a hero for it. When I said I wasn't going back—that was why. I don't want to be that person for the rest of my life, and between the Borg and the Romulans and whatever the hell is going to happen with the Gamma Quadrant, I'm worried Starfleet's going to ask me to do just that."

"And you're still going back because...?" her grandmother prods. They've had that conversation once before, brief and miserable, when everything was so fresh Chester couldn't help but talk about it. They haven't since.

"Because there's something better than running from that possibility. It's making sure it doesn't happen. They're sending us to the Gamma Quadrant, to mend fences, help people—and stop the next war. Stop the territories the Dominion's ceding from erupting into territorial conflicts. The *Armistice* Class was built to be warships; they're getting refitted for aid and exploration." She lifts and drops a shoulder. "Just like me."

Her grandmother is watching her, thoughtful. The worry has gone out of her eyes.

"I have to do this," Chester says, and in the little back kitchen of the old bakery, with the peeling old Year of the Monkey calendar on the wall and the cooling unit that makes loud creaking noises coughing to life, here in the midst of a hot spell in the Northern California autumn, where she's wearing a ratty old short-sleeved shirt, its garish colors long faded and soot up to her shoulders, it feels more real than if she was saying it in the captain's uniform they're promising her, in some shiny briefing room. "I wanted to be a Starfleet officer, not a soldier—and I wanted to be a captain and get out there and help people. We fought a war, and if I can't go back out there and start in the right direction myself, I can't expect it from anyone else. I want to come back from what I became during the war, and I don't think I'm the only one, so I'd better go start doing it."

It's a lot to say, even to family, and she finds herself tensing as she waits for her grandmother to respond.

"Good," her grandmother says. "You sound like yourself again."

Sounding like herself and feeling like herself are two different things, but Chester supposes it's a start. She'll have plenty of time to work on the rest of it on her way to Deep Space Nine.

Deep Space Nine. The *Interpreter* is already on its way. Her new command.

"Now, what did you say the ship was again? *Armistice* Class?" Her grandmother wipes her hands off and heads out of the kitchen and upstairs to the family apartment. Chester looks at the still-broken oven, at her grandmother's retreating back. "What are you doing?"

"Calling that old rascal Montgomery Scott and seeing what kind of ship he's proposing to saddle my favorite granddaughter with!"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This chapter: Paranoia, discussions of: past near-death experience and invasive medical experiments, death of other characters, physical and mental trauma

“You know, you don’t have to take it,” Marbog says from where he’s perched above the back of Piper’s head.

Piper continues to stay very still and doesn’t turn to look back at the Choblik. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“You sure you want to say that when I’m elbow deep in your cybernetics, smart guy?”

Piper stays still, letting Marbog continue to work on the cybernetics that surround the back and sides of his head, serving as replacements for his blast-damaged hearing and standing in to support some of the mental functions that were damaged by the head trauma ... and the subsequent damage.

“There, you feel that?”

His skin prickles down his neck and the upper parts of his spine, where more cybernetics address spinal and nerve damage, replacing function and suppressing nerve pain.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Physical therapy was still getting him used to the extra weight of the redesigned cybernetics on his head, and the new nervous system functions, just like it’s getting him used to his new prosthetic legs. At least with cybernetics in his head, some muscle memory could be worked around with clever programming - which allowed for programming for new variants on his legs. As Marbog would say, human feet were boring (‘and you don’t even bother having prehensile tails!’)

The cybernetics - *these* cybernetics - weren’t a problem. One of the Starfleet Recovery Assistance officers suggested some people struggled with their sense of self, of personhood, with new artificial, mechanical parts, and he had nearly burst out laughing. Clearly no one had read his furious op-eds in the wake of Commander Data’s personhood being put on trial.

No, the more he and Marbog work on his cybernetics and prosthetics - and his new drone that interfaced with them, Gull - the more he felt like. Well, to sound like a Starfleet counselor, like he was regaining control of his life.

The problem was what happened when he *hadn’t* had control.

This wasn’t the first set of cybernetics in his head.

He bites his tongue. “What’s the alternative? We grab a ship and run off to the far edges of the quadrant?”

“Please. Like I could tolerate your company for that long.” Marbog says. “*You* could take a ship, but...”

“Oh yeah, ‘Gee, I wonder why Hawthorne spooked and ran off to the ass end of nowhere. I wonder if he figured out the truth. Better go check on him, and while we’re at it, let’s have a poke at, oh, the cybernetics expert he knows.’ Yeah, I’ll definitely ditch you to that.”

Marbog snorts. “Yeah, *right*. And obviously being exactly where they want you on a ship full of - of whatever spies is *less* risky than being *literally anywhere else*.”

Piper groans.

“Don’t move!”

“I’m *not!*”

“You want me to fry your daft brains more than they already are?” Marbog says, ignoring him and his lack of movement.

Marbog’s not wrong. The Interpreter is exactly where they want him, and it will be full of spies, watching him.

Something about being blown up is that, if you survive, it tends to lead to a lot of time in recovery in Federation medical bays, and that’s a lot of time to think. He’s spent a *lot* of time trying to determine when it had all started to go wrong, and he’s pretty sure he’s figured it out.

There were faces he wouldn’t forget, the new, unfamiliar, supposed-Starfleet Officers that had walked on to the station - walked in to his research project. The face his cowardly worm of a boss had made when he’d gone from dismissive to - frightened.

He’d gone right back to dismissive, though, once Piper had voiced concerns about the ‘new direction and timeline’ for the project. The new orders claimed his team’s work would serve the Dominion War - while pushing forward with unacceptable risks, ignoring safety protocols and rushing forward. He’d spelled out his concerns, and then he’d spelled them out in writing. And again. And then he’d gone over his boss’s head,

and over his boss's boss's.

And then he'd been demoted and sent to the ass-end of nowhere.

Looking back, he knows his boss - and almost certainly two rungs up the chain from him - had known about who those 'officers' really were. And had known enough to be frightened, and roll over.

Piper, on the other hand, didn't even know what they called themselves.

Piper sighs. "Take your bets, when do you think she was recruited?"

"Chester? Oh jee, *real* tough call there, surely there's nothing suspicious about the glossed over bit in the incident with the Intelligence officer - who, conveniently, is captaining another one of these monstrosities."

"All of Starfleet Intelligence can't be - whatever this - this is."

"The project-taking-over, whistleblower-silencing, station-exploding, mind-control-attempting, changeling-bullshit-cover-story-devising, black-and-shiny-obsessed secret police?"

Well, that was one way to put it.

Because even after he'd been demoted, even after he'd been sent to a tiny, half-defunct research station at the end of nowhere, he'd still sent complaints. He'd still kept working independently on modeling exactly what was likely to go wrong.

What *did* go wrong.

And when he got to the station, to try one more time to make his case, to present his work ...

Well. They'd stepped up the timeline again, and before he'd stepped off his shuttle -

Boom.

The next thing he'd known, he'd been waking up groggy and then immediately panicked, trapped in a tight, black box, black metal in place of his blown off legs, and wrapping around his head.

He'd kicked and clawed his way free, somehow. Sometimes he wakes up and thinks he still hasn't, that he's still in there.

It's the sort of thing that Starfleet Recovery counselors want you talk about a lot, annoyingly.

"...I think just 'secret police' is more efficient."

Marbog snorts. "I don't know, Pip. I wouldn't count on anything at this point. Does it matter? There's no way that whatever got their hands on your project 'for the war' - and tried to get their hands in your head -"

Piper folds his hands to resist the urge to rub at the scar tissue around his cybernetics.

They *had* gotten their hands in his head, is the thing. They just hadn't managed to do what they wanted in there.

At least, that's what he thinks. Hopes.

When a Starfleet team had pulled him out of the barely-an-escape-pod that had surrounded the sleek black box he'd been folded up and stuck in, they'd taken him to a top-notch Federation medbay - the techs had told him that the technology in his head had been an attempt at cybernetic mind control. Remote control your very own covert officer. That part had been true.

The lie had been that it had been Dominion technology.

That had been the cover story. The supposed officers in his project had been changeling duplicates, who had deliberately sabotaged the project to hinder Starfleet research and war efforts. They'd taken his half-dead body and had attempted to use it as part of another failed Dominion plot.

It had made sense to think that. It had made sense to think his team had been killed by the Dominion.

And then Marbog, cybernetics research expert by long interest in understanding the technology behind his default-cyborg Choblik species, recovered Dominion technology best-we-can-get expert by necessity, deeply annoying best friend - and, okay, probably only friend - Marbog had come. And Marbog had looked at the sleek black technology that had been in his head, all part of the process of understanding what was needed for the replacement technology.

And Piper had decoded Marbog's message. *Not Dominion. Federation.*

And then, for a while, nothing had made sense.

And then he had done the sensible thing and destroyed the paper message and the sheets of paper he had used to decode it, and got very, very angry.

" - whatever did *all of that* - there's no way that doesn't have their hands on the next big thing in the Gamma Quadrant -"

The next big thing, or just a continuation of the same war. He shakes his head. "And that means all of the Captains. We've been over this."

The 'officers' who had swanned on to his project. Whoever had passed on the lies about supposed Dominion technology in his head - he couldn't trust any of the doctors there, they were all a risk. If they weren't agents, there was a chance they were complicit, like his boss.

He didn't know who he could trust; except Marbog.

And himself. If he was lucky about what was still in his head.

The newly minted captains they'd put in charge of this mission - that they'd be sending back into the Gamma Quadrant - both he and Marbog agreed, whatever this secret police was, this parasite inside Starfleet, there was no way they'd staffed the highest position on this ships with anything less than loyal agents, nevermind what other spies would be onboard.

"The point is, we know she's been recruited by the secret police and they're trusting her with this mission - and watching to put a phaser blast in the back of *your* head if you're stupid enough to take the position. When she shoots your dumb ass it's not going to matter when she was recruited. And it doesn't matter that you're already dead and managed to pop back up again, I don't think you'll manage it a second time."

Piper turns over the starfleet commbadge in his hands. It's not really recognizable as such, three quarters melted, hardly more than slag. "I think it might have been after the Bedivere. You go through something like that - you think there's any way to keep it from happening again, it's hard not to take it. You could see secret police making that pitch."

"And maybe all of that was cover-story bullshit they came up with to explain why they were putting someone so young in charge of one of those hulking monstrosities. The point is, you *know* you're going to be under their watch on that ship, so -"

"That *is* the point - I know *exactly* where they're putting one of their secret police officers on a major assignment. I *have* to do this - if I'm going to have any chance of *actually* stopping -"

"If you're going to have the best chance of getting *killed* more like -"

"*They killed my entire team!* They got them all *blown to bits* and blamed it on the war and the Dominion and - and now they're sending these - absolutely batshit not-warships on missions into the Gamma Quadrant to start it all again or fuck knows what -"

"And the last time you tried to fix their mistakes for them you got *blown up* and barely crawled out of the *box* they put you in! I have been shoulder deep in what they did to you and I am *not* putting up with it again!" Marbog's tail whips back, slamming a spanner into the wall.

"Mar..."

Marbog catches his breath. "Do you know how much of a pain in my ass it's been checking and re-checking and re-designing everything? Do you have *any idea* how annoying human brains are? Do you? No idea why I put up with it. *Not* doing it again."

"Uh-huh." Piper sighs. "Sorry, Mar," he adds, quietly.

"You want to say that again louder? I want to get it on record."

"Oh, louder? Sure. Fuck off, Marbog."

"You're lucky I've already locked in the covers on your cybernetics, dumbass."

Piper looks at the slagged commbadge in his hand again. "The captain will be one of them -"

"And they'll have extra spies in engineering to keep an eye on you, and also medical, and probably some of the captain's senior staff, plus whatever other spies everybody *else's* secret police has onboard."

"*But*. Most of the people on that ship - they can't be - they *aren't* secret police. They're Starfleet. They need someone who knows what's happening, and who has the best chance of keeping that poor space-station-with-two-warp-cores they've Frankensteined into horrible jumbled existence from exploding."

"Yes, and your track record is so great about keeping things from getting pushed into exploding."

His grip tightens on the slag. "I won't be just *filing complaints paperwork* this time."

"Yeah, you'll just be running right towards the most likely thing to blow you up - *again*."

"Well..." *maybe someone other than me will survive this time.*

The people - most of the people - on the Interpreter, they had to be worth at least *trying* for.

There has to be at least that much of the Starfleet he signed up for. That he believed in. Whatever parasite was growing on it - that was all it was. A parasite.

And if he could stop a part of it - if he could actually save someone else -

Marbog comes around, sits next to him. "They want me to do some rotations on the Interpreter."

"*What?*" He whips around, staring down at Marbog, who is staring down at the floor. "That's not even -"

"Some crap about wanting an engineer with experience in medical tech to look over the medical expansions and the abilities of the new systems to deal with aid in large scale medical emergencies, as well as being on hand to analyze any newly recovered Dominion tech. They know perfectly well I'm mainly a cybernetics and prosthetics research specialist and I'm like, thirty or forty people down the line of expertise

in large scale medical emergencies -"

But not, Piper notes, in recovered Dominion technologies.

"- but they definitely gave the impression that they'd be expecting me to check on how the cybernetics of 'members of the crew' - aka you - are functioning."

"Oh, *fuck*."

"Yeah. So they want a chance to take out you, aka the guy they tried to shove mind control tech into, and me, aka the guy who realized that gee, that actually looks like Federation tech, not Dominion tech."

Piper's whole body is tense. "They don't know that. You didn't say anything to anyone but me, and I've -"

"You said it yourself. I'm the cybernetics expert you know. I was the second opinion. If there's a hole in their cover story - if there's a reason you would have figured out that their cover story was bullshit - it's me. Two loose ends in one place, and their hand-picked secret agent captain to tie the knot."

"... that metaphor went places," Piper says, dully. Finally, after he catches his breath a little, "You sure you wouldn't come with me, if I took a ship and got the hell out of here?"

Marbog is quiet for a long time. "You're going to take the position, aren't you?"

"You're the one who said I'd be an idiot to take it. That it's going to get me killed."

"Yeah. But you've got the same look as you did when I told you it was idiotic to stay on a project you knew was doomed just in the hopes that maybe you could mitigate the damage."

"With my complaints reports." He says, the words sour in his mouth. He had been so *stupid*.

"*And* you look the same as when I told you that it was stupid to go..."

That it was stupid to go back. That if they hadn't listened to you before demoting you and throwing you to the ass end of nowhere they wouldn't listen to you now. That there was no reason being there in person would make a difference.

He hadn't listened that time either. And his shuttle had made it there. And then the station had exploded.

"Well." Marbog says finally. "We've been here before. I know you, regrettably, and I know what you look like when you're about to be stupid and you aren't going to be stopped."

"No." Piper shakes his head. "We haven't been *here* before. I know more now."

"And knowing what you know, if ... if you didn't take any chance at all that you could be in a position to stop it, if you ran away from that - you'd hate yourself." Marbog does his best to sound matter-of-fact; Piper knows him too well for that. Marbog adds. "And if you think *I'm* dumb enough to stick myself in a runaway ship with you when you're in your self-loathing angst bullshit, I fucked up something with your cybernetics. Which I didn't, because I'm me, and *I* am actually very good at what I do."

"This isn't like before." *I'm not going to come back a fraction of myself this time.* "I know too much for it to be. And I've got no intentions of letting them kill me."

"People rarely do." Marbog deadpans. "You won't be dragging *me* down with you, that's for sure."

He knows that isn't true. That's what scares him. "You don't have to take the rotations on Interpreter."

"Yeah, I know." Marbog says. Piper wishes he wouldn't, for the same reason Marbog wishes *he* wouldn't take the position on the Interpreter. If they got Marbog... well. If Piper had the power and authority to protect Marbog, it would be different. A lot of things would be different. But he doesn't.

And Piper is taking the position. So he can't ask Marbog not to take the rotations.

"Besides," Marbog continues, "I can't let some hotshot surgeon go thinking he knows better about your cybernetics than me. Gotta take pride in my work."

"It won't be like before." he says again. "We know the shape of the threat. We know to watch our backs. And as far as *they* know, their cover story worked and everything's fine. We won't be doing anything to raise suspicion and send them after us. That keeps us... safer." He hopes. "Besides, I have Gull now." He points up to the floating drone. "No one can sneak up behind me. Or you, when you're onboard."

"Yeah, you're going to look out for Pip, right Gull? Someone with sense has to."

Gull beeps.

"Good for you." Marbog looks back at Piper, and after a moment, laughs. "No idea how *you* managed to get cleared for duty. Especially with a Betazoid counselor."

"Well, they made me take the pointy bits off Gull." He says, and Marbog laughs. "Turns out, just because someone can tell you're angry, doesn't mean they can tell what you're angry at. So. Lying. That thing."

“That thing you’re notoriously *so* good at.”

A lot of - most of - what he had said to Starfleet Recovery had been true. Not that it had been easy to keep the important truths from them - Marbog’s not wrong - but he had managed somehow. He’d lie through his teeth as much as it took if it kept him and Marbog alive.

Odds are, there are worse things he’ll do to keep them both alive. Or, at least, to keep Marbog alive.

And when it came to keeping the Starfleet crew of the Interpreter alive -

“Well,” Marbog starts. “If you’re going to go off onto some half functioning ship, let’s get in some holodeck time while we’re both by one that works. Lord of the Rings?”

Piper smiles. “Sure.”

He certainly feels a bit like Pippin, with Merry, in the hands of the Uruk-Hai. Maybe it would feel better when it was just pretend.

Chapter 3

“Gēge!” Chester grins broadly as it makes the newly-Captain Sotek stop dead and turn with an eyebrow already in his hairline. She hurries to catch up with him. “Congratulations, Captain.”

“That would be the more traditional greeting, Captain,” he says. “I congratulate you on your promotion as well.”

“Pfft. Everyone’s saying that to you,” she says. “Only two people here are going to call you *older brother*. Speaking of, where’s Rilas?”

“Gēge!” An arm with a command-red band around the wrist waves somewhere up ahead, barely visible over the crowd. Captain Rilas Jeln is *very* short. She is also loud; heads turn all down the Promenade, universal translators probably rendering her greeting in a way that makes her sound like a lost kid. This does not square with the tiny blond Trill in a captain’s uniform, bouncing a little on her toes. A sense of relief settles over Chester as the three of them draw together. They’ve been fast friends since the Academy. Back together, everything seems better. Like they can still take on the world, even after everything.

Sotek, as always, has resigned himself to the use of the nickname. Chester called him *older brother* once, in the Academy, by accident—largely because he’s always had a tendency to be a mother hen. Then she covered it up by doing it on purpose. And then Jeln caught on and started using it.

Sotek is, in fact, quite a lot older than either of them, and well aware of the respect and affection it denotes, so he hasn’t protested too much.

Sotek doesn’t do hugs—Vulcan—but Jeln definitely does. Chester picks her up off her feet while she’s at it. Jeln squawks a protest, as is traditional, and then hugs fiercely back. “It is *so* good to hug you again,” she says into Chester’s ear. “You still had all those activity restrictions last time I saw you.”

“You’re one to talk,” says Chester, putting her back on her feet. Sotek is standing a little away from them, trying to look like he’s never met them before in his life. “Wasn’t like you were in the bloom of health then, either. So, what’s the plan? Quark’s?”

“There are very few other choices on the station for inebriating beverages,” says Sotek. “As seems to be your priority, at times like this.”

“I have a picture of you asleep and wearing a lampshade, mister, and don’t you forget it,” says Jeln. “Now, the night is young, and we’re not, so let’s go do a sensible amount of partying before everyone expects us to come back and be responsible adults *far* too early in the morning.”

“How disgustingly reasonable of you,” says Chester, and the three of them head toward Quark’s.

“Have you met any of your crew yet, Diane?”

“Commander J’etris, of course,” says Chester. J’etris, one of the small but growing number of Klingons in Starfleet, was in Security on the *Bedivere* when it went down; she and Chester were the two most senior surviving officers of the incident. Chester requested her specifically as first officer; there’s no one she’d rather have at her back. “We did the initial tour together. And I met my new chief medical officer—apparently he was on the medical team that glued me back together after Cardassia.” Dr. Boz Tirell had stared at her several moments in the empty sickbay, clicked his fingers and gone, “Ah. Yes, the complex orbital fracture with complete globular rupture.” It’s nice to be recognized, but she can’t say that was flattering. “He seems to mostly remember my eyesocket. I guess there’s worse things. And maybe the chief engineer.”

“Maybe?” asks Sotek, an eyebrow rising.

“There were a couple of feet sticking out of a Jeffries tube in the industrial replicator bay,” says Chester. Metal claws, specifically—Lieutenant Commander Hawthorne’s file suggests he’s tinkered extensively with his prosthetics, and has a series of them adapted for specific tasks, so it’s very likely they were his. “I asked if any help was needed, and was told to fuck off if I didn’t have any safety gear. I did not in fact have any safety gear, so off I fucked.”

“I should hope not, in the industrial replicator bay,” deadpans Sotek, and then looks terribly pleased with himself when Chester gives him an appalled look and Jeln snorts with laughter.

“The rest of the senior officers are arriving in the morning,” Chester adds. “I’m scheduling a first staff meeting that afternoon.”

“Should be an interesting meeting for your chief engineer, at least,” says Jeln.

“As far as I’m concerned, it didn’t happen,” says Chester. “We’ve got plenty of overenthusiastic young ensigns swarming around, it’s an easy mistake.”

“I still bet his face is going to be a *picture*,” says Jeln.

They’re almost to Quark’s when Sotek’s commbadge chirps. He steps aside to answer it, and when he returns, it’s with an air of faint concern. Jeln and Chester alert immediately—something’s happened. “Admiral Ross wants to see us,” he says. “Immediately. There is a last-minute adjustment to the mission parameters.”

Chester and Jeln share a jaded look influenced by a lot of last minute adjustments to mission parameters. “That’s not good,” says Chester. “Let’s go.”

“Come in,” says Admiral Ross. He’s not happy, and he’s not alone. There are a lot of Romulans in the room. One is a senior officer—Chester’s not quite conversant enough with their uniforms to tell exactly what she is, but it’s horribly senior, by the way Sotek goes tense next to her, moving deeper into Vulcan formality like a hermit crab into its shell. She straightens her shoulders instinctively. There’s a second officer hanging around the head of the wardroom table, and even she knows enough to identify that uniform as Tal Shiar—just like the cluster of other Romulans lined up tense and alert at the other end of the table. “Admiral Toreth, Major Mendak—” yep, Sotek was right, they’re both horribly senior, “may I present Captain Sotek, of the USS *Armistice*, Captain Rilas Jel’n of the *Negotiator*, and Captain Diane Chester of the *Interpreter*.”

“Three neophyte captains,” says Admiral Toreth, her mouth twisting in bitter amusement. “Hardly what *I* would choose to lead an ‘invasion’ of the Gamma Quadrant.” She looks sidelong at the Major next to her; his expression is simply dismissive.

No wonder Admiral Ross looks like he has a headache. “As we’ve previously stated, the Federation has no designs on former holdings of the Dominion, or the Gamma Quadrant. This mission is for the purposes of aid and exploration only.”

Chester steals a glance at the Tal Shiar agents on the other side of the table. There are three of them. They are watching the captains carefully, little attention on the more senior argument at the end of the table. Like they already know the outcome. Next to her, Jel’n takes a breath, like she’s going to speak; Chester picks up a foot and very gently and casually steps on Jel’n’s before she can say anything. Jel’n closes her mouth.

Three officers. Three of them. No, Chester does not like where this is going.

“Under those circumstances, you should have no objection to our proposal,” says Admiral Toreth. She looks awfully pleased with herself. “Starfleet Command has made it abundantly clear that the decision rests with you.”

“It does,” says Admiral Ross, “And I have come to a determination.” To the assembled captains, he says, “The Romulan Empire is concerned your mission is the first phase of the Federation expanding into the Gamma Quadrant. To that end, they’ve requested this become a joint venture; that each of you will host a liaison officer for the duration of your activities in the Gamma Quadrant.”

“A spy,” says Sotek, dammit, Chester chose the wrong foot to step on. “To ensure we do not undertake any imperialist activities, or to ensure the Romulan Empire is not left out if we *do* launch a full-scale invasion?”

Admiral Toreth laughs, delighted. Major Mendak looks like he’s bitten into something sour.

“You,” Toreth says, “Vulcan. I like your directness. But you were assigned to Romulus during the war, were you not?”

Sotek inclines his head. “I did. Enough so to determine that anti-imperialist sentiments are very unlikely to be a driving force for your concerns, Admiral.”

“We both want a prosperous Alpha Quadrant,” she says, and her gaze shifts to Chester. Chester meets it steadily and discreetly takes her foot back off Jel’n’s. “Captain Chester. Your actions in the Battle of Cardassia saved my sister’s daughter, though I understand your ship was badly damaged at the time. I thank you.”

For all the gratitude implied by the words, the tone is sharp and dismissive, Admiral Toreth’s gaze equally unimpressed. Chester wonders why, suspects it’s age; human lifespans seem short to many species, and she’s young even for that.

“And you—” the expression on Toreth’s face shifts back to a vicious sort of amusement, “Captain Jel’n. I thought you’d be interested to learn that our *esteemed* colleagues in the Tal Shiar have managed to gather very little information about you, save that you were in Intelligence during the war. Perhaps that speaks to your accomplishments.”

“You are very kind, Admiral.”

“I only said *perhaps*,” says Toreth, and Jel’n looks up at her and smiles.

It is the *exact* expression that heralded three of the most memorable barfights of Chester’s career, and she goes tense, hoping Jel’n isn’t going to ignite the next war right here by saying something, *doing* something to a Romulan Admiral who’s being an asshole, but Jel’n simply says, “I understand entirely.”

Toreth doesn’t know what to do with that. Chester doesn’t either. It is, however, very worrying. And it makes Toreth move on.

Chester finds herself glancing back at the Tal Shiar agents. One of them is watching her intently, with no regard for politeness or trying to seem non-threatening. He’s the biggest of the three by far; at least another six inches taller than Chester herself, and his shoulders look like they’re actually enough to fill out the square uniform coat. Dark hair, dark eyes, an expression of disdain—he looks almost like a joke, so completely does he fit the stereotype of a Romulan goon.

The Starfleet contingent here might have been surprised by the whole thing, but somehow Chester suspects the Tal Shiar already know their assignments. Neither of the other two—a tiny young woman and a completely average, unremarkable man with an expression of bland disinterest—are paying attention to her.

This is probably her liaison officer, then. She meets his gaze steadily, as Ross and Toreth wrangle over the details, and lifts her eyebrows.

He just stares steadily back, unfazed.

She takes a step forward, and then another. The brass don’t notice; there’s some kind of spirited argument going on about clearances and security. They’re very unlikely to listen to the youngest captain in the room. “So,” she says quietly, coming to a halt directly in front of him, “I’d gather you already know your assignment. Perhaps introductions are in order?”

He stares down an obviously broken and badly reset nose at her. "Subcommander Tanek," he says at last. "Perhaps it is heartening that you seem capable of the bare minimum of deductive reasoning to be considered competent."

"And I find it heartening that you're capable of a modicum of diplomacy, Subcommander." She quirks a smile, inviting him to share in the amusement of insulting one another; unsurprisingly, he does not respond. He only looks more deeply offended. "I expect we are both similarly pleased about the circumstances."

They both look up to the head of the room, where Ross has raised a hand to quiet the debate. "That is a matter for Starfleet Security," he's saying. "In the meantime, the *Interpreter* has an urgent assignment that cannot wait; we'll give your officer courtesy access for the time being, until Command makes a decision."

The urgent assignment, too, is an unwelcome surprise. Chester glances down to hide her reaction; the Subcommander's gaze on her makes her feel embarrassingly transparent.

She is going to have to get used to that. And she'd better do it fast. He looks like the sort to take this assignment very seriously, and she's probably going to spend the entirety of the upcoming mission turfing him out of sensitive areas and carefully not reacting to him trying to read over her shoulder. If she's lucky. He's probably sneakier than he looks. "Sir, if I may?" she says. "If we're departing on an urgent assignment, I'll need to return to the *Interpreter*. We're still undergoing system scans and maintenance, and crew onboarding won't be complete until tomorrow morning."

Jeln makes a face at her. *Oh, you're just going to leave us in the diplomatic argument, are you?*

Chester's expression is carefully smooth, which is probably more enraging than any other response might be. The fact she's definitely missing their first captains night out will mollify Jeln at least. Sotek hasn't a vindictive bone in his body.

For a moment she wonders if Admiral Ross will keep her here, anyway, but he nods and hands her a padd. "The sooner you can leave, the better. The initial contact indicated it was urgent."

"Understood, sir. We'll depart as soon as we have our full complement aboard."

"Very good." Despite the diplomatic mess and the lines of fatigue around his eyes, Admiral Ross gives her a small genuine smile. "And good luck, Captain Chester." There's a private pride in that, a congratulations.

Chester almost didn't return to Starfleet, after the *Bedivere*, and Ross knows it. He's the one who talked her into staying.

She grins back, and it feels almost like it did before the end of the war, all excitement and optimism, shakes the offered hand, inclines her head in the equivalent gesture to the Romulans, and starts for the door.

"Subcommander," Admiral Toreth says, and flicks her eyes at Tanek; Tanek immediately leaves the group of his fellows and joins her, a step behind her left shoulder. It's like having a personal guard—or jailor. The nape of Chester's neck prickles. She does *not* like having someone there, Starfleet Recovery Services be damned.

Telling him that standing there is a good way to get his nose broken again will have to wait until they're not in front of anyone important. She starts down the corridor to the transporters.

Tanek says nothing. Just follows, watching her with a silent, unsettling evaluation. Their route takes them back across the Promenade, with its windows. Chester hesitates by one without quite meaning to; her ship is in view. "There she is," she says. "The *Interpreter*."

From here, she looks about the same size as a *Galaxy*-class starship. That's an illusion; she's holding an orbit significantly further out, and is in fact about 60% larger. Her lines are closer to those of the old *Constitution*-class (a bit of nostalgia on the part of the designers, perhaps), though the saucer is tucked in a little closer to the primary hull, and her nacelles are pulled in as well to present a smaller target profile. There are four of those; the *Armistice*-class has dual warp cores. *Interpreter* is able to travel at high warp for more than twice as long as other ships in her size-class, the warp cores splitting the strain or trading off, depending on circumstance; the systems are entirely separate and redundant, so if one is knocked out, theoretically, the other will take over. Shields are designed the same way.

She's got four times the weapons capacity of a *Galaxy*-class, a bigger sickbay than anything outside a dedicated hospital ship or a space station, heavy ablative armor. She was designed to be a heavy-hitter, the front of a line of battle. But all those redundancies and duplicate systems and space mean she's ideal for peaceful purposes, too; troop bays are easily converted into refugee housing, and her resources and the long legs of her dual warp cores make long, distant missions possible that other ship classes can't handle.

"You cannot mean," says Tanek abruptly, "to expect me to believe that *that* is anything but a warship. Even if I had not seen its specifications—what little Starfleet saw fit to make available to your *allies*—I would not believe that was a vessel meant for peaceful exploration. I am not blind."

Well, at least he's making conversation. "The *Armistice*-class was built to be warships, yes," she says. "It doesn't mean they have to remain warships."

He huffs, like an affronted cat. "Why would you not use something so evidently purpose-built for a lesser aim?"

"Because it's not a lesser aim," she says, and starts walking again.

"I've seen your service record, and I doubt you really believe that, Captain."

The anger is sharp and sudden, surprising her. She keeps walking, keeping her face turned away from him, and wonders if their files on her are thorough enough that he knows that's a sore spot, or if he just got lucky. She made a very good soldier, during the war. She does still fear that

she's never going to be anything else. That Starfleet will never intend to use her as anything else.

But that's his training. Find a soft spot and stick a knife in it. And whatever Starfleet's intentions, they won't be affected one way or another by Tanek's assumptions.

And if he's going to be the kind of prick he seems to be setting up to become, she can't let his opinions matter to her.

"You have been a remarkably good soldier, Captain," he says. "A reasonable choice to head such a mission as this appears to be, rather than what your command is insisting it involves."

"They were none too clear on what your part of it would entail," she says.

"I am primarily an observer," he says, sounding dreadfully smug.

"Primarily?" she says. "Here to stop anything you don't approve of, perhaps?"

"Nothing so dramatic, Captain," he says.

"Hm," she says, raising her eyebrows. "Much experience with Federation ships, Subcommander? Spend any of the war aboard one of ours?"

There is suddenly a perceptible chill. When she turns, it's to find him looking at her with his face gone absolutely immovable and his eyes hard, as if he thinks she's making fun of him.

"No," he says after a long pause. "I have not."

"I see," she says, frowning at him a little. "That's not exactly uncommon, though; our peoples are relatively recent friends."

As cautious as the statement is, and even though she wonders if she should have asked if she had given offense, he seems to relax at it. "Of course," he says.

"I am of course unfamiliar with your record," she adds. "Is that likely to be rectified, or will I simply have to rely on what you tell me?"

Another pause, as he considers her—like he's reading a half-apology in the words. And then he frowns again, clearly dismissing it, and any consideration is wiped away behind the default expression of an aloof, pissed off Romulan. He's good at that one. "You will be provided with the necessary information," he says.

"Understood," she says, deciding not to continue to try to make conversation.

They're still both silent when they reach the transporter pad. "Interpreter," says Chester, and carefully doesn't look at Tanek as they beam over.

Commander J'etris is waiting in the transporter room when they arrive. She's had some warning of some sort; she's neatly put together even though the evening is getting late; a Klingon woman of a height with Chester, her pale brown hair braided tightly back and an expression of professional concern on her face. She sees Tanek and her face freezes several degrees further into formality. "Captain," she says, her eyes flicking to Tanek a second, then a third time. She clears her throat, stepping out from behind the console. Another glance at Tanek—who at least seems pleased by this—and she approaches Chester, something tight and unhappy around her eyes. "I wasn't aware we were taking on passengers."

"Commander J'etris, this is Subcommander Tanek. Commander, I just had a meeting with the Admiral. Apparently the Romulans are nervous about our designs on the Gamma Quadrant. Subcommander Tanek here is to keep an eye on our activities, make sure we aren't stealing the silverware."

The idea of Starfleet getting imperialist ideas makes J'etris's eyebrows go up and the corners of her mouth twitch. Tanek, no doubt under the impression she's laughing at him and disliking it greatly, goes even stiffer. "I see. Welcome aboard, Subcommander."

"Commander," he says, and inclines his head in grudging politeness.

"And the good news just keeps coming," says Chester to J'etris. "Can you get the good Subcommander settled in? We just received orders—priority message from the Chiron Gamma system. They say they want to discuss membership, but if you review the actual message, it sounds like a distress call. We're the only *Armistice*-class ship ready to go in the next day, so we've got the assignment. Command wants us underway as soon as crew rotation is complete."

J'etris's raised eyebrows speak volumes about exactly what she thinks of that. "Is Command aware we're still dealing with the issues that came up on the flight out?"

"Yep. Apparently we just had the least of them. So, I will be going down to Engineering to give Lt. Commander Hawthorne and his people the bad news in person." Chester makes a face. "It's the very least I can do."

"Understood, Captain," says J'etris. "Any other surprises you'd like to share before you go?"

Chester tilts her head, wry. "None that spring to mind. Thanks, Number One." She straightens her tunic, nods at Tanek. "Subcommander. I apologize for the short notice, but I am sure you understand the exigencies of the service. Commander J'etris will see you to your quarters."

She strides off down the hall, headed for the turbolift, and lets her shoulders slump a little with relief once she's out of sight. Not that that's going to last long.

She's read her Chief Engineer's records, and it doesn't take much guessing to know that he is *not* going to be pleased with this development.

Either of these developments.

Chapter 4

Main Engineering is enormous. Chester pauses in the entry to just look at the warp cores, humming in their early-startup sequence. It's a sound just off enough from other starships that it's a little unsettling, but it still sounds and smells like Engineering, and there's still something in the back of her mind that thinks of it as home. There are a couple of pictures out there of her as a child with her grandmother and a crowd of bemused cadets in the background—Grandmama never saw teaching and babysitting as necessarily separate occupations. Not once Chester was past the age of slipping away and wedging herself into something dangerous—something she never actually got the opportunity to do, because Grandmama learned her lesson with Chester's mother.

No, her bad behavior had been limited to whispering the right answers to confused students when Grandmama called on them.

Fortunately, Engineering is fully staffed, and there's a lot of scurrying activity. A lot of clumps of people at two or three stations, though; Chester's heart sinks, because that means trouble. "Still?" someone is saying, their voice a little shrill. "How many *tubas* can one replicator make? Look, can we cut power to that deck?"

Yeah. That's bad. She looks around for her Chief Engineer, and finds him by the port warp core. Hanging upside down. By his clawed mechanical bat feet.

"Lt. Commander Hawthorne?" she says, once she gets close enough. A frisbee-sized drone - one she recognizes from her chief engineer's file - has buzzed up to her, and then zipped, beeping, back to Lt. Commander Hawthorne. A light flashes on his cybernetics, and he glances her way. "I'm Captain Chester. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but there's a high-priority mission, and the Admiral says we're closest to being departure-ready. We'll be staffed-up by 0800 tomorrow morning; what do you need to get us to be ready to go by then?"

"This is a joke, right?" The drone buzzes back towards her, looping around her in circles. "Who am I kidding, of course it's not. Two minutes forty and I'll be at a breaking point to talk about exactly how stupid that is."

That is... not promising at all. Chester glances back at the rest of Engineering, and her scrambling crew, and guilt pricks at the back of her mind. She doesn't want to push too hard, but...

She looks over the padd in her hand again; she skimmed it on the way down in the turbolift, and she hates to say it, but she agrees with Ross about this one. They need to be there, and it needs to be the Interpreter, with all her firepower. And Interpreter can *get* there in time.

But...there's also a reason that her grandmother often invokes the hell that awaits captains who rush their chief engineers.

At about two minutes, another voice calls out from the gantry, "Pip? How's it - oh." The tiny choblik looks down from above, and his voice goes very cold for a moment. "It's *you*. Eh. Your captain." The choblik hops over the rail, swinging down on his tail to hang next to Lt. Commander Hawthorne, facing away from her.

"I know." Hawthorne says flatly. "Thirty-five."

Chester reaches back in her memory of her chief engineer's files. This is probably Lt. Marbog Bu-Fsen-Faa, who has done some work with Lt. Commander Hawthorne's new cybernetics.

At exactly two minutes and forty seconds, a small cable slides back from the open ship's panel directly into the cybernetics around the back of Hawthorne's head, and he closes the panel with a brief pat. "Good work, 'Pret." Hawthorne uses his prosthetic feet to clamber around, rotating to face her, still upside down. He clears his throat and waves at the choblik. "Captain Chester, this is a colleague who felt the need to do some checks in the last few days before we depart - which are going to turn into the last *day*, singular, if command has their mad way, I take it."

Hawthorne and the choblik - presumably Bu-Fsen-Faa - are exchanging some kind of look that's difficult to parse. The choblik continues hanging next to him in silence.

"I don't intend to make this a habit," says Chester, "but we're the ship best equipped to respond, and both other *Armistice* -class vessels are not going to be ready to go for another seventy-two hours. By all reports, that will be too late." She looks around, wry. "I take it things here are a little rockier than we'd hope before our first deployment, too."

"A little rockier -" he snorts. "You could say that. Obviously, the problems start well before the retrofit. The 'Armistice class'" - he does, in fact, make air quotes, "seems to have been a concept devised by a maniac who took the idea of wars being won by the person with 'the biggest stick' and decided it would be a great idea to try and make a space station go to warp and shoot things. Their design and assembly was all rushed because of course it was, it was the damn war and everything gets rushed until it blows up -" he gestures emphatically at his cybernetics, " - and it would be insanity to try and put crews on them as they were, without extensive testing and redesign, unless there was truly no better alternative. Only then do we get to the added insanity of the massive retrofits that have somehow been slapdash added. But our problems don't end there, no. Because instead of sending these Frankensteined ships to do some low risk milk run, they're supposed to go missions into an entirely different volatile quadrant through a *wormhole*. And now *this* ship is supposed to go *earlier* on a mission so urgent it can't wait. What is 'Pret going to be expected to do? Throw them right into combat? Test out their new medical bays with a new crisis? Pack hundreds of hungry refugees into their bay? Industrial replicators that only make tubas will be a lot less of a funny story when we're short food and medberths in another quadrant with intermittent Starfleet communications. 'Pret will do their best, and I'm going to fight tooth and nail to keep anyone else from getting blown up, but that doesn't mean I don't recognize it's insanity."

She lets him rant. He's not wrong. Her grandmother had said some of the same things, and cutting him off now, dismissing him, will be the very worst thing she could do. "I understand and I agree with you about the need for caution. We can requisition station resources, including technicians, to get us underway. Tell me what you need to get us functional; if we're lucky, this will be a short diplomatic mission."

There's a *tiny* bit of relief when she says 'short diplomatic mission'. "Well, let's hope we're very lucky. Short diplomatic missions don't always stay that way. And even if it *stays* a short diplomatic mission, we should not be deploying for months if not years, much less tomorrow. *None* of these ships are actually going to be 'ready' in any proper sense of the word in seventy-two hours, no matter what command says. *And* you can tell command I'm not asking my engineers to pull all nighters no matter their schedule, that's bad for my people and it's the sort of thing that leads to mistakes. I already had a list of things we need, and if they want to up the timeline we're going to need two temporary crew rotations worth of crew in engineering before departure."

"I'll call Ops and get that for you," she says. "We do not want mistakes, and I don't want us arriving exhausted. Believe me, I'm well aware we shouldn't be pushing it like this, but it's us or no one and... well, the world we're heading for just got free of the Dominion. Time isn't something they've got a lot of."

Watching his face—yeah, she's going to the special hell for Captains who rush their engineers. In their first conversation, no less. Lieutenant Bu-Fsen-Faa is also looking at her in a way that assures her she's made no friends here today.

Hawthorne snorts. "Time's never something anyone has a lot of. There's never enough time to get things done properly and safely, is there? Do things right by Starfleet. You'd think at some point they'd learn how much more time you need to fix things when they're done wrong."

He waves a hand before she can say anything else. "You've got orders, you're giving me orders, if I don't follow them they'll find someone who will. So I'll keep trying to keep this from blowing up, huh?"

Bu-Fsen-Fa grumbles, clearly not thinking very much of this argument.

Chester thinks carefully about her response. The last thing she wants is an engineer who's going to simply say *yes* to things for fear of being booted. He's also clearly very angry. She's not sure why—his file did discuss combativeness and paranoia, but there's almost something personal here, and she wonders for a moment if it's about the *Bedivere*. "There isn't someone else, and I'm not in the habit of getting rid of officers who tell me things I don't want to hear."

He frowns, almost an edge of confusion with the anger. Like he's bracing for her to yank the rug out.

She continues. "If we can't do it, I need you to tell me that, and give me a timeline, so I can tell Admiral Ross, and so we see what can be done about the message that came through. It's important, but we won't do them any good if we drop out of warp in pieces."

He continues frowning. Bu-Fsen-Fa looks at him as he pulls himself up to the gantry.

He's still frowning when he makes his way down the gantry stairs and stands upright facing her, arms crossed, tapping his fingers against his arms. "I'll assume that the actual, sensible approach of taking a couple of years to test and go through the appropriate processes on the design, much less the retrofits, is out of the question. Starting from the original - still insane, mind you - schedule for deployment, I prioritized the risks and added several steps around our original deployment plan that would get the greatest risk reduction per hour. If I knew what systems were likely to be stressed by what we were facing, I would add more and adjust the priority list and risk flowchart. I can update my lists of the requirements to get us to a *minimum* standard based on trying to get us deployed as soon as possible tomorrow, and more information about the mission parameters, but command won't like what's on them. I'll need some time to look into it, I may update the time parameters. It'll still be like sending a toddler with a tricorder built in 20 minutes by a first year student onto an unknown alien planet, but if there's no reasonable chance that an actually *functioning* ship can be sent out..."

"Tell me what you need," she says. "I don't care what Command says, I will make sure you get what you need to get us there. Even if I have to poach every engineer off the station."

He continues to frown, but it's got a more quizzical edge now. "Gull, can you upload a copy of my list to a free OA PADD?"

The drone buzzes and then opens a slot on the side.

"That's my original list for the old schedule. Add the two shifts of engineers. Get me *some* sort of mission parameters and time to get updated progress reports from all of my teams, and then I'll know what to add to that list and what the timeline looks like." He snorts. "I thought I might have to give the 'this is what happens when people don't listen to me about safety' speech," he says, gesturing at - well, all of himself, "but clearly they gave you my file."

They did, but that's not top of mind here. "That, and I don't believe in being stupid on a maiden voyage of a mostly untested new ship," she says. "And whatever you read in *my* file, I've got no intention of making a habit out of *losing* ships."

Hawthorne's face goes very blank. The drone beeps. Hawthorne, face still unnaturally still, pats the bulkhead. "Well, I'm sure 'Pret appreciates that. Not their fault their design was driven by absolute maniacs."

Dammit, this is like juggling knives. Which she expected from the Romulans, but *not* her own chief engineer. And now she's dropped one, and she's not even sure *how*. She looks down at the padd in her hand and presses a few keys instead, sending the briefing to his device. "Specifics for our mission," she says. "I'll go over it in the senior staff briefing in the morning, but this should be the information you need. Unfortunately, it's not much to work with."

He takes it. "Well, it's better than nothing," he shrugs, with a raised eyebrow as if to say, *Command, right?*

He pauses, looks at her like he's weighing something. Bu-Fsen-Faa mutters something that he apparently ignores.

"Look, I don't mean to -" he starts finally, "I'm not going to claim I understand what you went through when your ship died under you. All I can tell you is I know what it felt like for me, to know that people I was responsible for died and I didn't save them. And if there's something I do understand... it's wanting to do everything you can to make sure that never happens again. And ... if - when -" he shakes his head slightly "in the end, choices are going to hit us all eventually, where we think we have to move one way to make sure of that. Maybe that's already

come up for you.” He looks at her, and the drone hovers a little closer, like he’s waiting for her to crack on - something. Bu-Fsen-Faa is just glaring at the wall.

This is about the *Bedivere*, then, and it’s also an olive branch, but Chester has to concentrate to keep from frowning herself. There’s something else in this. She doesn’t understand it, and she *really* doesn’t like that, because he seems to be expecting... something.

She does what she can. “I think we both understand no-win scenarios a little better than anyone should have to, Mr. Hawthorne,” she says, and gives him a tight, pained smile. “Personally, I’ve got no desire to repeat the experience. Let me know what you need, and I will make sure you get it.” She hesitates, then tries for levity. “Besides, there’s enough engineers in the family that if I start playing stupid games here, I’ll never hear the end of it next time I’m home.”

He tilts his head at that, in apparent surprise. “Well,” he says slowly, sounding like he’s picking his way through words carefully, “if you know Starfleet engineers in your family, you know we don’t take the Kobayashi Maru... but you can’t escape it at the Academy.” His tone might be attempting levity, but he’s not doing a very good job of it. “So what I know of no-win scenarios ... is that someone had to make them that way.”

She can practically feel Bu-Fsen-Faa glaring daggers in her back. The Choblik coughs, pointedly.

“Guess *the Dominion*” he says, with a bitter twist of his mouth, “got pretty good at making those. Let’s hope,” he adds, “their remnants are less ...practiced.”

“Would be nice, wouldn’t it,” says Chester, dryly.

Hawthorne snorts. “If I’m going to get you an updated list before end of shift, I’ll need to start compiling up-to-date status reports.” He taps his commbadge. “Hawthorne to all Engineering Section heads, I’ll be making rotations and I’ll need status reports when I do. There are new timeline parameters, but we are not going to be skimping on keeping the crew and the ship in order.” He closes the line. There’s some muffled profanity from one of the engineering groups nearest; Hawthorne doesn’t seem surprised.

“If we’re going to be working together,” he says, as he starts to walk, “you might as well know how I work, aside from what’s in my file.”

Bu-Fsen-Faa mutters something that might be, “Here we go,” as he hops down from the gantry to follow them. Hawthorne shoots him a glare.

“First of all, I don’t break the laws of physics. Anyone who tells you they are is either relying on you having an imperfect understanding of the laws of physics, has come up with a very clever work around, or has managed to prove that all of us had an imperfect understanding of the laws of physics in the first place. I am very good at my job,” Bu-Fsen-Faa snorts. “but I am not enough of a genius for that last one; if you wanted that, you should have asked them to get you Lt Commander LaForge. As for the first one, I’ll tell you this: when it comes to this ship and the lives of its crew, I will not bullshit you. I do not do bullshit in my engineering section and I do not pretend to be a miracle worker. If I say something will take two hours that means it will take two hours, it’s not something that will take half an hour that I’m exaggerating so I look good when I turn it around ahead of time. If I tell you we are at capacity we are at capacity, and if I tell you something is a serious risk to blow up or fail and kill crewmembers I mean it is a serious risk above and beyond the baseline insanity of,” he waves a hand as if to encompass the entire history of the ship, “everyone who thought this was a good idea. Sorry, ‘Pret. Not your fault,” he adds, patting a bulkhead again in passing.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she says, with a pang. The chief engineer of the *Bedivere* had given her a far more politic but similar spiel.

And then he had died delivering a miracle anyway. Perhaps it’s better if Hawthorne point-blank refuses those kinds of heroism. If Mr. Bena had, he’d still be alive.

Chester, and everyone else still trapped aboard with most of the escape pods destroyed and no way to get to the few that remained, would have probably died. All of them, instead of most of them.

“I don’t intend to play stupid games with my ship or my crew,” she says. “I understand your reluctance on that count, and I know the accelerated timeline was the worst possible way I could have introduced myself. I saw the report from the investigation into what happened at Forward Research Three, and it’s a large part of why I wanted you as my chief engineer; you didn’t give up on your people, regardless of the personal consequences, and you didn’t stop warning them. That’s exactly who I want keeping this ship running. That’s exactly who I want at my back if everything goes to hell.”

Hawthorne’s face is very blank again, frozen and pale. The drone beeps.

Bu-Fsen-Faa lets out an exaggerated sigh. “See, obviously this is why my expertise was needed on board. Starship engineers, getting so preoccupied with their ships they don’t keep up with checks on their own parts.”

“Of course,” says Chester, but lets her concern show. That looks...bad. Not cybernetics bad, trauma bad.

Hawthorne, face unfrozen, snorts and rolls his eyes.

“Those cybernetics will need a fresh calibration cycle before you set off. Apologies, Captain,” Bu-Fsen-Faa says, not sounding sorry at all, and, if anything, glaring at her more intently, “we’ll need to step out for a moment,” he says, jabbing Hawthorne with his tail.

“Ah. Yes.” Hawthorne says. “Apologies. That. Was what that was. Brief cybernetics glitch. I’d say it won’t happen again, but, the replicators are still making tubas, so,” he adds, like that’s not a complete non-sequitur. He looks at her and squares his jaw, speaking with that same careful cadence again. “That means a great deal to hear, Captain. Thank you for telling me.”

She nods. “One other thing, Mr. Hawthorne. We’ll be hosting a liaison officer from the Romulan Empire for the foreseeable future; they’re taking a dim view of our activities in the Gamma Quadrant, and want someone to keep an eye on us in case we suddenly come over all

imperialistic. His name's Subcommander Tanek. I expect you'll meet him in the staff meeting tomorrow. We're authorized to give him courtesy computer access, pending review by Intelligence." She makes a bit of a face, showing what she thinks about *that* complication. "So if he shows up down here, he can have the tourist experience, but no more. I hope we'll keep him busy enough and out of your hair, however."

Bu-Fsen-Faa just starts *laughing*.

"Shit Triscuits." Hawthorne says. "Well, I'll give the team a heads up and I'll do some extra checks on computer security. Did they admit he's Tal Shiar, or are we supposed to pretend he's not?"

"Oh they admitted it." She wrinkles her nose briefly. "Theoretically, we're all being honest and above-board with each other. It's a bold new era." She lets the sarcasm slip out, just a little.

He snorts, and he and Bu Fsen Fa exchange a *look*. "Well, at least that's something."

"I'm glad to have you aboard, Mr. Hawthorne," she says, but she's pretty sure he won't believe her.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Reference to digestive upset/IMPLIED offscreen vomiting, anxiety, memory issues and other symptoms of head trauma, paranoia

“Are you done in there?” Marbog asks, several minutes after the ‘fresher flushes for the last time.

“A minute.” Piper finishes washing his face and pulls on a fresh uniform top, tossing the previous one in the recycler. “Maladaptive stress responses, I swear,” he says, exiting the room and turning to the replicator. “‘Pret, a glass of water and an ant- ant -”

“Antacids are a common order after human digestive upset.”

“Yes, that, thank you ‘Pret.”

“Nothing else?” Marbog asks.

“Can’t. Too much to do and I have to be watching my back, clearly.”

“And you’re doing so well getting things done just letting your anxiety run rampant.”

Piper glares at him as he swallows the antacid and takes a sip of water. “Thank you ‘Pret. Could you generate some soothing - ah - white noise, from my program? Volume setting eight.” The gentle humming tones switch on, the thrum of a Federation fifth generation space station power core. “Thank you.”

“Is there anywhere else?” Marbog asks, in archaic Choblik - a language he’d learned to study old records of Choblik cybernetics and prosthesis, and one that universal translators tend to struggle with. Why *Piper* had learned it - well, he had taught himself Tolkien’s Elvish when he was thirteen, and at some point learning seemingly useless bits of language was entertaining.

“No,” he replies in the same language, waving Gull down so he can manually enter some requests. *Interpreter’s* at risk of surveillance, and he can’t trust Deep Space Nine either. Taking a shuttle out and then sweeping it would raise too many red flags. Conversation in Federation Standard starts to fill the room. He takes a breath, and keeps talking slowly, thinking through the translation into archaic Choblik in his head. “Gull’s playing one of your previous diagnostic conversations. And some background static interference.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” Marbog says, moving close to Piper and looking at his cybernetics, face pointed down so it would be hard to see his mouth. Piper does the same. “So you’re in for a fun assignment.”

“At least we all know the Romulan’s a fascist spy.”

“Your captain *really* wants you to trust her.” He snorts. “At least the benefit of having a reputation as a pain in the ass means she won’t be surprised when you don’t get along.”

“I’ve cultivated that reputation,” he mutters, then sighs. “Clearly, the ‘watch Hawthorne’ assignment is ... a bit more serious than we thought,” he says, taking a sip of water and concentrating on holding it down.

“Maybe,” Marbog says, “Someone was definitely paying attention to how much of a rock drilling woodpecker,” the literal translation referred to a species on the Choblik home planet that was roughly analogous to a woodpecker, though they were widely known to accidentally try to drill through rock instead - and sometimes succeed. It was one of Marbog’s favorite epithets for him, “you were about making yourself a horned beetle in their burrow.” Another archaic Choblik idiom, something like ‘a thorn in their side’.

“Do you think they suspect that - I know?” That *we* know.

“I don’t know.” Marbog says. “Look, when it comes down to it, did she really tell us anything we don’t know? They wanted you here so you could be observed out of the way and easily shunted out of the way permanently if needed. For everyone following the official line, the nice story is that command wanted to reward your determination in whistleblowing, the cynical story is that this is a ‘now shut up about it’ bribe promotion, the *more* cynical story is that they want you in another quadrant so no one can hear you if you *don’t* shut up it, and you can’t complain because it’s a promotion with a shiny new ship, no matter how insane the design. She’s one of the people watching you, she wants you to trust her, she’s telling the nice story.”

“What if she’s not just *watching* me, though?”

“I’m the one who told you she was bound to shoot you in the back.”

“No, I just ...” his fingers tighten into fists. “*How* sure are you that the mind control tech failed? I mean ...”

“Piper -”

“How sure are we that she doesn’t want me at - at her back because she knows how to - how to activate the sleeper programming. How can I -”

“*Pip.*”

He catches himself, realizes he’s slipped into Federation Standard. *Fuck.*

“Look,” Marbog says, back in archaic Choblik. “I’m not going to beetledung you and say that there’s no chance. But I am very good at my job, and I didn’t find anything. And we have worked very hard and put our not inconsiderable skill - yes, ‘our’, I’m actually including you in that - in making these new cybernetics secure. Maybe I’m wrong and we missed something. Maybe. But if she thinks she can find a way to overtaking-tunnel into this tech, she would have to be a lot better than the people who made the *first* tech, and frankly I don’t know when she’s supposed to have gotten *that* good.”

He’s afraid to trust his own voice, so he just nods.

“Speaking of your cybernetics... *have* they actually been glitching? Have you been having lapses -”

“Just within the expected parameters you gave me.”

“And *you* didn’t see fit to mention it.”

“They were *your* expected parameters.”

“Starship engineers... tell me now, and *I’ll* tell you whether they’re within expected parameters.”

“I forget words more often than I used to.” Like *antacid*. “Nothing engineering related, just like you guessed. Just - bits of memory gone here and there. It’s harder to keep my anxiety in check, though admittedly most of that’s not on the cybernetics.”

“Harder like *that*.”

“*That* doesn’t happen ... often.”

“And when you say bits of memory gone.”

“Forgetting I already met someone. Or forgetting bits of ... history, or political context. Not my work.”

“But noticeably worse than what would have been previously typical forgetfulness.”

“You know, I don’t really remember.”

Marbog jabs him in the shoulder with his tail.

“Worse. But not by too much. The last few weeks of calibrations have helped a lot.” Piper says. “Pret will be keeping an eye on me for erratic behavior. If anyone looks into it, it’s to monitor and keep full medical records of my recovery and cybernetic integration.”

“You were worried before she said anything.”

“It’s not like we hadn’t tossed around the possibility that they might have wanted a sleeper agent.”

“You’ll tell me how this progresses. Even if it’s within normal parameters.”

“May my burrow collapse if I don’t.”

“Don’t say that one lightly.”

“I’m not.” Piper says, seriously. “Starfleet’s expecting you to be a regular consultant, anyway. It won’t surprise anyone that I’m sending you reports.”

“I can’t go on this one. You know that.”

He knows. Marbog has a duty rotation the day after tomorrow. “I don’t like the idea of you being here at all. *You* know that.”

“You can still leave.”

He can’t. “I know.” He gets up. “I have status reports to collect. And apparently I should make sure a Tal Shiar agent isn’t wandering around engineering poking his head where it shouldn’t be.”

“At least you don’t have to pretend *that* one isn’t a snake in the burrow.”

That’s the truth. “You going to come complain about starship engineers?”

“Obviously,” Marbog says.

Piper reaches for Gull, but Marbog stops him before he does.

“Pip - are you going to be able to *sleep* here?”

It’s a fair question. “A few hours left on my shift is enough time for me to get the status reports together and get an updated list and report to the Captain. My engineers aren’t pulling an all-nighter and I’m not either.”

“Not what I meant.”

Yeah. “With a couple of batarangs under my pillow, I’ll try.”

Marbog snorts. “You are a deeply, deeply deranged little man.”

“I know,” he says, switching off the recorded conversation that had been playing over them on Gull and getting back to his feet. “Pret, you can cancel white noise, thanks,” he says in Federation Standard. “We’re going to go find out how much work I have to do to fix you, kiddo.”

It’s early morning. Chester’s been up most of the night, getting Hawthorne’s team what they need from the list he made, then popping in and out of Engineering to make sure they have what they need as the additional shifts start work. She grabbed a few hours of sleep once Hawthorne came back on shift, found out she’d been popping in and out of Engineering all through Delta shift, and told her to fuck off again, this time with the addition of ‘and go the fuck to sleep’. She sort of did. After reading the Chironian briefing materials.

Maybe canceling her earling-morning sparring session with J’etris would be wise, but frankly she needs the exercise.

“I don’t get it!” she says, waving the door to the fencing room in the ship’s gym locked. It locks, much to her relief; Hawthorne’s report indicates that’s a crashshoot right now. “A nonzero amount of this crew hates my guts! We only just met! I usually only piss people off when I *mean to*.”

“Well,” says J’etris, “the Romulan’s a given. I’m not happy about him myself. Who else?”

“Our Chief Engineer,” says Chester, pulling on her jacket—maroon, heavily padded, an asymmetrical fastening along the shoulder. It’s old-fashioned snaps. People who do historical fencing tend anachronistic in all aspects of it. Her hair is tightly braided against her skull and the end of the braid bundled compactly at the back of her head. She pauses, stretches, testing the movement of the jacket. Across the room, J’etris has already pulled her dark blue jacket over her shoulders, and is frowning at shin-guards.

“As I said, the Romulan is a given,” J’etris says. “What’s it about Hawthorne that’s got you all worked up?”

“It’s not me being worked up at him,” says Chester, a little strained as she works at the buckle of her gorget. Ambidexterity doesn’t help when the buckle is *tiny* and just about under your ear. “It’s him being worked up about *me*, and I don’t know why. It’s like he hates me. Specifically. I’ve never met the man before in his life and he’s acting like I insulted his dog.”

J’etris makes a face. She grew up in Montecito, California—the town still has a thing about pampered dogs. Chester’s been in crappy bars the universe over where you could steal a Nausicaan’s drink with less of a reaction than you’d get from insulting a Montecito artist’s dog. “I can see that being concerning. He is a pretty integral part of the crew. But I was under the impression there aren’t many people he *does* trust—it’s unlikely to be personal.”

“Oh, he does trust someone. He trusts Lieutenant Bu-Fsa-Fenn, who likes me even *less* than he does. It’s amazing, I don’t think I’ve put my foot in my mouth so many times since my first year at the Academy! It’s also like he’s *scared* of me.” She makes a face. “I can’t say I care for that.”

“Well,” says J’etris, taking a sword down from the wall and thoughtfully flexing the meter of steel between her hands, “I’d suggest I should talk to him, but you’re supposed to be the approachable one.”

Chester snorts. “Not in this case I’m not.” She finishes buckling the last few things and takes her own feder down—a blunt replica of an ancient Earth longsword. She and J’etris found out they shared a passion for historical martial arts when they were both assigned to the *Bedivere*. They’ve practiced together ever since. Both of them prefer Earth historical fencing. Chester’s been doing it since she was a kid, and J’etris...

J’etris prefers not to dwell too much on her Klingon heritage. She’s been rejected by her Klingon family twice now, and doesn’t care to continue to invite it.

“The chief engineer being afraid of you doesn’t seem like a good sign, no,” says J’etris. “We could see what we come up with to deal with that. Or... we could let off some steam sparring, and try again at the staff meeting.”

Translation: she’s overworked, far too worried, and J’etris thinks it’s time to do something about that. Chester feels herself grinning for the first time in what feels like forever. “Sparring. Please.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” says J’etris, with a straight face and a comically exaggerated salute that’s appalling in its disrespect; Chester makes a totally involuntary face at it, and J’etris grins. It is *not* an expression that heralds anything good. “Maybe if I kick your ass hard enough, I’ll shake *something* out of your head.”

Chester is briefly, overwhelmingly grateful to her in that moment. It feels normal, it feels like old times. If she’s got J’etris at her back, they can do anything.

If she’s got J’etris at her *front*, especially with a sword, she may well get that threatened ass-kicking—and J’etris with a sword in hand has no compunction about rank, either. Chester’s been doing this much, much longer, but J’etris has strength and reach on her.

“Yeah,” she says, “Good luck with that. Come on, show me what you’ve got.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! Hope everyone's December is off to a good start. Without further ado, let's rejoin the Interpreter!

A message from the ship's counselor on his Padd wasn't the *very* last thing Piper needed as 'Pret was finishing departure preparations, but it had to be pretty far down the list.

Counselor Rala would be the person on the ship most likely to hear crewmember's concerns, troubles, doubts and suspicions - well, most likely as long as the ship didn't have a functioning bar. Regardless, he and Marbog had agreed that any half-functioning Secret Police would have a way to make sure *they* were getting all of that information. And now that it seemed that Operation Watch Hawthorne was getting higher priority - well.

There were a few possibilities for Counselor Rala. It wasn't necessarily the case that he was a secret police agent, or knowingly complicit like his old boss, who went along for fear of the secret police. He might have gotten orders he decided were reasonable, 'due to the concerns about Lt. Commander Hawthorne's mental state and the stability of his cybernetics, we want all recordings and notes from his sessions run by a few additional experts, we trust your judgment, obviously, but as this case is novel, in the interest of ensuring Lt. Commander Hawthorne gets the best care and' - etc etc.

He may not even know that his computers or records or bugged - Piper's doing his best to sweep for bugs in the ship and have 'Pret check, and he's found some, but he doesn't want to know the secret police know all of what he's found, and he's sure he hasn't caught them all. Taps in the Counselor's computer systems are something it would be hard to find an excuse to go digging to find.

He's looked at Counselor Rala's files; the records stated that during the war, the Betazoid had been experimented on by Cardassian allies of the Dominion, part of a broad project of experimentation on individuals with telepathic abilities. Of course, the story in Piper's file said that *he* had been experimented on by Changeling infiltrators from the Dominion, so that record could be just as much bullshit. When he'd discussed it with Marbog, they'd considered a few possibilities -

- one, that like what Piper suspected with Captain Chester, the horrific incident during the war had been leverage for the Secret Police to say 'shouldn't you help us do *anything necessary* to fight the Federation's enemies to prevent this happening again'?

Two, that whatever orders had been given to a knowing or unknowing Counselor Rala, they'd leveraged what had happened to him to assure his collaboration - potentially through the connection to the public-facing story about Lt Commander Hawthorne's own experiences.

Three, that the whole story had been cover for whatever already-secret police 'Counselor' Rala had actually been doing during the war.

Four, the whole story was cover in the same way that blaming Dominion Changelings was cover for what the Secret Police had done to Piper.

But what the Secret Police had done to Rala had *worked*.

Piper rubs at the back of his neck, around one of the pieces of cybernetics running down his upper spine. Thinking that Rala might be puppeteered - or might be activated unknowingly - drags him right back to his conversation with Marbog, to the possibility that *he* might be activated by some deeply-buried piece of hardware, something stuck in his own brain that all the scans and all of the doctors and Marbog hadn't been able to root out. Something that was too deeply buried, integral to his brain's functioning, that they thought they had taken back, had given control of back to Piper, but that secretly had a trap waiting to turn him from a 'failed mind control experiment' into a very successful one.

What the actual story was didn't matter. Whatever was said to Rala, whatever he noted down, Piper had to assume it would get back to the Secret Police. If Rala knew - if he suspected - that Piper knew the Secret Police existed, Piper - and *Marbog* - would be in immediate danger.

So getting word that before they started their mission, Counselor Rala would like to make up for not doing an initial appointment during the days 'Pret was meant to still be at Deep Space Nine in preparation by doing a short 'getting to know you' visit with the Chief Engineer - well, it wasn't exactly reassuring. He'd considered insisting that he was too busy with the work to keep the ship running, but he second guessed himself - it might raise red flags.

That put him here, on his way to Counselor Rala's office.

It was fine. He'd had a Betazoid counselor as part of the Starfleet Recovery process before, and he'd been certified to return to duty. It was a patient's right to refuse mental probes except for cases of emergency need, and as he'd told Marbog, picking up on emotions didn't have to give you their full story.

He was angry because of the rush job done in getting 'Pret underway. He was intensely anxious about the possibility of systems failure. He had frustrations about feeling Starfleet had failed him and his team, he had some fears related to bodily autonomy and was determined to reassert control.

All of these things were true. Counselor Rala didn't - *wouldn't* pick up on anything more to those emotions than that. Attribute oddities to the cybernetics. Let the Counselor think that he could *connect* to Hawthorne on the basis of related traumas, that he had a point of leverage for Hawthorne's sympathy, that he would be winning Hawthorne over - Piper grits his teeth at the thought - that they had a shared enemy in the

Dominion.

He could do this. He's done it before. He can manage it for fifteen minutes. Be Piper Hawthorne, survivor of Dominion experiments.

Just fifteen minutes.

And then fifteen minutes again. And then an hour. And with every other member of the crew - couldn't trust any of them.

Just that, until he died or he rooted the parasite out.

Gull beeps. He forces himself to take a deep breath.

"Pret, how are things in engineering?"

"Engineering operations are within appropriate parameters."

He sighs. "Thank you for telling me, 'Pret.'"

No excuses then.

He is annoyed at being dragged away from engineering. He is *so annoyed*. He is Piper Hawthorne, uptight, disagreeable, abrasive all-round bastard.

Alright. *That* is true.

No need to know anything else.

He pings the counselor's door. It opens almost instantly, and a small man - probably not much taller than Piper - looks up from his perch on the edge of the desk, where he's been reading with one leg tucked under him.

Counselor Rala has a sharp, elfin face, a mane of curly reddish-brown hair tied loosely back, and wide, guileless black eyes with the usual disconcerting lack of distinction between pupil and iris. He's also dressed like a pirate, or the romantic lead from the worst kind of vampire romance holonovel, and the welcoming smile he turns on Piper as he hops down quickly fades into a sort of resigned amusement as he picks up on the sheer force of Piper's annoyance.

"And *what*, exactly, was so important you needed me to take a quarter of an hour away from keeping this behemoth running on our priority mission?"

"Schedule maintenance for your equipment, or your equipment will schedule it for you," says Rala. "I'm pretty sure I heard you saying just that to one of your ensigns shortly after I beamed aboard. Unfortunately, that maxim is just as true about your brain as the warp core. Devvoni Rala, chief counselor—though of course you knew that. I'm happy with Dev, or Counselor Rala; only my mother calls me Devvoni."

The room is comfortable and only partly unpacked. There are plants and bookshelves and multiple small tables with things on them, all well-worn, like people have been fidgeting with them; a wall with musical instruments, more in crates. The standard issue desk and computer console are almost invisible under plants, old fashioned books, and knickknacks. There's a colorful mug with a collection of flags in it—on closer examination, Piper recognizes them as pride flags, from Earth. There are several of the pale blue, pink, and white of trans pride flags - flags he's particularly familiar with, they match the ones in his own office.

Rala catches him looking. "I went to San Francisco Pride every year I was in the Academy," he says. "Betazed didn't have the same difficult path to acceptance for its queer community, but defying oppression by celebrating openly, and making something so joyful out of so much suffering—it struck a chord with me."

"Yes, I was there." His favorite comic book library had a great view of the parade. He looks away from the trans pride flags, keeping his arms folded. "And I have had maintenance on my brain, the cybernetics engineer triple-checked all of my systems before departure."

He regrets the jibe as soon as he says it. He could have filled the rest of the fifteen minutes with useless-to-secret-police conversations about which years they had been at San Francisco Pride, and first experiences of Pride celebrations on Earth, and whatever else.

An eyebrow goes up. "Your brain's a lot more than just your cybernetics."

"But my cybernetics replace, support, or connect to just about every component of my brain. If something was wrong, I'm more likely to be able to see it than someone without cybernetics, obviously." He tosses it off, as arrogant and offhanded as possible. If the report is he's got more arrogance than sense, maybe he'll be less suspicious.

"Right," says Rala, and that's not the tone of someone who's convinced Piper has more arrogance than sense. It's neutral to evaluating, and he doesn't seem particularly surprised.

"Is there anything else?"

"Your return-to-duty medical clearance stipulates regular mental health appointments and support. I recognize this is likely disruptive, but it's better we make the arrangements as soon as possible to establish a routine. I have two junior counselors; you may select any of us as your care provider, but cybernetics or not, you will be seeing one of us on a regular basis." He leans back against the desk, gives Piper a wry look.

"Don't feel singled out, either; we're giving this lecture a lot this morning, and I had it from my own medical team a few days ago. A postwar fleet has a high trauma morbidity. Do you have any questions for me?"

Are you acting under duress? Blink twice for yes. He lifts one hand out of his folded arms and waves it dismissively. "Yes, I know what was in

my return-to-duty clearance. I assume you have access to my medical and recovery files, I can't imagine there's anything to add."

Rala regards him evenly for a moment longer than is comfortable, not really blinking, either.

"My shift assignments are available for reference with Counseling's scheduling. Is there anything else before I return to Engineering?"

"No," says Rala, in a way that makes Piper sinking certain he's done everything *but* allay the possibly secret police agent's suspicions. "No, there isn't. Thank you, Lt. Commander."

Walking into the briefing room feels strange, especially taking the seat at the head of the table. It would feel stranger yet, but the *Interpreter's* room is almost twice as large as the *Bedivere's* was, and still smells of curing adhesives and fresh carpet. They'd never gotten the ozone smell out of *Bedivere's* after the electrical fire.

Her senior officers are a larger group than the *Bedivere's* were, but looking around at the empty table, Chester remembers that they're still a lot fewer of them than this ship was built to carry. During the war, there would have been ground combat specialists and flight crews and a separate repair team for other ships—Bay 1 was designed to handle a *Defiant*-class ship—and two medical officers administering paired sickbays. Hawthorne's department is the only one at its full staffing in peacetime.

During the war, she probably would have had an admiral underfoot as well. The fact she's now in command of what would have been a flagship as a junior captain speaks volumes of what Command *actually* thinks of the utility of the *Armistice*-class.

Her officers filter in, and she focuses on them, not the empty spaces. J'etris almost goes for a spot a few chairs down from her, where she would have sat on the *Bedivere*, before course correcting at the last moment and settling in on her right hand. Tanek, immediately on J'etris's heels, takes the left in a gesture that she's sure would be tremendously psychologically illuminating had she the inclination to dissect it.

The security officer, Lt Fult, a Tellarite who looks every bit the part of security officer, follows shortly after J'etris and Tanek. The science officer, Lt. Commander Salera, is next to arrive. She's a small, solid Vulcan with jaw-length pale brown hair—only joined Starfleet recently after a long and distinguished career as an agricultural specialist. She's followed by ops officer Lt. T'Sandi, a tall, muscular Caitian with a slightly crooked smile on their face. Then Dr. Boz Tyrell, a dark-haired Trill of medium height and a deeply dissatisfied expression, and behind him, Lt. Commander Hawthorne, who's gone right through dissatisfied and just looks *pissed*.

Counselor Rala comes in a bit later, and hesitates a moment before choosing a spot next to Dr. Tyrell. Chester represses the twinge of guilt at the back of her mind—she's been ignoring one of his messages in the haste of getting the ship ready to go. She'll apologize once the ship's underway and the troubleshooting's complete.

"Good afternoon, everyone," she says when the doors slide shut behind the last person on the list she's been surreptitiously checking on her PADD. "I will forgo the usual platitudes to respect all of your doubtless heavily constrained time—let me simply say I am proud to be working with all of you, and glad of your experience and expertise in our pressing circumstances. As you are already aware, our departure has been moved up. You should have received the detailed mission materials this morning. This mission is in keeping with overall Federation aims in the Gamma Quadrant; we are here to provide assistance and stability in the wake of the Dominion's withdrawal from their previously occupied spaces, and ensure that no predatory parties take advantage of the newly independent worlds they have left in their wake. This urgent case is the planet Chiron, a former Dominion colony until recently used for weapons manufacturing. Given their role, our concern about exploitation by third parties is particularly high, and the circumstances are already concerning.

"For one thing, we have yet to speak to any actual Chironians. Our sole contact has been through a Karemma representative." There's a pause, a few nods, and she adds, "The Karemma representative states the Chironians are interested in Federation membership. Our listening outposts have picked up a lot of activity in that area, and Command is concerned that this is a rapidly developing situation that could end badly for the Chironians." Her mouth twists, and she adds, "Not everyone has our non-interference directives. The *Interpreter* is directed to assist in negotiations and to ensure that the planet isn't coerced into a situation against its will and the interests of its people."

"Heartening to know that Starfleet's prioritizing picking up weapons manufacturing," Hawthorne mutters.

Tyrell adds, equally sarcastic, "Yes. Soul affirming."

Her senior staff are going to be an endless feedback loop of smartassery. She hides her own grim amusement—the thought had crossed her mind, despite the careful packaging of concern in her orders—and tugs everyone's attention back to business. "Are your departments ready?"

There's affirmatives from Commander Salera for the Science department, and Tyrell for Medical. Hawthorne just snorts and says, "Objectively not but technically we've gotten through everything on the top priority of the list - though the list would have been more useful if we had a few more mission details," he waves the padd in the air. "Like whether or not 'Pret will get shot at.'"

Chester would like a few more mission details as well. Chiron is almost a complete mystery, protected during the war by a constant blockade—the Dominion was as chary about giving insight into its weapons manufacturing as any sane government might be. There's no information on leaders, leadership, or what the Chironians themselves look like. The sole point of contact has been an individual Karemma.

From the *Defiant's* logs, Chester isn't sure that trusting him, or his assessment, is wise.

"Intelligence doesn't think there's a significant chance of combat." She lets herself make a bit of a face to show what she thinks of that. "But we can all see exactly how much of that we've got on the situation."

“So we’ll definitely be shot at,” Hawthorne says. “Well, ‘Pret will do their best.”

She chooses to ignore that pessimism in favor of the lurking presence behind her. Subcommander Tanek appears to be unsubtly looking for padds that were not the ones handed to him. “I believe,” she says loudly to the table at large, “you’ve all heard about our Romulan liaison officer. This is Subcommander Tanek,” she gestures to the Romulan behind her, “who will be accompanying us. Subcommander Tanek, looking forward to working with you,” she says directly to her Romulan shadow. “If there’s anything you’d like to know, please ask me.”

“If there’s anything I’d like to know, I wouldn’t ask *you*,” Subcommander Tanek says, with no attempt at diplomacy.

Before she has to figure out an answer to that, Hawthorne butts in, “And if there’s anything you’d like to know about engineering, ask me instead of trying to find out yourself, I’d hate for you to blow anything up or,” he looks at all six foot eight and absurdly broad shoulders of Tanek, “try to fit yourself into a Jeffries tube.”

“Yes,” Tanek says, “I’ll be certain to listen to the poster child of Starfleet safety.”

“Subcommander,” starts Chester, quelling, but Hawthorne laughs.

“Goddamn right,” he says, with an emphatic nod and grin.

The rest of the table, who have fortunately not decided to be the most - let’s say *combative* people in the fleet, have been reviewing the data, and the table moves into a conversation about the nature of Chiron - whether the Chironians are at all involved in the request to the Federation, and whether the operations of the planet may be entirely automated. The discussion seems fairly civil, Subcommander Tanek’s disparaging comments about the quality of Starfleet Intelligence aside. There’s even a side conversation she catches, Hawthorne asking Salera for help with the matter synthesizers with regards to reviewing their ability to build biological products, to which she agrees, which - well, him reaching out to someone else on the crew has to be *something* of a good sign, right?

... Right?

The conversation wraps up, with plans in order to ensure they are ready for departure after the next full rotation.

“I suppose it would be too much to hope for that they need tubas.” Hawthorne snarks as he leaves.

She gets J’etris’s attention as her first officer is about to leave. “J’etris—a moment. Any other little emergencies I should be aware of?”

“None in the last two hours, Captain.” Chester makes a face. “We’re as ready as we’re going to be, under the circumstances.”

“Good. Good. And - make sure Hawthorne gets what he needs to stop the replicators making tubas, please?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m headed to Sickbay for a final review at Dr. Tyrell’s request. I’ll meet you on the Bridge for departure.”

“Yes sir,” says J’etris.

Chester gives her a tired smile as they part ways, J’etris headed for the Bridge and Chester to Sickbay. “Good job, Number One. Thank you.”

Of course, she gets only as far as the turbolift before someone else wants her attention; Counselor Rala steps in next to her before the doors close. “Good morning, Captain.”

Chester hesitates. Her conscience prickles guiltily. She turns to look down at the ship’s Counselor, who looks back up at her with the steady understanding gaze unique to psychological professionals and con artists. “Ah. Counselor Rala. I apologize; I haven’t had time to get to your message yet.”

“You and half the crew,” he says dryly. “You’re inspecting Sickbay next, I believe? I’ll come with you.”

“Certainly,” she says, while wishing dearly she could have put this off a little longer. “How are you settling in, Counselor? Any trouble with the ship’s systems or replicators?”

“Not yet,” he says, “though from the way Commander Hawthorne puts it, it’s very much an issue of *yet*.”

“I’m glad to hear it—though very much with Commander Hawthorne’s assessment in mind. How are the crew dealing with our newly accelerated schedule?”

“As well as can be expected,” he says. “With the exception of certain officers missing their first appointments.” He tilts his head with a wry smile, making it clear it’s a joke. She smiles back.

“I apologize for that, Counselor. Our earlier departure date caused some... friction.” She makes a face. “I’d offer to reschedule now, but with the ship in its present condition, I’m concerned that I’ll have to cancel once again.”

“Understandable,” he says, “under the circumstances, but I do not see much of a likelihood of said circumstances changing anytime soon.” He stops walking, making her pause too; they’re temporarily alone in the corridor. “Captain, you are under a great deal of pressure right now, particularly that of living up to the expectations of your crew.” *What expectations*, Chester thinks, with the memory of that dismal briefing weighing on her, but now isn’t the time for that kind of humor. “I know it’s tempting to confront that with the same kind of work schedule you maintained during the war, but that’s unsustainable, and you will have to find something sustainable. Might I suggest scheduling the appointment and working around it? Neglecting your own health is not going to help.”

He is very kind, not mentioning the *You're less than a year out of one of the most traumatic things that can happen to an officer, and I need to make sure you're not going to fly the ship into a supernova* part of his concern. She can hear the warning all the same.

It's not like he's wrong, either.

"I'll take that under advisement," she says, darts an amused glance upward at the turbolift lights. "And I'll hope that the ship cooperates."

"So will we all," he says, just as dryly amused. "And in the meantime—do remember to take some time for yourself, Captain. We're not at war anymore."

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Her senior officers briefed—some, it seems, in spite of themselves—Engineering at the tentative ready, they can head out. Chester's heart beats hard in her chest, the fizzle of nerves she's been pressing to the back of her mind all week rising back up. Her first command. The *Interpreter* is *her* ship, and now they're actually leaving the station, heading into the mostly-unknown, to do all the things a Starfleet ship is supposed to. Explore, make new friends. Offer help.

It feels *real*.

She's been in command plenty during the war, taking the conn of the *Bedivere* in Captain Steenburg's absence. Taking command as the *Bedivere* spiraled to its doom.

But the *Interpreter* is *hers*. Captain Diane Chester, of the USS *Interpreter*, a brand-new captain with a brand-new ship and a crew that doesn't trust her or each other, a ship that's still working out the bugs, finding the steps between what she was meant to be and what she's now supposed to be. A half-broken ship, and a crew that's still licking their wounds. And here she is, captain, green as grass and with her own barely-healed scars, and she needs to use this voyage to make something out of all of them. Or start the process of becoming something better.

It seems abruptly insurmountable.

She's faced worse, she reminds herself, and then the bridge doors slide open and none of it seems important anymore. All the problems—the tubas, her crew's suspicions, the tangled mess of malfunctions, Tanek—snap into perspective. The *Interpreter* is on her maiden voyage. She and her crew will all make sure this works, because there are people out there who need them to make it work.

Standing on the bridge, looking at it, at all her bridge crew looking back at her, it's like stepping aboard for the first time. This is *her* ship. The moment she's been dreaming about since she was old enough to stand on the roof deck and try to identify the shuttles coming into Starfleet Academy over the Bay.

She is a Captain, and this is her ship. She waits another moment, looking over the bridge. It's a throwback to the old Galaxy-Class school of design, warm and carpeted, wood accents and paneling. The palette is shifted a few shades deeper; blue and chocolate instead of pink and gray. It's a big bridge, still the bridge of a warship, with a plethora of redundant stations. It, too, still smells new. No plasma fires, scorched metal or burnt hair, the smells even the best of their advanced technology couldn't entirely erase.

She saw the early mockups of what this bridge was supposed to look like. What it was supposed to be, the drafts marked *Kongming Class*, rather than *Armistice*. That had been sleek, all shining floors and metals, no soft wall paneling or carpet—crisp and clean and easily cleaned. It's changed a lot, because the war ended.

She can only hope the rest of them do, too.

She draws a deep breath and makes her way down to the Captain's chair. She's sat in plenty before; babysitting, Captain Steenburg used to say. They have never been *hers*.

This is hers. Trepidation flutters in her chest. This feels *too* big. Too important. No one hands a brand new captain a state of the art warship.

She puts it aside. She decided she was done being afraid after the *Bedivere*.

“Commander J’etris,” she says.

“Yes sir?”

“Is crew rotation complete?”

“Yes sir. All departments report ready.”

“Lieutenant Iverat, has the station cleared us for departure?”

“Yes sir,” says Lieutenant Iverat.

“Then open a shipwide channel.” She does not want to admit to anyone how many times she's practiced this, in the mirror, pacing her quarters, running through it as she went to meet Sotek and Jel'n. She takes a deep breath, fixing her eyes on the starfield on the viewscreen. “Good afternoon everyone. This is Captain Chester. We will be departing Deep Space Nine for the Gamma Quadrant, where there is a world that has asked for our assistance. It will be one of the first peaceful missions into the Gamma Quadrant by a Federation starship, and I believe there could be no more appropriate ship, no better crew, than this one.

“Many cultures attach special significance to the maiden voyage of a ship. The journey we begin today is no exception. Indeed, the path we're starting down isn't just that of a new ship's career—it is, finally, that of peace.

“The *Interpreter* was built to be a warship. This is clear in every line of her construction, from flight deck to nacelles. She, like all of us aboard her, was profoundly shaped by the Dominion War. But we have made the peace we fought for so desperately; and with that peace, we can return to what we aspire to be.

“The *Interpreter* has been reshaped into an instrument of that peace, for aid and exploration. To offer an open hand to our former foes, to show them and ourselves that the dark times we have passed through have no right to our destinies; to act, at last, on the better angels of our nature.

Compassion is a fundamental quality of sentient beings. So is curiosity. It is time to make space for these things again, untrammelled by fear and grief and necessity. The *Interpreter* has been given another chance, to be what she was not made to be, to be the best of what she can be—and so have we.

“And together, we will seek out new life and new civilizations—but also old foes who may become new friends, and offer to the peoples we meet those three most important words: let me help.

“Helm, plot a course through the wormhole.”

The captain’s words speak of the retrofit of the *Armistice* -class - of ‘Pret - in lofty turns that beautifully paint over the madcap decisions made - and the tubas. It should be easy to be cynical about the words, that’s all they are, words.

But -

But they are exactly the kind of words he would want to hear - the ideals he has always believed in for Starfleet, the reason that he joined.

And those words are in the mouth of a fascist parasite on Starfleet.

He grinds his teeth together. Words are just words.

The secret police will use whatever they can to achieve their ends. Words are easy. Even words that are at the core of the ideals they spit on.

He forces himself to relinquish his grip on the railing of the catwalk. It doesn’t matter what pretty words the captain can speak as lies through her teeth about their mission, about ‘Pret. He knows his ship, and they - and everyone onboard who would like to stay not exploded - need him. He has work to do.

Chester sits in the command chair and listens to the sounds of a healthy ship at warp, and lets herself believe this can be the future. They *can* go back to what Starfleet was supposed to be. The *Interpreter*’s venture into the Gamma Quadrant won’t just be about stabilizing the region; it’ll be about exploring again. A return to the missions Starfleet *used* to run, something where strategy and tactics will finally take a back seat.

She listens to it, and realizes the last time she sat in the Captain’s seat, it was on the *Bedivere* . It makes something lurch sickly inside of her. She takes a deep breath and thinks of Captain Steenburg—the *Bedivere*’s commanding officer, and her mentor. Bonnie would be proud of her, and glad of the peace, that missions like this are even happening, and so soon, too.

Keep moving, Diane, she’d said, shortly after the death of Commander Faisal had propelled an unprepared Chester into the position of XO. *Don’t let what we’ve lost hold you in the past, because you’re needed in the present. Keep moving, because the universe certainly won’t stop.*

It was brutal wartime advice, but it still applies. If she dwells on what they’ve lost, she’ll drag this whole crew with her back into that mentality. She can’t do that, and she has to let the *Bedivere* and all the dead rest, because this is the future they died for, and she has to make it a better one.

Well, Bonnie , she thinks, *here I am. Moving.*

Piper’s fingers dig into the ash of the fields of Mordor.

He looks up, up to the fire and glow of Mount Doom. It is so far away - he doesn’t even know how far.

Of course, it isn’t actually far at all. All of this is contained within the bounds of the holodeck, clever work making it seem far away. The holodecks, fortunately, are not generating simulacrum of tubas. His shift is over, he has a full set of shifts before he’ll be back on shift and he has to fix whatever fresh problems arise when they actually get ready to drop out of warp at Chiron IV on this mad assignment. He doesn’t let his engineers work more than their regulation shifts, and he holds himself to the same standard - as chief engineer, he, even more than any of his team, cannot afford to make the kind of mistakes brought on by overexhaustion.

And he is exhausted.

He’d told Marbog he would sleep, and he wasn’t going to break that promise. But there are some things batarangs can’t fix. Usually, he would

play through this program with Marbog, taking a different path - Marbog as Merry, him as Pippin. But Marbog isn't here. And maybe the physical exhaustion of pulling himself up the cliffs of Mt Doom, something in that desperate struggle, will get him out of his head and be enough to let him keep his promise to Marbog and sleep properly on his offshift.

"Mr. Frodo?"

Sam is also a hologram. Piper is perfectly alone in here.

Entirely alone.

He pulls himself forward through the ash as Sam does, and -

- and at the last, he lets himself fall into Sam's arms.

It is as though Sam's arms wrapping around him pushes the sob from his chest, and once it's out it's followed by another, and another, and another, as it all -

As it all -

Mount Doom is so far away, so far he doesn't know how far, and he has to get there or die trying, and he doesn't know when and where the eyes of Mordor would fall on him, and he is *alone* -

He doesn't know, he doesn't know the name of his enemy, he doesn't know what eyes are out there, he doesn't even know if he's walking directly into the enemy's hands here, and even if he does manage to stop one of their plans there will be another and another and another, and how could he possibly think he could stop this and go home -

"Do you remember the Shire, Mr. Frodo?"

Do you remember why you're here? Do you remember what Starfleet means to you? Do you remember how it's home?

The Starfleet he had signed up for, the Starfleet that had inspired him, reaching out into the galaxy with curiosity, with compassion, reaching out to embrace those different than them, not to rule but to *help* -

He is a Starfleet engineer.

"Yes." The sobs begin to fade in his chest. "Yes, I still remember the Shire, Sam. Thank you.

"Pret, please end program."

Chapter End Notes

Piper and holo Sam Gamgee angst doodle, one of the early character moments I thought of before I started playing him:
<https://squireofgeekdom.tumblr.com/post/711439035970781184/i-should-introduce-my-uss-interpreter-character>

Chapter 8

When they come out of warp, the most immediately noticeable thing is the Breen and Ferengi ships onscreen - large cargo ships. The planet itself, by contrast, is relatively drab, appearing as an opaque grey marble of swirling atmosphere.

Lt. Commander Salera speaks from the science station. "The visible atmospheric cover is large scale cloud formations, rather than purposeful shielding. There are a large number of lifeforms, but largely distant from the manufacturing facilities."

The Breen and Ferengi are very likely here for the same reason the *Interpreter* is, and if she were the one sitting on a decommissioned Dominion weapons factory, Chester would be deeply concerned about all the circling vultures ganging up on her. As concerning as the Breen presence is, the Chironians are her priority—not picking a fight with the possible competition. "Lieutenant, hail the planet."

The Karemma appears onscreen, looking flustered. A glance around the office around him shows a variety of control panels and tech that are clearly not designed to be operated by humanoid hands. Whoever's meant to be in this work space, it's not him.

Much as she suspects that he might not be the person who ought to be negotiating with them.

He's talking before she can introduce them. "You must be Starfleet - we've been very busy today." His delivery is that of an old Earth furniture salesman. "Seems like a lot of people want what we have to offer, I hope you're ready to negotiate."

Tanek mutters behind her, "I hope you're ready to be taken for all you're worth, whatever little that is."

Chester does not react. She's going to have to get used to ignoring his commentary. "I'm Captain Diane Chester, of the Federation starship *Interpreter*. Your initial message indicated you were interested in joining the Federation; we're here in response to that request."

"I am Orthrax, the representative of the planet Chiron," he says. "There are a hundred million souls on the planet in need of safety in this strange new world. We have been offered economic protection by the Ferengi, physical protection by the Breen. What does Starfleet offer?"

"I am authorized to negotiate treaties including defense," she starts, "depending on what the Chironians want. These may include membership in the Federation, but that is not a requirement or a guarantee."

"What do you want to do with our factories?"

This seems a bit of a non sequitur, but she takes it in stride. "What happens with the factories will be up to the discretion of the Chironians. We're here because you requested help, not to take advantage of your resources."

She means it to be reassuring, but Orthrax looks upset. That's suspicious. Is he expecting to derive some kind of personal benefit from this? "What are the Chironians hoping for from us? How can we be of assistance?"

Orthrax wrings his hands, the practiced air dropping from his speech. "We're not safe without the Dominion. We need protection. Can you provide us with that, Captain?"

"We will be able to provide protection while we negotiate," she assures. "But we will need to know—" *More. Anything aside from your very evident fear, and the absence of the Chironians*— "about the situation, and what the Federation can do to help. Chironian self-determination is of the utmost importance to us."

Orthrax wrings his hands again, and then brightens, clearly having an idea. "Do you want a tour? The others were *much* more enthusiastic after a tour."

"Certainly." If nothing else, it might give her a chance to meet the *actual* Chironians.

And these factories. He seems eager to be rid of them, or to hand them over to someone else. Is that profit, or real fear driving him?

Orthrax offers coordinates. She accepts, hesitates, contemplating her next actions.

"Lieutenant, hail the Breen and the Ferengi." The *Interpreter's* presence alone is, if not a threat, a statement of Federation interest. A large and well-armed one. She doesn't want anyone getting nervous while they're down there. When Lieutenant Iverat indicates they're transmitting, she says, "This is Captain Diane Chester, of the Federation Starship *Interpreter*. We have no hostile intentions and are here to negotiate with the Chironians, who have requested our protection. I surmise they have made much the same request of everyone present in orbit, and I have every faith in our ability to cooperate to provide it."

There is no response. "Friendly neighborhood," murmurs J'tetris.

"Lieutenant Fult," says Chester to the Tactical Officer. "You have the conn. J'tetris, Tanek, Salera, you're with me." She pauses and considers the potential state of a planet after Dominion occupation. "Have Dr. Tyrell and Commander Hawthorne join us in the transporter room."

She hesitates a moment about Tanek, but excluding him from their first negotiations will cause more trouble than it will save. She'll have to trust that the Tal Shiar instill some sense of professionalism in their agents, despite his performance in the meeting this morning. And, perhaps, make it clear that disrupting normal operations will not be tolerated.

They arrive at the transporter room at the same time Hawthorne does.

"Captain," he starts, "should I send down a drone before we transport?"

It's not an unreasonable suggestion, though she's not sure if he's offering to be helpful or to try and avoid an away mission. "No," she says. "It's a good thought, but I don't want to put them off."

He doesn't seem too off-put himself, just nodding.

"Has your team managed to stop the, ah, tubas?"

"Oh, yes, we have," he says absently, with the air of someone already thinking about the next half-dozen issues to be solved. "I'll be working with Commander Salera," he nods in her direction as she arrives in the transporter room, "on any bugs with the replication of organics."

"Very good," she says, as they all step onto the transporter pad.

As the lights of the transporter blur past her, she sees a flicker of six-legged movement across the floor of the transporter room—a Cardassian vole. Apparently Deep Space Nine has shared its chronic infestation.

Her profoundly justified curse is lost in the hum of the transporter.

You'd think the years at the Starfleet Academy on Earth would have gotten him used to being on planets, but after having been raised on a space station and having done most of his work in ships and other space stations, his brain still tends to default to enclosed spaces. Even the holodeck doesn't quite seem to acclimate him. Maybe if he makes it on the Interpreter long enough, he'll get used to beaming down to planets and looking out at wide green spaces and horizons and *sky*.

The cloud formations are so thick that if he doesn't quite look up, it's almost like a grey ceiling. That makes it a little less disorienting.

And there is certainly plenty to look at down here.

In the beautiful green spaces, there are gold horses - *not* horses, he amends at the sight of the three horns and the too-large eyes, but something like horses.

Well, it's not quite Rohan, but he does smile a little.

Marbog, of course, would kick him for his humanoid-centrism in assuming these are not the local sapients, ('Hey, the Mearas were intelligent.' he's already internally retorting to imaginary Marbog,) so he adjusts his thinking and turns to the science officer, who already has her tricorder out.

"Lt Salera, do these life signs," he tilts his head to the beings, "match what you detected in orbit?"

"Yes." She pivots to scan the herd. "This does appear to be the dominant species on the planet."

"That explains the equipment in the control room," the Captain murmurs to Commander J'etris. "So what's Orthax's role in this, I wonder?"

Orthax himself comes hurrying up at that moment, a man of typical height for his species, though a lot more anxious than any of the Karemma in the recorded encounters that Piper's seen. "Captain, so good to see you. Now, the Ferengi and Breen are already...getting impatient, so the tour is urgent—you'll understand much, much better."

"Understood," says the Captain, but she's looking over his shoulder at the herd of gold horses, who are circling closer and closer. "But I'd like to talk to the Chironians as well. This *is* their planet, and you've yet to make your own role here particularly clear, Mr. Orthax."

"That's not the important thing," says Orthax, with a nervous glance at the not-horses - Chironians, presumably.

"Yes," says the Captain, her voice going very dry, "so you have said. Unfortunately, Starfleet regulations require me to ascertain the stance of all parties on this planet before proceeding with negotiations."

For a moment, Orthax looks worried. "Captain, I really think you should see the facilities here before making any hasty decisions."

"I'm in no danger of being hasty here, Mr. Orthax," says the Captain, with a tolerant humor that's miles from the suspicion Piper's feeling at the way Orthax is trying to rush them.

Orthax, as if he hopes he can just distract her, immediately turns them to the other sight on the planet - the absolute city of a factory they are next to. "Come! Come! Let me show you the factory."

The Captain won't be distracted. She tips her head at the approaching horses. "Are those the Chironians?"

"Ah, yes, unfortunately. That one is Fleetfoot." He gestures to the one in the lead, a gesture that's as much shooing as introduction. "He's one of the more social."

Unfortunately?

The Captain does not turn to the factories. She turns towards the Chironian. He's about the same height as an Earth horse would be—or at least as the *holograms* of Earth horses Piper's seen have been—with bright, intelligent green eyes and pale mane and tail. The same hair feathers the bottom portion of his legs, covering where a hoof would be.

"Hello," the Captain says, with an easy smile up at the taller being. "My name is Diane Chester. I'm here from the United Federation of Planets to provide assistance. Is there any way we can help you?"

Fleetfoot moves closer as she stands very still, lowering his nose to whuffle into her hair—again, much like an Earth horse. She looks startled

for a moment, then smiles. "It's nice to meet you, too, Fleetfoot."

"They have to go to the factory," Orthax says, with apparent exasperation, to Fleetfoot. "They're here for a tour."

Fleetfoot appears unmoved. Piper is also unmoved.

"Fleetfoot - what is it you want to happen with these factories?" he asks Fleetfoot, not looking at Orthax. "What is *your* goal in negotiating with the Federation?"

As he speaks, Fleetfoot's attention turns to him - to his hair, in fact, just like the Captain. As the intimidatingly large muzzle whuffles gently overhead, he hears, *What is the Federation?*

Okay, they *really* had not been involved in this ask. This was going to be complicated. "The Federation is a ... well, a federation of lots of different planets and different kinds of people, in, uh," do they even know about the wormhole? "In another part of the galaxy, who have come together with shared goals - like exploration and for mutual support -"

Fleetfoot's sniffing reaches his cybernetics, and Fleetfoot raises a hoof - not a hoof, there isn't a hoof in that long feathering, it's *not a hoof, it's definitely tentacles!*

And then the sparks start flying.

Chapter 9

FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!

The surge of energy from Fleetfoot's tentacles rushes through his cybernetics, everything is *too fast!*

"FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!" Piper frantically backs away - Gull flying rapidly away as well.

Tentacles belong in the ocean!

"No no no," he distantly registers Orthrax saying. "He's not a tool."

Damn right!

"Please don't do that," the Captain says, "he's fragile, our bodies aren't made for that kind of current—Mr. Hawthorne, are you all right?"

Piper *rankles* at that. Right, *she* thinks he's a tool, and she's protecting Section 31's investment.

"Please don't shoot," Orthrax says, pleading.

Looking around, Piper sees blast marks on the walls of the factory. The rest of the away team seems to notice them at the same time. Whatever tours had happened here before, they hadn't gone as well.

"No it's okay," the Captain says, reassuring, her hands held out from her sides and fingers spread, showing she's not armed or aggressive, "no harm done, we were only startled. Commander Hawthorne needs that technology to—to function. We're not hurting *anyone*, especially not over a misunderstanding."

Piper is currently evaluating the state of that technology he needs to stay functional - apart from the sudden burst of speed, nothing seems to be altered or burnt out. He'll do an extra scan when he gets back to 'Pret, in the meantime - well, he'd like to stay away from those tentacles.

"Commander Hawthorne?" the Captain asks. "How are you?"

"It's fine, for now," he says, tersely.

The surge of speed is giving him a suspicion about the nature of the factories, and those controls that aren't operated by humanoid hands...

"The Dominion built the factories," says Orthax, apparently now scared into something like cooperation by the near miss with Hawthorne's prosthetics. Or still afraid that Starfleet will be as trigger happy as the other tourists. Chester supposes he's got some cause, with those blast marks on the walls. "They're designed for the Chironians. What happened with your officer—that's why. They have an affinity for technology, an ability to do far finer manipulations of current and components than you or I could, Captain, and the Dominion... well, they're nothing if not resourceful. They used them as slave labor, Captain. And if the factories stay, if they're still here, and we don't have protection, it'll just be the Orion Syndicate, or the Breen, or the Ferengi. We're totally undefended. Please, we need your help."

Chester is looking around, seeing the factories, the green fields, the leaden sky. There is a certainty growing in her, a heavy dread, roused by Hawthorne's explanation of the Federation, and cemented by the Karemna's fear. "This was a prewarp society, wasn't it," she says, her voice very bleak even to her ears.

"Yes," says Orthax. "Look at the sky, Captain. The cloud never lifts. As far as the Chironians are concerned, the stars don't exist."

Chester looks at where Hawthorne is approaching the Chironian again, apparently undaunted by his previous encounter. She likes him a lot better in that moment. For his part, Fleetfoot looks happy to be approached, and that...

...that makes her heart hurt. Because after the unimaginable horror of the Dominion descending on a prewarp society, enslaving them for its industrial aims, now with his species' fate hanging in the balance of these negotiations, Fleetfoot is still willing to approach an alien. To try to make a connection. It's a measure of faith that none of them have earned, especially after the horrors these people have endured.

"We have to respect their wishes," she says, hearing her own voice as if from a distance. "Because of what the Dominion did, that's more important than ever. They deserve to have the self-determination that was taken from them. You may have their best interests at heart," she's not sure he does, she wonders about his own role here during the Dominion occupation of this world, "but you can't make this decision for them, Mr. Orthax."

"They're a target in a universe full of predators, Captain," says Orthax. "They can't defend themselves, and they don't understand what's going on. You'd just be leaving them to the next empire."

Chester sighs, her shoulders slumping. "I know," she says.

He presses on. "The Dominion was here for hundreds of years. It's all they remember. They don't have a unified government. They've never *needed* one, not before the Dominion came."

He's getting to something. Chester just watches him, feeling the actual reason they're here, his real reason for sending that signal, is lurking just around the corner.

"They're not safe with the factories here," he says. "You need to see them. You'll understand. As long as these are standing," he gestures to

the factory, "they'll be a target."

Chester stares at the factory, her mind churning. The scope of the damage done is hard to grasp, just standing here in a pleasant green field, but she knows it's extensive. It's generations of trauma, of lost culture and way of life. There's a reason there's an exception to the Prime Directive for the purpose of repairing a previous violation, though damned if she knows how you can expect to actually repair *this*.

She wants to ask Orthrax what his role is in this, because she very much doubts he was an innocent bystander. But recriminations will not help the Chironians. Right now, the priority is to make sure they're safe. That no one is going to get grabby about these factories, and drive them right back into them.

Speaking of which... "One moment," she says, stepping away. "Chester to *Interpreter*. Status report."

"*All quiet here, sir,*" says Lieutenant Fult. The Tellarite sounds pretty disappointed about that, like she's spoiling for a fight with the Breen. "*They're sitting tight and looking innocent, and we're behaving ourselves.*"

"Very good, Lieutenant. See to it things stay that way. I think some people are going to find this planet pretty tempting."

"*I'll make sure they don't steal the silverware while your back is turned, Captain.*"

Chester lets out a breath of amusement. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Chester out."

At least she can take a break from worrying about *that* for a few hours.

While the Captain is on comms and their Romulan liaison continues to make an ass of himself, Piper makes his way over to Lt Salera.

"I'm an engineer, not a biologist -" he starts, "Can you tell if what he's saying is making sense? With the biology of the Chironians - that they evolved like this on a planet without technology?"

Salera considers. "Fleetfoot, may I scan you?" she asks, holding out a tricorder.

"For what?" says Fleetfoot's voice in their heads.

"Now, don't worry," Orthrax says, looking at the tricorder and back at Fleetfoot. "They aren't going to put anything in you."

A chill runs down Piper's partially-cybernetic spine. *What?*

Fleetfoot nods to Salera, and she begins to scan him with her tricorder.

Piper steps towards Orthrax, and makes an effort to get his throat to produce words, "*What* did you mean, 'putting things in -'"

Orthrax pulls him aside, outside Fleetfoot's hearing. "The Dominion - did experiments. Tests to better control them."

Piper's teeth grind in silent fury.

"Implanted tracking devices - attempted behavior modification - and other experiments I didn't understand -" Orthrax looks at what must be readily apparent anger on his face. "I've done what I could for the ones who survived."

The ones who survived.

Piper's whole body is cold; like metal in a black box in space. A lump blocks his throat and frost chills thoughts in the process of becoming words. He speaks haltingly. "I've had ... some experience, with - with - implants. I - we - Starfleet - we will do everything we can. For any - all remaining survivors."

"Then I hope you win the negotiations," Orthrax says, with all apparent sincerity.

But apparent is just that, appearances. He has no way of knowing what, if anything, Orthrax says is true, and given his *apparent* role on the planet, Piper suspects him of being more complicit in these 'experiments' than he's saying.

Speaking of verifying if what he said was true -

"Fleetfoot's front feet generate their own electrical charges," Salera says, having completed her scan. "Much like Earth's electric eels. It seems most probable that they have independently evolved this mechanism, perhaps for similar purposes to other species with strong bioelectricity, without native tech, and it has since been repurposed."

Some bioelectricity that could speed up electronics, like his cybernetics - yes, he could certainly see how that could be 'repurposed'. And if they had their own natural purpose for using them, perhaps it made sense that some of them enjoyed applying that to the factories - when it wasn't enforced as slave labor.

He glares up at the hulking grey silhouettes of the factories.

Whatever happens next, no one would be using those buildings to make slaves of the Chironians again, Piper thinks, looking back at Fleetfoot, who continues to make his brave stand in front of the building.

He looks back around - the Captain is off comms, and watching the conversation.

No. No one was going to get an excuse to *put anything else* in the people of this planet. Not Breen, not Ferengi, and certainly not Starfleet's

parasite.

Chester watches this exchange, very carefully keeping her reactions off her face. She should have expected this. Or, to be more accurate, she had expected this, some combination of these things. But it still hurts to see, and fury bubbles in her chest as she watches.

It isn't right. It isn't fair. And the scale of what's happened here is overwhelming. It cannot *be* repaired, because it happened. The very least they can do is help the *recovery*, and there's a difference.

"How have the negotiations with the Breen and the Ferengi proceeded, Mr. Orthax?" she asks, clasping her hands behind her back. If she sounds a little cold—well so be it. There are other ways she could sound right now, and she's sure he would appreciate them even less.

"The negotiations with the Ferengi were... short," he says. "They were interested, but the Breen arrived."

That doesn't sound like it was a friendly interaction. "And the Breen were insistent, I take it."

He nods. "They offered us protection... and promised not to attack themselves. On the condition we operated the factories for them."

"On the condition the *Chironians* operated the factories for them," she says, her voice carefully bland.

He ducks his head, acknowledging this. "That was when I contacted the Federation."

She thinks of his complicity, and the conversation going on just over her shoulder. "We're not interested in becoming the next colonial power here," she says, and for all the evenness of her voice, her anger still translates; he darts a startled, nervous look at her. "But we will help. The Chironians deserve better."

His relief is palpable. "The factories need to be destroyed. Otherwise they'll just be targets for the next power that comes along."

"And what good will that do?" murmurs Tanek, though not as quietly as she wishes he would. "This is a culture of ready-made victims, Captain. They won't be able to have anything like self-determination until they've had several wars about it."

"That will do, Mr. Tanek," says Chester, acidically, and turns her back on him. "Mr. Orthax, I think you'd better show us these factories." *And maybe we can figure out how to burn them flat.*

Tanek isn't wrong about the short term nature of the solution. Word of a species that can manipulate energy like this gets out, and everyone will be interested. The Federation will find itself treading the fine line between protector and colonizer, again.

Chester suspects it won't be the first or the last planet in the Gamma Quadrant to present this quandary.

"Afterward," Orthax goes on, "maybe we could set something up for them, like a nature reserve?"

"Nature reserves are for non-sentients," says Tanek, sharp. Chester doesn't disagree, though she raises her eyebrows at him.

"We'll deal with that problem when it arises," she says. "For now, we need a plan."

Orthax gestures them toward a ground transport, large enough to accommodate them and Fleetfoot—who seems deeply disinclined to be left behind.

"So," says Tanek, the moment they're all settled, and Chester abruptly regrets her choice of seat—she can't step on his foot to shut him up. Cultural differences or no cultural differences, she's pretty sure she can get her point across with enough pressure. "You were their overseer under the Dominion. Why, precisely, have you decided their welfare matters *now*?"

"I was never a cruel man," says Orthax, not looking anywhere but the controls, his shoulders hunched. Chester glances sidelong at him. She doesn't trust that statement. By Tanek's expression, he's about as unimpressed as she is.

Orthax, whatever he may say, was complicit in what happened here. Perhaps his desire to atone is genuine; perhaps it's for his own profit. Either way, her job is to protect the interests of the Chironians as best she can. The immediate problem is the Breen, if what Orthax has told them is true.

They have so little information here. She glances over her shoulder at Fleetfoot. They don't have a unified government or a representative system. How the hell do they know they're acting in their best interest? The removal of the factories will remove the immediate temptation from other powers. But then what?

One step at a time. "Why haven't you destroyed the factories yourselves?" she asks. "I can't believe the Dominion didn't leave you anything to *do* that with."

"They use geothermal energy," says Orthax. "They tap directly into the planet's mantle. The kind of explosives that would be needed to destroy them would cause immeasurable damage to this world, violent geological activity, and bury this valley under lava. The loss of life would be incalculable."

Hawthorne, jammed between Tanek and J'etris, pipes up, his voice vehement. "Fine. We'll find a way to make them useless *anyway*. We're not leaving this planet until we do."

"You would have to remove them totally," says Orthax, in the leaden tones of someone who doesn't see a way out. "Even with scraps, someone could..." He shrugs, angry and sad and Chester finds herself believing his claim at least a little more. "You'd have to leave only bare ground," he finishes, and there is a bleakness to the statement that makes it the first one he's made that she believes.

Speaking of the Breen... Chester taps her commbadge. "Chester to *Interpreter*. Status?"

This time, all that answers her is dead air. "Chester to *Interpreter*. "

Still nothing.

"J'etris?"

The Klingon woman nods, tries her own badge with the same lack of result. She shakes her head at Chester, who turns to Orthax. "Is communications interference normal in this area?" she asks.

"No, but there is a communications array in the factory. You may be able to get a signal out there," he says, and Chester glances up instinctively at the lowering clouds, as if she can get some sense of what's happening to her ship and her people past their dense barrier.

Chapter 10

Previously

Lieutenant Fult crosses her arms and frowns at the viewer, uncomfortable in the command seat that's built for a human—a *tall* human. She isn't tall, even for her species, and she's getting too old for this garbage. "I want to know whose cute idea it was to drop a jamming buoy," she tells the Bridge at large, "and then I want to have a few words with them."

Comms are down. The Captain is still on the planet. A new captain, too, inexperienced and prone to fits of idealism, which in Fult's experience has an unfortunate overlap with fits of stupidity. She should have objected more to so many senior officers beaming down together. This isn't her first babysitting mission, but it works better when you keep the youngsters where you can see them.

Comms are down, but at least the brand new shiny sensors are punching through the interference just fine. It's nice to have one thing on this boat working.

"Sir," says Lieutenant T'Sandi from their place at Ops, "the Ferengi are pulling out of the system."

Human idiom permeates Starfleet. Everyone picks a bit of it up. Fult thinks about the one about rats leaving a sinking ship. It sounds apt, even though she's never seen a non-holographic rat in her life. "Sounds like someone knows something we don't," she says. "Shields up. Red alert. Comms, get me the landing party."

T'Sandi nods, getting to work, but Ensign Kotan looks at her from the helm, frowning. "Sir, that could be seen as hostile action."

She gives the young Bajoran a smile that's not so much reassuring as satisfied. "You don't get to be my age by being considerate of the Breen's feelings, Ensign. The profit margin has to be *really* good for the Ferengi to stick around after the shooting starts, and the Breen know it. They probably just gave them an unfriendly heads up."

He nods, chagrined.

The red alert sirens whoop to life. But at Ops, T'Sandi frowns. "We have a problem. Shields aren't responding."

Fult contacts Engineering. "Vulst, talk to me."

She doesn't need to see Lieutenant Vulst's face to know the Catian's expression—she can practically hear how flat her ears must be to her skull. "It's the *kssthsst* regenerating shields! The generators online and the port generator created a surge that fried the starboard one, and the resulting overload rebounded and fried *it*. I'm going to need at least an hour to get them functional!"

"Comms are jammed," says Iverat. "I can't reach the landing party, and we won't be able to get a distress signal out."

Fult eyes the approaching Breen ships. They don't have an hour. "I suppose we need to test out the ablative armor sometime," she says.

The *Interpreter* was built to be a warship, to take a beating and keep on coming. It looks like they're going to be putting that to the test.

Now

Orthrax describes the communications array in the factory - presumably how he had communicated with the ship before, Piper thinks, and how the initial call to Starfleet had gone out. He's been with Starfleet and heard enough stories to not discount the power and probability of *interference* - if it is interference, the communications center is probably the best chance of cutting through it - maybe with some tinkering.

But if it's not just interference, if something has gone wrong on 'Pret - an attack or sabotage - well. It's probably not long before trouble comes down here.

Orthrax is leading the Captain and the others to a set of small land vehicles pointed in the direction of the factories; Piper follows. So too does Fleetfoot, jumping into the jeep with confident bravery, and a drop in the pit of Piper's stomach.

Yes, they may need something to defend themselves, but he certainly won't be using any weapons made by the processes in this factory - however it 'uses' the Chironians, he doesn't trust it one bit. No, if it comes to that he'll have to put something together from the equipment in the factory. That he can do.

As they get closer to the walls of the factory, the blast marks become more obvious. Orthrax notes the crew staring. "Ah... there was a ... misunderstanding, regarding the Breen's refrigerated suits, and the Chironian ... interaction."

No wonder Orthrax had been worried about Fleetfoot having touched his cybernetics. At least Starfleet hadn't broken out the phasers.

"Was anyone hurt?" Captain Chester asks.

"Only minor injuries, thankfully."

"We may be able to provide medical aid, if needed," Captain Chester looks at Boz, currently preoccupied looking at Fleetfoot's scan results on Salera's tricorder.

Piper, however, is preoccupied with Orthrax's mention of the refrigerated suits. "Do the Breen know the factory is geothermal?"

Captain Chester looks at him oddly, which twigs anxiety in his brain. "Do you think there could have been additional damage?"

Piper frowns, as if considering, as Orthrax answered. "I believe I explained some of the details to them," he wipes at his forehead. "It was... something of a stressful meeting."

And a cold adapted species was still interested in pursuing it, presumably as a long term project. That was... interesting.

But potential problems with the Breen would have to wait until they had any idea of what was going on with 'Pret and the Breen ships in space, and for that, they needed to get into the factory.

The factory is more like a city than a single building, all single storey—built for beings that don't use stairs, Chester guesses. Every so often, their comms fizz softly with static, but they're clearly being jammed.

She's got a guess about the reason for that—the Ferengi can be plenty ambitious, but of the two groups in orbit, the Breen are far more likely to get grabby about a Federation starship in addition to a weapons facility. But the *Interpreter* was built to fight; Lieutenant Fult is an experienced officer, and there is nothing she can do about it, not from here, not until she can get to a working comm. Or, failing that, make sure the Breen have nothing *to* acquire on this planet.

It's hard, trusting her new command to an officer she knows only by reputation. Until very recently, it was *her* in that position, hands-on and doing her job when Captain Steenburg couldn't be there; being on the other side of it is distinctly unpleasant. Let go, let your people do their jobs. The hardest lesson of command, Steenburg had been fond of saying, but she'd had a lot of other things she'd called the hardest lesson of command, too, and Chester has often felt that command is almost *all* hard lessons.

Her grim mood is shared; Orthax is looking worried, and Fleetfoot is making a soft noise she's pretty sure is the Chironian equivalent of a whimper. She can't imagine the courage it must take for him to return to a place so intimately linked with his species' suffering.

They approach a rounded building at the center of the factory. This one has windows, and is easily the tallest structure in the whole complex. Fleetfoot makes a motion, drawing away from it.

Dr. Tyrell's tricorder hums to life. "That building is the only one with active power," he says, "and Fleetfoot here is responding to it." He tips the screen so Chester can see; there are charges moving up Fleetfoot's legs, far more powerful than when he first touched Hawthorne.

"Fleetfoot, are you all right?" she asks. "You don't need to do this, not if it will injure you."

It doesn't hurt. But it takes. He turns his head to fix her with a large frightened eye. *I want to come back out again.*

"They operated it themselves," says Orthax. "Except for the experiments. The Dominion wanted to make tools to replace them."

It takes, says Fleetfoot again, misery in his mental voice.

"Fleetfoot, you don't have to come in," says Chester.

I have to. Determination now. *I have to make sure you're safe.*

"Safe from what?" asks J'etris.

But things don't work very well in there. I need to be there to operate it. You cannot.

The concern on Salera's face is perceptible even to non-Vulcans. "Will it hurt you?"

Fleetfoot makes an odd gesture with neck and shoulders—at a guess, the Chironian equivalent. *It takes,* he says, *and you become tired.*

Like it's sapping their natural bioelectrical signals in order to function. Chester feels a little sick to her stomach, contemplating it. This entire factory is simply a way to extract the most use possible from the bodies of this world's people, using the heart of their own planet to do it. She glances at Hawthorne, worried; this must have unpleasant echoes for him of his own experiences in Dominion hands.

Fleetfoot's words about *'it takes'* have a chill grip on Hawthorne's spine as they step into the factory. Whatever happens, he has to destroy this place.

That chill only intensifies as he sees the space itself. The main control area is a kind of panopticon, a room full of screens of unfamiliar design.

"How do we disable it?" he asks Orthrax immediately.

"This is just one building - the different buildings make different things, in each one the Chironians would - interact with it mentally. We tried to turn it off as much as we could, but I don't know how to disable it entirely."

"You could blow it up." Tanek says dryly, because he thinks he's clever, apparently.

Captain Chester looks at him. "That would cause significant damage."

"*Earth* has survived a great deal of 'significant damage'."

“Ah -” Orthrax pulls up a map of the facility and the planet.

They all stare as the realization hits - the construction underlying the facility runs deep, deep into the planet.

“I believe that would cause - ah - a supervolcano,” says Orthrax.

“I do not want to test that hypothesis empirically,” Lt. Salera says, in the understatement of the year.

Well, fuck.

As Fleetfoot reaches out towards the controls for the lights, Piper sees that Fleetfoot’s feet are sending out electrical bursts, controlling the lighting instrument like he’s playing a musical instrument.

Lights flicker on across the building.

The lights come up.

And for a moment, all Chester can think of is Earth cockroaches. When her family had first bought the restaurant, it had been sitting empty for a few months. And cockroaches *love* restaurants. There had been one morning right after they’d moved in when she was five when she’d gone downstairs and called up the lights early on a winter morning, because she wanted to look at all of it again, and there’d been a dark wave of glossy scuttling bodies fleeing across the floor.

She’d managed to catch one of them, and it was probably for the best her father had been the first to come downstairs to see why the lights were on, because he’d let her keep it for a week, lecturing on the eusocial nature of cockroaches and how they were related to termites; then he’d talked her into letting it go, so it wouldn’t be lonely. She’d named it Bob, after her teacher, and for years afterward she imagined Bob having adventures in the walls with his friends. Dad had talked about how in the past getting rid of the cockroaches had meant killing them, and she’d made a face about that, because it sounded barbaric, and was very glad about modern repellants.

What happens when the lights come up is like that long-ago morning, except in reverse, and it’s not glossy little insect bodies, it’s much larger furry ones that suddenly turn and start coming toward them. Chester gets a good look at one and *wishes* it looked like a roach; it’s a large rat, with an unsettlingly humanoid face, and it and its buddies are converging on their position like they’re lunch.

“What are those?” she asks. “Are they a threat?”

“Yes, yes,” says Orthrax, his face going an unhealthy color. “Yes, they’re vermin, they *bite* .”

Fleetfoot seems less worried. He reaches for one of them and zaps it. It dies with a squeal, and he bends his head and starts to eat it. So much for the Chrionians being herbivores like Earth horses. Chester draws her phaser as Orthrax, the last of his courage failing him, bolts for the door. He doesn’t get far. Two of the rodents hurl themselves at him, jumping spectacularly and climbing to bury their teeth in his shoulder and arm.

Chester takes aim and stuns the rat on his shoulder. Except it doesn’t topple over stunned—it explodes. She gives the spot where it was a brief look of total horror, a mirror of Orthrax’s own spattered expression, then downgrades the setting on her phaser. Next to her, J’etris takes aim at two advancing rats and successfully stuns them. “Low power, wide field,” she says.

Chester and the rest of the landing party do the same.

It works, they drive them back while Hawthorne works frantically at the communications panels. His reward is a burst of static. “They’re working,” he reports.

“Well done, Commander,” says Chester, pivoting to deal with the next wave of rats. “Hail the *Interpreter* . I want to know what’s going on up there.”

There’s another screeching burst of static, Hawthorne saying, “Hawthorne to Interpreter, Interpreter please respond.”

But instead of Fult’s voice, or any response from a member of the crew, the response is clearly modulated, a language the universal translator hiccups over. “*This is Thot Prens of the Breen Confederacy. We have taken your ship. Surrender the planet, or your crew will be killed.*”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You have one hour,” Thot Prenn says. *“Respond with an assurance of surrender, or we will destroy your ship. Extraneous communications will not be tolerated.”*

And the comm line closes.

Captains don't show panic. They most certainly do not say 'oh fuck', which is what's currently on the top of Chester's mind. She takes a long steady breath. “If we lost one of the Federation's crack warships on its maiden voyage to the *Breen*,” she says, very dry, “we're never going to live it down. Let's look at our options, people.”

“The *Breen* wouldn't be threatening us if they thought they had the forces necessary to hold the *Interpreter* and take the planet,” says Salera. “Therefore, it is logical to conclude that they are attempting to hold the ship with a small force. Incapacitating even part of that force is likely to give the crew an opportunity to retake the ship.”

“That's a good start. We're going to have to figure out how to do that when we're stuck down here, however,” says Chester. She's trying to tune out the bickering that Tanek's just touched off, some unflattering speculation about the resemblance of the rat-creatures to a hypothetical human ancestor. Hawthorne, either addled by exhaustion or driven by simple annoyance, has taken the bait. “Your understanding of how evolution works is so wrong it's funny.”

Tanek lifts one of the dead rats and makes a show of eying it, then Hawthorne. “Well, it *does* bear a significant resemblance to our Chief Engineer,” he says.

There is a very exhausted corner of Chester's brain, deeply annoyed at both of them, that acknowledges he might not be completely wrong in that assessment. She stomps it back.

Hawthorne looks at the rat as well, and then cackles. “Yeah. Guess it does.”

“Mr. Hawthorne. Mr. Tanek,” Chester says, “I'm glad you're enjoying yourselves, but we have bigger problems than who's winning the smart alec contest right now. J'teris?”

“Fult wouldn't have lost the ship unless it experienced some major malfunctions,” says J'teris. “It's perfectly possible it's a small force holding it—the *Breen* ships we saw wouldn't outnumber us if we put all their crews together, and they weren't in good shape.”

“So we need to come up with something clever to get them out of the way.” Chester draws in a breath, looking around the factory. “Then trust our people up there to take care of the rest of it. We've got one hour. Let's figure out our strategy; handing this planet over to the *Breen* is *not* acceptable.”

While the rest of the away team seems to be either distracted by rats or discussing the message from the 'Breen', Piper continues to work, efficiently and methodically as he can, on disabling the factories.

“Breen require cold suits to live,” Dr. Boz notes, in response to Salera.

Piper doesn't snort, but it's a near thing. “They probably don't like this factory being a heat source, then,” he remarks dryly. *Oh yes, let's focus our cold adapted efforts on a geothermal factory. Let's get close enough to it to shoot. That makes sense.*

They obviously weren't *actually* Breen, as far as Piper was concerned, but those suits would make a great way to disguise whatever other operatives the Secret Police had sent here for this weapons factory.

“Hawthorne,” the Tal Shiar officer says, “could you access the temperature controls of the ship?”

Oh yes, and why don't I just remote pilot 'Pret into shooting at the 'Breen' ship as well, while I'm at it.

“Bit busy at the moment,” he says, twisting two wires together. He does *not* say 'shut up, fascist,' as he would prefer, because if actual Breen were on the ship, it wouldn't be a terrible suggestion, 'Pret's temperature controls *would* be easier to backdoor into than the weapon's systems.

But of course, presumably the Secret Police who were *actually* onboard knew that, and plenty more about 'Pret besides - enough to take control of the ship to 'force' Captain Chester to surrender and negotiate terms for Chiron IV. They might make it look good, but the Secret Police wouldn't have sent them here if their endgame wasn't to take control of these weapons factories.

He just wouldn't have guessed this was how they'd go about it. *Breen.*

Well. That was something he'd learn for next time.

This time? This time they'd get *nothing*.

Piper detaches one last cable with a satisfying metallic *click*, and watches on the screen as the power levels in the other factory buildings drop to zero.

Piper turns to the computer display illustrating the geothermal pumps. Time to bring them all down.

She's going to be bluffing the Breen. Chester can't say the thought fills her with glee—this is, after all, the species that the Romulans of all people have a saying about never turning your back on. But there isn't a choice. So what can she show them that will play into their expectations, make them more likely to believe her?

Unfortunately, the Breen aren't her only problem. They're still trapped in a semi-functional factory full of killer alien rats, which sounds like a really bad holodeck program. And as if on cue, there's a scuffle from the vent over her head and a snarling rat bellyflops onto her head, tearing at her hair in a murder attempt that makes up for what it lacks in accuracy with sheer bloodlust. She rips it off and hurls it across the room; Tanek, also a victim of the newest wave, is having less luck - and it's a real treat to see just how flustered he is. Killer rats were not on his list of expectations of the day, either.

It's J'teris who leaps into the fray - in a holonovel-perfect moment - to drag the rat off of Tanek, who takes the rescue with about as much ill-grace as she's come to expect.

She's really tempted to match his smart remarks by saying something like, "Welcome to Starfleet," but she's got more important things to do. She gets back to work.

Amidst the screaming and smacking sounds as other members of the landing crew somehow *continue* to be distracted by rats, Piper is able to finally place together a working understanding of the function of the geothermal pumps - at least, according to the diagram.

Lt. Salera, at least, seems less distracted by the rats. "Lieutenant," he asks, "any chance you could help determine how to shut this system down."

Salera looks at the diagram, considering. "It may not be advantageous to shut the system down at the moment," she says. "As a large heat source, it may be advantageous to weaponize it against the Breen, if we can draw them down to the planet."

Their first officer turns around, looking like she just walked out of an action movie. "Having the factory active might let us bluff against the Breen."

His stomach drops with every word. He'd had his suspicions that Commander J'teris was compromised - her service record was so closely tied to Captain Chester's - but ratcheting up his suspicion of the Chief Science Officer stings a bit. Call him biased, but he likes a fellow researcher, and Salera's done a lot of good work.

Maybe she just is making the logical case to keep options open. Maybe.

Still. He looks at both of them, and hopes that his face looks as hard and unyielding as the metal of his cybernetics.

"If we let the Breen down to the planet with the factories still working, and we *lose* - then we will be allowing this to be a *slave planet*," he glares towards Tanek, "*again*." He stares around the room. "I *will not let that happen*," he says, with all the furious conviction he can muster. "Even if we don't do it *now*, we need to figure out a failsafe to shut it down - and shut it down *quickly* - no matter what. Even if we die against the Breen."

Even if I die against the 'Breen', I'm going to do this.

He looks around, at Tanek, at Boz and Salera, at J'teris, at Captain Chester, daring them. *If you're going to shoot me for trying to stop this, shoot me now.*

No one does.

Salera turns, completely unruffled, to the diagram, concentrating on it. "The pumps have valves, which could, if properly set, release lava and melt down the infrastructure of these factories. Based on the design of the factory system, the lava could be contained without damaging the landscape beyond the industrial complex."

Right. Melting down the weapon of the enemy in lava. This is getting a bit more Mordor than he expected.

Once Salera has pointed it out, Piper can draw the line between the valves she's referring to and the control mechanisms in question. They're certainly not meant to be operated this way - they're meant to be operated to *prevent* this, specifically, but -

But they need to be operated in person. No remote access.

'One of you must do this' he can hear holo-Elrond intone in his head.

Salera follows his gaze. "They appear to be manual controls."

Captain Chester frowns with apparent worry. "But it won't happen immediately, right? We could beam out whoever does it before the lava reaches the facility."

'Whoever does it' - well he sure isn't trusting *her* to. He grips his hands on the controls in silent claim.

"Yes, that is correct." Lt Salera says. Captain Chester looks thoughtful.

Whatever plan she has, he isn't leaving Fleetfoot in the middle of it. The Chironian has already been brave enough. "Fleetfoot, you should get out of here. Let the others know they should head away from the area as well."

"Why?" Fleetfoot asks.

"Well," Piper starts. "It's about to get ... very dangerous."

One hour has elapsed. It's time to give the Breen a response.

Chester takes a deep breath, hopes she can be convincing enough. Hopes she can tell the Breen enough of what they want to hear that they'll come down here.

She's also not exactly thrilled about Hawthorne being down there, with the imminent lava, and dependent on them fooling the Breen and beaming him out in time. It's a *hell* of a lot of trust from a man who pretty blatantly doesn't trust her.

"Ready?" J'teris asks her softly once they reach the room. She nods, and J'teris busies herself with the panel. A few moments later, the viewscreen flickers back to life.

At least they have visual. It's the *Interpreter's* bridge, and Chester notes with a breath of relief that all the Bridge crew seem to be there and, as far as she can tell, unharmed—crowded together in a corner with Breen guarding them, but otherwise all on their feet.

That's something, at least.

"*Are you calling to surrender the planet, Captain?*" says the first of the Breen.

"It will be logistically complex," she says. "The factory is badly damaged. We have made repairs that should protect the inhabitants, but we will need to show them to you and your engineers, and be sure you can maintain them."

There's a pause as he looks at her, clearly evaluating her trustworthiness. "I cannot by negligence leave these people in danger, Thot Prens," she says.

That seems to fit with what he expects from Starfleet. "*I will inspect your work, Captain. If this is a trick, your crew will die.*"

"I understand," she says. She keeps her voice very calm, even though this feels like gambling with the lives of her crew. But she cannot let this planet fall into the hands of the Breen. She's going to have to trust Salera's assessment of the strength, or lack thereof, of the Breen. She's going to have to trust that, should the Breen presence be significantly weakened onboard, Fult and the bridge crew will retake the ship. She doesn't like this; it fills her mouth with the clotting dread of those last minutes aboard the dying *Bedivere*.

But it's the best option she can see, and there will not be time to find another one.

If the Breen are down here with her, if she can get to them, she's got more of a chance of saving her crew than she currently does.

The hum of a transporter fills the air. It's now or never. Ten columns coalesce into Breen a few feet from them, outnumbering her and the landing party. She's going to have to stall, take them by surprise, something, she can't let herself and the away team get turned into the next round of hostages in this debacle.

Fortunately, the rats haven't chosen a side. Perhaps it's the new sense of bodies in the room, more prey. Perhaps it's just chance. But as the Breen finish materializing, the next wave of the creatures comes boiling out of the walls. The operations room devolves into chaos and shouting—the Breen were expecting Starfleet resistance, not murderous vermin, and though a few stray shots go the landing party's way, the rats take the brunt of it. Chester hopes this means Hawthorne is relatively safe, that most of the rats are here, not down at the pumps, and spends some very busy moments pulling her people back together at the raised control platform.

At the least, she's not having to do much bluffing. She doubts the Breen have had time to get in contact with their compatriots on the ship, even if they've lifted their jamming and can use their own communicators, instead of the facility's built-in comms.

She hopes her crew is having a similar stroke of luck. But every moment she can stall the Breen down here is a moment she's buying them. She hopes.

The Breen around them are scared.

As they should be, thinks Fult vindictively. Because since their leader beamed down with the rest of his escorts, they're left with only three armed Breen on the Bridge, and the bridge crew is angry. And at least for Fult and T'Sandi, this isn't the first time they've been held hostage by a bunch of overconfident wannabe conquerors.

She tilts her head at T'Sandi, cocking an eyebrow and glancing at the guard nearest them. T'Sandi, with their calm, leonine air, has a deceptively long reach, and the claws retracted in their fingertips are razor sharp. T'Sandi's favorite armchair in their shared quarters has the damage on the armrests to prove it.

Then she makes eye contact with Ensign Kotan, who's closest to the third of their captors. He looks puzzled, but now he's paying attention, and the small jerk of her chin directs that attention to the Breen by him.

Which is when T'Sandi makes their move, lashing out at the hand of the Breen nearest them and slicing open the refrigeration glove, suit, and

the flesh under it in one gesture. The Breen howls and drops the weapon, which he grabs. The other two guards swing around to fire at him, but Fult is already in motion, kicking the knee of the one nearest her the wrong direction with a crunch and following up with a two-fisted blow to the neck as the guard crumples. That leaves the third guard, and Kotan, who's wrestling for control of the phaser with the Breen. It's keeping the weapon out of play, but not much else. T'Sandi steps in and clubs the Breen across the back of the head, and there's sudden silence on the Bridge.

"All right," says Fult, scooping up the weapon and stepping over the unconscious body of her opponent. "Get us remote transporter control, find out where the rest of those bastards are, and beam them into the brig. Iverat, get comms back up, ask Vulst if we've got shields back." The Breen had been pretty insistent on at least some repairs. Maybe they got lucky. "Kotan, everything we've got at the Breen ship. I don't want them shooting at us again."

She takes the center chair. "Then get me the landing party. See if they need an extraction."

Securing the ship has to be the priority. Hopefully, the Captain is living up to her reputation of being exceedingly difficult to kill.

"This was a trap!"

At least, that's the translator's rendering of the enraged electronic garble coming from the lead Breen as he lurches up the gangway to the comms controls, suit leaking refrigerated atmosphere at several points and one rat still clinging to his arm. He shakes it off and levels his weapon at Chester, who returns the favor.

"We warned you about the damage and the dangers of the planet, Thot Prenn," she says.

"Enough of your Starfleet deception! Your crew will die for this!"

Chester shoots him in the face. Fortunately, what constitutes a fatal blast for one of the rats is simply a stun for a Breen. He keels over backwards onto his comrades, and they're too busy wrestling his limp form to shoot back at her. Which is also good, because falling backwards into the ever-increasing sea of rodents is a good way to end up horribly dead. She gives them a second to teeter on the brink, contemplating that, and then says, "Anyone *else* want to say something stupid?"

They look at her. They look at the rats.

Her commbadge crackles back to life. "*Fult to Captain Chester. We've retaken the ship. Do you need an extraction?*"

Chester lets out a breath of relief. "Yes. The Breen too, beam them directly to the brig." She raises her voice. "Hawthorne! *Now!*"

Piper holds a white knuckled grip on the lava system controls.

He can only barely hear anything that's going on in the communications room, a fact that has him intensely on edge. Gull is sweeping the room around him continuously, so no supposed Breen or anyone else can sneak up on him.

Shouting - *that's* loud enough to hear - from the control room. He tightens his grip.

His communicator crackles - the connection's open to the ship - he hears Chester shout - "*Lock on and beam us up!*"

He throws the switch.

The last thing he sees as the transporter beam activates is lava bubbling up and swallowing the city.

Chapter End Notes

Hawthorne, quite literally in-game, rolled a nat 1 insight on the Breen call. This was the result XD

Last chapter up Thursday, with the postscript up Friday!

Chapter 12

The Breen ship sulks under the threat of the *Interpreter's* repaired weapons array, and the unspoken threat of their brigged senior officers. Apparently Thot Prenn brought his best and brightest over to hold the ship. Looks like it didn't turn out well for him.

Chester makes her way down to the brig. Everyone's patched up from the rats and other excitement, Orthax is silently relieved, Tanek all but tried to start a second Earth-Romulan war over getting treatment for his rat bites, Hawthorne is as cheerful as she's ever seen him—apparently the trick to getting on his good side is to let him melt a factory in lava, good to know. There's just dealing with the Breen left, which after the other events of the day, seems gratifyingly simple.

“So,” she says. “I think my crew and I are due an explanation for your activities. Last I checked, we had a treaty.”

Thot Prenn looks sullen, or as sullen as anyone can through a Breen helmet. “*We were stranded,*” he says at last. “*Our warp engines were down. We would establish a base, wait for rescue, and to expand the Breen Confederacy in this quadrant.*”

Both Chester's eyebrows go up. She's not sure he's telling the truth, but there's a way to give him the benefit of the doubt, while making sure he can't get away with more shenanigans. “I'm afraid our treaties preclude us tolerating a colonial power in this corner of the galaxy, Thot Prenn. But I can offer assistance with your immediate problem; we can take you in tow back to Deep Space Nine, where your engines can be repaired, and Starfleet can see you safely back to your space. Will this be sufficient to encourage your people over there to stand down?”

He hesitates, then mutters an affirmative. “*We did not want this backwater planet in any case. But be warned, Captain. The Federation is no more popular in these spaces than it was during the war, and you will not find all your enemies so easily mollified as we are.*”

“Good to know,” says Chester blandly. “We'll arrange for you to be transported back to your ship, and begin the preparations to take you in tow.”

Fult pulls her aside as she leaves the brig. “Sir, they're probably lying. I don't think they would have started that fight if their engines had been damaged.”

“They might,” says Chester. “I even agree with you that they probably are. But this way we'll tow them out of the Gamma Quadrant, and they'll have Starfleet ships ‘helpfully’ offering them assistance the whole way home. A little tough to prosecute a campaign of territorial expansion under those circumstances, really.”

“They aren't going to like that one bit.”

“No,” says Chester cheerfully. “Not even a bit.”

“And the Karella?”

“The Chironians seem happy enough to keep him around for his opposable thumbs. The diplomatic team that's headed here from DS9 may disagree with me, but for now but I'm inclined to let the Chironians make the call here. Now come on, we've got the remains of those factories to dismantle, a report to write for the incoming diplomatic team, and a planet to protect.”

Behind them, as they leave the corridor, something large and furry scuttles into the shelter of a Jeffries tube.

Piper sits in Bag End.

Lava runs through his mind, but it's not the lava of Mount Doom. It's the lava that destroyed the factories.

It wasn't the end. There are, as always, many endings, and many stories that go on and on. There were Chironians who had been experimented on who needed help - help that might see Marbog detailed to the *Interpreter*. Some Chironians may want to interact with some level of technology, freely, and that raised questions. The ‘Breen’ front that the secret police were putting up might still act on interest in their abilities - after whatever the Captain had reported to them - they needed long term safety.

But. But.

For now, they were safe, and they were free, and the instruments of their subjugation were melted away, destroyed in the fires that had fueled them. And any temptation to use their exploitative, corrupt powers for their own ends - that path had been left untaken, turned away from.

The literary reference wrote itself, really.

Chiron is not his planet, he knows that, not his Middle Earth or Shire, and he is only a side character in this story. Fleetfoot is the hero of the day - of his whole planet, and Piper remains impressed by his bravery. Though he doesn't need to be in contact with those feet ever again.

Fleetfoot's story will go on. So will all this Chironians', and they'll at least be able to write it for themselves. He likes to hope, someday, they'll join the Federation, but it will be their path to choose.

And if he has anything to say about it, it would be a Federation and a Starfleet with parasitic fascists distinctly excised.

This - what they had helped Fleetfoot do here today - was what Starfleet was meant to be. This was the Starfleet he had signed up for.

This was why he was on the *Interpreter*. So that every turn he got, he could keep fighting to make sure what they did out here was on

Starfleet's path, and not their fascist secret police parasite.

The feeling settles in to him; surety he hadn't felt when he started. This is where he should be.

His fears - his many, many fears - aren't gone, and tomorrow is tomorrow. But he had helped something good today. It was possible for him to help something good on this ship.

Speaking of his fears - staying means plenty of opportunities for any Secret Police agent to ferret him out, or weasel their way into his head, or some other mustelidae related metaphor. He rubs the back of his neck.

Not for the first time, he thinks about a failsafe. But this time, he doesn't push it out of his head quite so quickly.

There are all sorts of traps and security measures in his cybernetics already. They're as secure as they could make them and still keep them fit for purpose. But - but. He could find a way to patch together a true failsafe in his cybernetics, something that would kill him and fry the whole set of tech if anyone delved too deeply to try and make the mind control work *this* time.

He'd have to do it without Marbog - who'd never agree to it - which would make it harder. And Marbog would shout about how stupid it was the second Piper told him, for at least an hour.

But it would mean he couldn't be their puppet. Ever. And if Captain Chester or any other Secret Police agent tried, they'd end up with a charred heap of tech and a dead Chief Engineer.

He thinks about what he'd need to do, to get it done. It's possible. Not easy, but possible. He could do it safely, which seems like a daft way to describe making a *kill* switch.

But he's not going to do it.

He knows, deep in his bones, he's not going to do it. He's Federation - he's *Starfleet*, right down to his marrow. And that means believing, in the darkest pits of the shitter, in the cold aftermath of the third World War on Earth or the destruction of Wolf 359 or in a black box on a shuttle in space, that you can pull out of it if you just keep going, if you don't give up - a chance will come. Against all odds, you will find a way. Against all odds, and doing the near-impossible, help will come. A hand will come along, and pull you out. Another Starfleet officer will come back for you. You cannot - *cannot* - give up.

And despite his more rational thoughts telling him otherwise, he still believes, deep down, that if they do take him, if they do make him a puppet, if he does end up in a black box again - another Starfleet officer will come and pull him out again, that Marbog will manage to fix him, that somehow, everything will be salvageable. That not giving up will be worth it.

He's going to stay, and he's going to live, and he's not going to give up. He's going to do good. That was worth staying here.

At the very least, he could keep doing good by continuing to keep 'Pret from blowing up. That had been quite some doing, and he was proud of his shift of engineers who had held down the fort without him. There were many repairs still to do, though luckily for him at the moment, none to the holodecks.

But those repairs were gamma shift's duty right now. His duty was to get the rest and sleep needed to continue the work tomorrow.

And maybe he'd listen to the Marbog-sounding voice in his head telling him to take anxiety meds before bed. But he wasn't moving the batarangs out from under his pillow.

"Mr. Frodo?"

Samwise Gamgee's voice. The hologram of Samwise Gamgee.

He knows what he's meant to say here. *'It's been ten years to the day since Weathertop, Sam. It's never really healed.'*

"I don't know, Sam. But... maybe a bit better than I was."

He'd followed the Starfleet path, the Starfleet ideals he had come from and would go back to. He knew what he was here for.

"Sam,"

"Yes, Mr. Frodo?"

"I still remember the Shire."

"Well, of course you do, Mr. Frodo, you're here now, aren't you?"

"Yes. Yes I am." He pats Sam's hand where it rests on his shoulder. "Thank you, Sam."

"*'Pret, please end program.'*"

Postscript

A blonde human woman, clad all in black, looks over a series of files. On a holoscreen in front of her, there is the footage of a Captain, long haired, dark eyed, and determined, on the bridge of an *Armistice* -class ship.

“Well,” she says, “that *is* illuminating.”

“If we had our agents in command, and not just -” says a distorted voice over comms.

“No,” says a deeper voice. The screens are taken over by a wavering figure. “Our game is the long game. The Captain is young and inexperienced, and there is more than enough time for her to become a valuable asset to us—and the ideal Starfleet officer she aspires to be.”

“It’s not as though we’ll lose track of her, or the failed experiment, in that behemoth of a ship,” mutters the distorted voice.

“When the threats from the Dominion emerge, the threats that *we* need to face—we will be quite ready. Won’t we, Agent?”

The blonde woman looks down at the file in her hand. Her sharp-edged face becomes sharper still, her eyes light with anticipation. “Yes, I think I have *quite* a handle on Captain Chester.”

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