

Worst Case Scenario

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1271) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1271>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/F , F/M
Fandom:	Expanded Universes (General)
Relationship:	Diane Chester/T'Polis , Diane Chester/Tanek
Character:	Diane Chester , Tanek , T'Polis , Ensemble Cast - PRT
Additional Tags:	Medical Trauma , Angst
Language:	English
Series:	Part 7 of USS Interpreter
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-12 Completed: 2024-01-23 Words: 15,944 Chapters: 10/10

Worst Case Scenario

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Summary

When the examination of a defunct Dominion bioweapons lab goes terribly wrong, leaving Chester stricken with an unknown virus, Starfleet calls in their foremost expert in biogenic weapons--Dr. T'Polis, the youngest-ever head of a department of the Vulcan Academy of Sciences... and Chester's ex.

Notes

This takes place about three years after the events of *Winning is Easy, Living is Harder*.

Chapter 1

Dr. T'Volis, deputy chair of the Department of Infectious Disease at the Vulcan Academy of Sciences, is checking through her messages and carefully portioning out water to the collection of Terran phalaenopsis orchids that still reside around her home workstation. Two of them are showing buds and a possibility of flowering again, which is in itself remarkable, given that even indoor temperatures on Vulcan are at the far upper edge of their heat tolerance. She is examining one glossy green leaf when the call comes through.

Starfleet. High priority.

"Dr. T'Volis," says the male Trill on the other end, relief evident in his voice. T'Volis raises an eyebrow; for all the relief is strictly contained, it's uncharacteristic for Dr. Tyrell, who has the arrogance on which so many human jokes about surgeons are based. "*I'm glad to have reached you.*"

It looks like it's the middle of ship's night for him, and like he has not slept for some time. "You have an emergency, and you require a consultation," she states.

"Yes," he says, and getting directly to the point when his pride is on the line indicates it must be dire indeed. "*We responded to a request to clean up an abandoned Dominion military research laboratory. The evidence suggests that they were working on biogenic weapons. There was an attack.*"

"And there has been an exposure of one of your crew."

He nods. "*Yes. There was. Captain Chester.*"

For a moment, the world goes still and slow, and what has, so far, been a theoretical problem of intellectual interest becomes sharp pain. T'Volis composes herself, with more difficulty than she expected. "Has the pathogen been identified?"

"*It's entirely novel,*" says Tyrell. "*I...have made some progress in sequencing it. But given the uncertainty about disease course and virulence, bringing a specialist in seems wise. I can transmit the data to you—,*"

"Do so. I will come to you." It is a foolish thing to say, as she does not know where the *Interpreter* might be, but it is also unthinkable to do anything else. In her lab on Vulcan, she can run analyses, sequence the virus—but it will be delayed. And delay is something Diane—Captain Chester—cannot afford. Not with a biogenic weapon tearing through her body.

How did she come in contact with it? Diane's tolerance for risk has always been high, her tendency toward self-sacrifice concerning, but she is not stupid. She would not have violated infection protocols, and she would not have gone into a biogenic weapons lab without them.

There was an attack, Tyrell said. Something outside of their control. Malice. Diane has also always been very good at making enemies.

"*I'll arrange it with Starfleet,*" says Tyrell. He does not look pleased; he wouldn't, about having to bring another doctor in to manage a case, but some of the tension goes out of his shoulders. "*We're already on our way back.*"

It is a long way to Deep Space Nine, much less to the Gamma Quadrant. Diane may not have that long. T'Volis does not say it, because Tyrell already knows it, and it would only serve to air her own anxieties.

This is what she feared, she realizes as she ends the call and begins to make the necessary arrangements. This is what she drew back from, like pulling her hand away from a live heating element. One day, there would be a call like this, and it is bad enough now, when it is about a woman she still esteems—it would have been unimaginably worse, if it had been about her wife.

It was Sotek who introduced them.

T'Volis had spent most of her life unbonded; a childhood accident had taken her bondmate, and the feeling of abrupt unraveling and sudden, terrible silence had stayed with her since. She had not been sure she wanted to bond, to risk that again or to inflict it upon another—and it would happen, one day, to one or the other of them.

Sotek was one of her older cousins, one who had been kind in the wake of her loss, and also the one who understood *her*; she had known, intellectually, that there were men who bonded with men, and women with women, but she had also known the statistical frequency of such pairings and hadn't thought she might be one of the latter until Sotek had spoken of his bonded, and she had found knowing someone like her brought her own inclinations into sudden sharp focus. After that, there was a degree of ease in being around Sotek that there was not elsewhere. He simply understood. Being understood in such a way was a very great relief.

Sotek's husband also understood Sotek, and shortly after Sotek had earned his degree and been teaching and heading research for a time, Asil was the one to pick up on his discontent and accurately identify its cause. "You are bored," he'd told Sotek bluntly one night. "Join Starfleet. The diversity of challenges will suit you, and the itinerant nature of the postings will curb this tendency to wander; it will be safer than your current approach." Asil had both been right and painfully observant. Sotek did go for long walks on his own, and he did not attend to where he was going.

And Asil had continued to be right. T'Volis, beginning her own studies at that point, saw a great deal less of Sotek after that. When she did see him, he seemed settled. Content, even, as if a longing in him had been fed. And then, shortly after he was promoted to lieutenant, he came home with one of his colleagues.

"This is Lieutenant Diane Chester," he'd said to T'Volis, and the tall handsome human next to him had not offered a handshake—as humans so

often did to everyone's excruciating embarrassment—but a bow, a bow that would have been correct even from another Vulcan. T'Polis returned it, and returned the look of interest. Lieutenant Chester was almost of a height with her cousin, with long black hair tied sensibly back, wide dark eyes, and a sharp-chinned face with a hint of sunburn coming up across the bridge of her nose. She seemed cheerful, but she wasn't making the exaggerated show of it most humans did.

She was a lieutenant in communications, specialization in linguistics, history, and ethics. She was assigned to the *Billings*, hoping to become a specialist in First Contact. She was calm, steady, cheerful; had completed several internships with the Terran Embassy on Vulcan, hence her facility with the culture; came from a family large and tangled enough to almost qualify as a Vulcan clan; spoke Golic without the translator and with a tendency to slide back into the tonality of her native tongue, an old Earth language called Mandarin. She was at what T'Polis's medical textbooks called 'a developmentally analogous stage' to T'Polis herself, and muffled her enormous amusement at this being pointed out with a ducked head and a hand briefly pressed over her mouth, which T'Polis found charming—both for the consideration attempted, and for its own sake.

There were, T'Polis realized, a great many things she found charming about this human. And Chester made it politely clear there were a great many things she found charming about T'Polis. Sotek had been so smug it bordered on rude.

There had been a tendency, as there was with most beings in Starfleet, to take illogical risks. T'Polis had not liked this, but endeavored to put up with it. A courtship with a human entailed certain things, and one of them was a greater appetite for risk-taking than most Vulcans would humor. As their relationship did not include many of the points of friction that most Vulcan/human relationships did, T'Polis told herself she would humor this, at least; she was courting a Starfleet officer, and these things were a given.

Starfleet sends a courier for them, all the laboratory supplies T'Polis can requisition; it also tries to give her a research team, but she insists on her own postdoctoral trainees. She picks them carefully. It is not skill she selects for; it's calmness, ability to handle emergencies, the ones she thinks will be able to bear trauma. She spent the war studying Dominion biogenic weapons. Even if it all goes well, even if they do save their patient, it is too likely it will be an ugly illness and an ugly recovery.

She needs experienced researchers who will not flinch at what a pathogen can do to a humanoid body when it's not cells on a slide, or forensics afterward, when it's happening in front of them. These ones are young enough they didn't see it during the war; T'Polis has. But it has not been someone close to her before.

Close to her. Diane—Captain Chester—are they still close? She is not sure. Her own investment in Chester's wellbeing seems to argue that they are.

Chester did not often speak about the risks, but there were glimpses that T'Polis got, a news report here, an offhand comment there, Sotek mentioning something or other, and it had built a concerning picture.

Starfleet was a high-risk career. It selected for people willing to undertake those risks. Sotek was lucky, in that both he and Asil accepted those risks. Asil had joined him on many of his pre-war assignments. A starship suited Asil's own research well.

A starship would have suited T'Polis's research well, but not her preferences. She was perfectly willing to travel on them, and attend conferences on them, but the idea of living in an artificial bubble, surrounded only by artificial things in a vast and innately hostile environment, was profoundly unappealing. To be able to step outside, and walk among things that had been long before sentients had started to build, and would remain long after she herself was gone—it was fundamental to her. She had mentioned this to Chester, who loved the mountains and grasslands of her home in California in much the same way T'Polis did the Vulcan desert, and Chester had looked at her with gentle consternation and said, "I don't see it as much different. The planets and stars are much the same. They've been here for eons, too."

They weren't the same, T'Polis had been certain about that, but had not been able to put it into words in a satisfactory way. Not enough to bring it up as a counterargument, at the very least. She wasn't sure Diane would be capable of understanding in any case; there was a deep restlessness there, constant and insatiable. When Diane was still, it was the stillness of a coiled spring, energy repressed and held uncomfortably in check. She was at her best in motion, whether it was a simple camping trip, or waiting to board a shuttle back to her current ship, or undertaking a new project, and when she was still too long—usually only a matter of two of Earth's short weeks—she stagnated, a graying moroseness coming into her mind that was difficult indeed to share a house with, let alone a bed.

T'Polis preferred hearth and home. She felt tense and on edge in space, found Earth pleasant enough, save for the cacophony of unshielded minds. It had occurred to her that this might pose difficulties in their relationship, and she asked one evening when they were coming close to the two-week mark, when Diane would become restive.

Diane looked up from where she was working on dinner, cleaning bok choy. They were an Earth vegetable some of the local growers were experimenting with, white and green, and the growing sense of restrained irritation from the kitchen had been setting T'Polis's teeth on edge.

Diane raised her head and blinked at her from where she was pulling one of the vegetables apart. "Why would I find that difficult?" she asked, sounding a little blank. "You made your preferences perfectly clear. I'm not expecting you to uproot your life here and follow me." And then at T'Polis's steady look, realizing she hadn't sufficiently addressed the question, "I like having a home to come back to, dear. When you're out there, it's good to have something to anchor you. Especially when everything goes to hell."

"You are irritated," T'Polis said. "I am concerned there may be more to this."

Another blank look and blink and then a quiet huff of amusement. "Oh. That." Diane raised a leaf of the bok choy, and made a face—demonstrative by Vulcan standards, mildly put upon by human. "Bugs. Your local insect life likes this stuff as much as I do. I was trying to avoid the extra protein."

If Diane were so determined that it wasn't an issue, it wasn't something that could be productively pursued. T'Polis put it aside. It wasn't that

her life was devoid of excitement. It was a meticulous, careful sort of work, studying the universe's most deadly pathogens, and in her time in the lab she spent a great deal of it in a full protective suit, working within a fume hood with unidentified samples, or identified samples hideously deadly to anything that should come in contact with them without benefit of extensive protective equipment. But her work wasn't the reactive make-it-up-as-you-go that Sotek and Diane had described to her; it was slow and meticulous and carefully cognizant of the risks, and the procedures if those risks were realized. It was dangerous, but it was a quiet kind of danger, almost more in one's own head; the risks of overconfidence.

Before the war, T'Volis had tried not to think too hard about those other dangers, of the risk of losing another partner. During the war, she lost that luxury.

She reads the files on the virus itself first, because viruses are simple. She scrutinizes the genetic sequence. The infection pathway. It's based on an old Earth clade of viruses, long-evolved with humans and highly transmissible. Occasionally in Earth's history, they've caused horrifying pandemics; she looks up the one in the early 21st century and finds herself wincing inwardly. Humans, and their appetite for risk.

"The virus does not display sequences from any known virulent pathogens," says L'Nar, one of her three postdocs. "Including the very pathogen from whose lineage it descends; none of the clotting or severe pneumonia or neurological complications. There is something we are not seeing."

"The patient is, so far, only displaying symptoms consistent with a mild respiratory infection," says Meket. "Burden of care is not very high—at least not yet. Perhaps the infection is dose-dependent."

"We had best hope not," says T'Volis. "The patient was in the ruins of the lab for several hours after her EVA suit was breached and her atmospheric had finished venting. The location she reports waking in was adjacent to a collection of samples. There was ample exposure to a high dose of the infectious material."

"Is it possible we are working with multiple pathogens?"

"This is the only one that has been identified." There might be other pathogens. There are three research vessels en route now, under the guard of the *Titan* and the *Armistice*. The *Armistice* is Sotek's ship. He must have heard the news; he must have taken it hard. He and Diane have remained friends.

The *Interpreter* is a day away. From this morning's report, there is reason to hope that Diane will still be alive when they reach her. But the Dominion would not bother with a virus that only causes the symptoms they're observing. There will be something else.

Chapter 2

The war brought T'Volis to Earth often, which was fortunate, as it brought Diane there too, and as Starfleet allowed her considerably less leisure now, it meant she could see both T'Volis and her family at once. It brought, in short order, a promotion and switch to command track for Diane, and a new assessment of the risks in Diane's career for T'Volis.

Initially only an infectious disease researcher during her graduate studies, she found herself quickly pulled onto a Starfleet biodefense task force a few short weeks after receiving her degree. Once through the layers of security approval, she found it thoroughly appalling. Once, a task force including the *Bedivere* disrupted a Dominion operation involving a particularly virulent biogenic weapon meant for deployment on a Klingon colony world; she was responsible for analyzing the genetic sequence of the virus, and simulating its effects. The idea of Diane being on the same ship with the thing kept her awake for weeks afterward.

Then, during another assignment at the Institut Pasteur, that ancient august body drafted into the war effort like everyone else, there was an autopsy. A Dominion research facility had fallen into Federation hands, and they found Starfleet personnel there—or at least, that Starfleet personnel had been there, as experimental subjects. Infectious disease specialists were invited—requested—because of concerns about biogenic weapons.

T'Volis had attended and done autopsies before. Since the subject was dead, they had never particularly disturbed her. Indeed, she had felt it was an opportunity to do something for the dead—to uncover how they had died, and perhaps protect others from a similar demise. But one of the cadavers was a human woman with dark hair, and when T'Volis looked at her records to assess preexisting conditions, if any, she realized that the woman had been Diane's age almost exactly—date of birth was a week off, and then it became exceedingly difficult to stop seeing the similarities, or the realization of this being one of the many dangers Diane faced. The face of the dead woman was swollen and bruised from hemorrhage, her features blurred; it was too easy to imagine another face there, though she kept her imagination strictly in check, put it from her mind as deliberately as placing something in a recycle slot. But the other thought was harder to banish. Diane took risks. A lot of them. Diane was a senior officer on a front-line ship, and it would be too easy for her to fall into enemy hands, it would be too easy for her to end up on an autopsy table, with only her corpse to bear witness to the obscenities perpetrated against her.

That was by far the hardest to bear. And T'Volis had been bitterly acquainted with the mortality of those she loved a long time now.

Dr. Tyrell has sent everything. The full situation report on the laboratory, the relevant logs; T'Volis's high security clearance has been reactivated, and Starfleet has sent files as well. It is comforting, to know that Diane's superiors are so concerned for her—but it is not only her. The identification and countering of a new Dominion biogenic weapon is of great interest to the security of the Federation. Diane's superiors will be just as eager to supply the resources with which to dissect her corpse as they are currently to save her life.

Logically, it is a reasonable approach, but T'Volis finds it dampens her appreciation for the support a great deal.

There are medical files. Some of this is familiar; the radiation burn, the appendectomy. But there are new ones; the fight in the wreckage of the *Bedivere* cost Diane an eye, and the replacement is cybernetic, rather than lab grown. More lacerations and disruptor burns and broken bones; a whole history of violence and risks taken, and T'Volis forces herself to close the file, because simple physical trauma, with modern medical technology, is unlikely to affect the course of illness. It is harder to do than it should be.

Easier to look at the records of the accident and exposure.

Captain's Log, Stardate 54923.7: We are in orbit around Caterus 7, a rocky planetoid that, until recently, housed Dominion military research. The rebellion of the neighboring system, Venesium, cut off the major Dominion supply line to this sector, and the Venesium government has requested we examine the facilities for dangerous substances. Indeed, records indicate that the research may have included biogenic weapons. As a precaution, all away teams undertaking surveys are required to don maximum protective gear. We're keeping missions short and limited to experienced personnel.

She had done everything right, thinks T'Volis, paging through the reports, the details of the landing party and mission. This is probably why she is the one patient. This time, the damning factor had not been Diane's willingness to take risks.

The laboratory had been underground, the beam-in point a few hundred meters up a tunnel, the rock rich in ores that scrambled communications and transporters. So the first Diane and her team had known about the attack had been the first shot shaking them all off their feet.

Diane had ordered a return to the beam-in site, and taken the rear, making sure all her crew got out before she did, and it was what doomed her. The tunnel came down before she could get through; retrieved footage from her helmet recorder shows the faceplate fracturing. She's lucky to have kept the other eye. T'Volis can see, in the flicker of her helmet lights, the crack across the faceplate of the mask. The thumbnail sized hole, outlined in white.

Six hours and thirty-one minutes into the recording--the computer helpfully skips to the next point of interest--the suit's struggling life support systems give up, the hiss of escaping atmosphere going silent and leaving her completely unprotected. If the lab had not remained pressurized--with all its infectious samples--she would have suffocated.

It is possible that it would have been kinder than what will happen to her, but that line of speculation is counterproductive.

Seven hours and forty-six minutes later, Diane regains consciousness. There is a groan, a faint stirring. "*Chester to Interpreter.*"

Nothing. Shuffling, as the camera rights itself. T'Volis knows the moment Diane sees the hole in the EVA suit. There's a sharp ragged intake of breath, and a quiet but heartfelt obscenity.

She sits there for a while, saying nothing, her breath fast and ragged. And then, she gets up, and she begins to try to dig herself out.

It's another three hours and seventeen minutes before her crew pulls her from the rubble.

A week after the autopsy, the *Bedivere* arrived on Earth. T'Volis was still there, doing a series of briefings on biogenic weapons and protocols for dealing with them, in between the actual research; everyone on the task force was rotating between several labs across the planet. The sheer volume of research demanded it. She had this lecture at Starfleet Headquarters this evening. Tomorrow morning would see her at the Bethesda International Institutes of Health, noon at the World Health Organization headquarters, and then back to the Institut Pasteur, to check the cultures from the autopsies. So far, it seemed to have been simple brutality, no pathogens, but the possibility has yet to be completely ruled out.

She was very tired. The unshielded minds around her were a cacophony, she didn't think she had been properly warm since she stepped onto the shuttle departing Vulcan, and the humidity of a San Francisco afternoon had filled her sinuses with permacrete. She was tired, and she was discouraged, and more than ready to be done with the lecture, hoping no one would come up with any clever questions before she could make her escape to the relative calm of her visiting researcher's quarters, when a sudden sense of reassurance brought her head up, like a single true note through the roaring noise.

Diane was standing just inside the doorway, a pleased, fond expression in her eyes and the curve of her mouth. The sense of her was someone coming back to a refuge. But past the calm, there were dark smudges under her eyes, exhaustion in the slump of her shoulders, and when the last of the students had filed out and she came to help T'Volis with her notes at the podium—unnecessary human chivalry—there was a hint of a limp in her gait.

"You are injured."

"Not recently. It's stiff when I stand still too long, and Dr. Harris says it will fade over the next few days. How are you?"

Terrified for you, T'Volis thought, unbidden. She had spent the week with corpses, people so much like Diane who'd died alone in pain and humiliation. She reminded herself that Diane had applied to a transfer to Strategic Analytics, where her skills could be put to better use, and where she would have far better odds of survival.

Aloud she said, "Tired. The humidity does not agree with my sinuses."

"Let's get dinner somewhere drier then," said Diane, cheerful, "and then spend some time together before you have to go off to Maryland, which, let me assure you, will be a very great deal wetter."

"It will. I intend to spend all my time in the medical center."

Diane talked as they went, the surface-level current events that she could relate; crew gossip, a handful of support activities like providing supplies for water purification and agricultural activities. Not the war. After dinner, well after dinner, when they were standing in a park looking at one of Earth's horrifyingly endless seas, she said, "I didn't apply for the transfer to Analytics."

T'Volis turned sharply to look at her. "Why not? Your skills are needed in decryption and code-breaking; you would be a useful asset."

"There's no one to replace me on the *Bedivere*," said Diane. "Skill shortage. I'm third in the line of command now. There's our chief engineer after me, and then a twenty-three year old kid. I can't leave them."

T'Volis had to take a far longer moment to compose herself. "Your attachment to your colleagues does you credit. However, I cannot say that it was a logical decision."

"You're right, but it was an ethical one," said Diane, which meant she could not be moved. "I can't leave them. The damage would be unjustifiable."

The disappointment was nearly overpowering. T'Volis watched the sea, trying to let go of it, but the face of the dead officer was too easy to remember. Also too clear: the memory of her grandmother when Diane's name was mentioned, just before she left Vulcan on this trip, and saying, "Whatever her character, that woman is not one you can build a house with." It had been tempting to dismiss it as xenophobia, but T'Volis's grandmother wasn't prone to that variety of illogic; no, it had been because the dead were no help at all in building a house.

She turned to fully face Diane, who turned to her as well. "Please," she said. "I have spent this week with what the Dominion would like to do to you. Your skills are needed. Your contribution to the war would be greater. You are not simply—*meat* to be thrown at the enemy."

Something came into Diane's face then, not something that T'Volis had ever seen before. It was something terribly cold and strangely ancient, implacable and ruthless, and it was not the woman she loved. She could imagine cruelty in the lines around Diane's mouth, and Diane abruptly turned her face away as if she knew what T'Volis had seen and it shamed her to the bone.

"It's not simply being cannonfodder," she said after a moment that stretched far, far too long, still looking at the sea and not T'Volis. "I wish it was."

T'Volis stayed silent, shaken. It was fading out of Diane's face, as she mastered herself in turn. When she could finally bear to face T'Volis, her eyes were wet, her lips pressed together. The breath before she spoke was long and shaky. "It turns out I am very good at killing people," she said, and the brutality of the statement was aimed inward, "and I am a very good soldier. For all our ideals, the Federation needs both right now."

"Don't do this to yourself." Reflexive, sharp. "This is not you."

Diane shook her head, a little sharp gesture. “I’m not so sure about that. And either way—it’s what Starfleet needs of me now. These questions aren’t going to matter if we lose. And if we don’t...”

She glanced around; the park was almost deserted, and she offered two fingers to T’Volis. There was no hesitation, even after seeing that thing in Diane’s face. T’Volis pressed her own against them, feeling the solid steady sense that was the woman who she very much hoped would be her wife, and nothing at all of the other thing she had glimpsed for an instant in the fading California sun.

Chapter 3

The *Interpreter* makes the trip back from the Gamma Quadrant in record time; the *Armistice*-class is new, and the exact capabilities of their engines are still classified, and so it is only five days from Diane waking up in the wreckage to when T'Volis materializes on the transporter pad. The first officer, a tall Klingon woman, is waiting for her.

"Doctor," she says. "I'm glad to see you. Sickbay is this way." And then, an afterthought of politeness, "I'm Commander J'etris. Please let me know if you or your team need anything. Thank you for coming."

"What is her condition?" asks T'Volis.

"Stable, until this morning," says J'etris. "There was a change." She makes a small frustrated gesture, minor compared to the distress she's emanating; she's painful to be around. "I'm not a doctor, you'd better get the specifics from ours. Something about clotting factors."

Clotting factors. A disturbance in those may mean hemorrhagic complications. That's more in line with what she would expect from a Dominion bioweapon. She braces herself as she enters the *Interpreter's* sickbay.

The sickbay is much larger than that of most starships; the public information on *Armistice*-class ships indicates that they were originally intended to be able to provide the level of care possible in a starbase hospital, decreasing in-transit mortality, in addition to their role as the center of a line of battle; massive, heavily armed and armored warships with redundant systems. Now, they're intended for long-haul exploration and responding to massive disasters.

T'Volis hopes that the sickbay lives up to its advertised capabilities. A long period with minor symptomology, during which the disease can be spread—a logical characteristic of a biogenic weapon. Now, more serious symptoms are developing; it is equally logical to assume that this will be a disease intended to have a high mortality rate, so those symptoms are likely to be painful and significant. They may yet have time. It is not only the mortality rate of a disease that devastated healthcare systems; it is the attention each patient requires. Symptoms that require significant medical intervention and monitoring not only exhaust healthcare staff, but provide opportunities for further transmission. Killing victims quickly is not an effective trait of a biological weapon. Killing victims after a long period of debilitating illness, tying up healthcare resources, infecting and exhausting healthcare personnel, with terrifying symptoms exacting a psychological toll on all involved—that's a lot more effective in destroying a targeted society. Actual mortality is only one tool of many.

A simple rule of public health; it is not the simple mortality from a disease that has the worst effect. It is the mortality of healthcare personnel, the conditions and diseases ignored in favor of the outbreak that exact their own tolls, the strain on systems that become unable to rise to usual requirements. Three waves of mortality and morbidity: the disease itself, the disease's impact on healthcare workers, the disease's impact on healthcare systems.

No humanoid species handles hemorrhagic illness well, psychologically speaking. There's a reason it shows up so much in biogenic weapons.

Tyrell is there, hurrying over with padd in hand; he hands it over to her without being prompted. "Your timing is excellent," he says. "We detected a crash in her production of clotting factors early this morning. They've not returned; she's on a regular slow infusion of replicated ones. Found it in a historical textbook for treating genetic illness."

"Not due to trauma to mucosal membranes?" T'Volis asks. "Usually it's the viral activity that causes hemorrhage."

"That's the other thing," says Tyrell, leading her to the back of sickbay and toward what she assumes is the isolation wing. "Her viral load has cratered as well. There's a few stragglers, but her immune system is taking care of them. A few other things, actually—look at her liver function."

T'Volis does. "That does not make sense. Unless something is very wrong with the replicators, such concentrations of waste products should not accumulate, even in a very ill human."

"And lung function."

T'Volis hesitates, looking through page after page of report. It's a complete breakdown of metabolic function—of multiple functions. It's as if Diane's body has ceased to correctly process normal elements of her diet and environment, even forgotten normal internal processes. She remembers her background classes on noninfectious and genetic disease. On Earth, there were genetic mutations that could do this to people; an inability to process copper, or produce clotting factors or...

But one at a time. Not all together.

She stops walking. Flicks through the screens again. Looks up at Tyrell. "Captain Chester did not waive the genetic screening in her intake medical evaluation at the Academy, correct?" she says. "Has there been one done since?"

He frowns, and she can see the beginnings of the suspicion coming into his face, just as it has crept into her mind. "No, there's been no need."

"Do another one, now," she says. "A complete one. I will speak with her."

He nods, goes to get the materials; she hurries to the single occupied isolation room, bracing herself for what she'll see. Pauses before turning the corner to send her postdocs away with instructions to assist Tyrell. It is necessary, not a way to buy time.

That feels false as she thinks it. She walks forward anyway.

Chester has her back turned to the observation window as T'Volis approaches. She's sitting up, mostly, her head leaned into the corner of the

transparent aluminum wall, dark hair braided tightly to her skull. T'Volis remembers how she favored that hairstyle for camping, or anything that meant she wouldn't have time to manage or tend it, and the idea of her calmly braiding it that way in anticipation of this illness is strangely disturbing.

She looks tired. Her shoulders slump, the pale blue of the medical-issue tunic and pants hangs loosely around her shoulders. T'Volis keeps walking, deliberately stepping loudly. Diane straightens at the sound of footfalls, tugs the loose tunic into some semblance of neatness, and tries, at least, to sit upright in the chair.

She looks bad. It is a simplistic descriptor, but comprehensive. There are dark smudges under her eyes. Her nose is red and her cheeks flushed, her skin grayed and mottled along one arm with a fresh bruise—the lack of clotting factors, one supposes. There is a hollowness to her cheeks, and it looks terribly wrong against T'Volis's memory of her face round and full of cheer. And in the first moment when she looks up, before it's smoothed away behind that terrible mask, the artificial one she wore during the war, she looks scared.

Her body is destroying itself, or being destroyed, and this is an enemy she cannot simply fight. Diane does not do well against things that she cannot face.

She stands. There's a slight lurch to it, as if her balance isn't what it should be; she does not straighten all the way, her shoulders hunched like she's guarding herself. Muscle pain, most likely. "T'Volis," she says, her voice just as warm as T'Volis remembers, even with the tinniness of the speakers, warm and calm as if she's not *dying*. "You came. Thank you."

T'Volis just looks up at her, seeing the way Diane searches her face. "Treating you at a distance would have been ineffective," she says. "Delays in sample transportation would have entailed substantial risk. Additionally, the discovery of a new bioweapon is of urgent interest to Starfleet Intelligence, and more broadly, Federation security."

Diane's mouth quirks. It is not her small amused smile. It's something grim and faded and struggling. T'Volis remembers what she gathered Diane feared, from the other woman's silences over the years. Disease, like this, was near the top. "Nice to know they care."

T'Volis just looks at her, barefoot and standing in a pained hunch, and realizes the other emotion she's not masking is a hope that's agonizing to see. "We have some suspicions about the mechanism of action," she says. "The prognosis is, at this point, unclear."

"I spent over ten hours marinating in a Dominion bioweapon," says Diane very dryly. She sinks back down into her chair; her face sheens with sweat. "I don't expect the prognosis to be good. But the chances of pulling *something* out of this mess have just increased, thanks to you."

That awful attempt at a smile again. T'Volis wishes she would stop doing that. Both of Diane's eyes look the same, she realizes; there is no difference between the natural and artificial. There are so many wounds there that have been smoothed away.

She finds this, too, upsetting. Like someone has carefully erased everything being a starship captain costs.

She does not understand why Diane chose this life over a life with her, and now it is killing her, and it is all too probable she will have to watch.

"That's not fair, T'Volis." Diane's voice had been even, though strained. "We're in a war. Of course I take too many risks. I'm trying to keep my crew alive."

"You take more risks than is excused by even that," T'Volis said, hearing the answering strain in her own. "And as the war has progressed, those risks have increased exponentially. They are far beyond acceptable levels."

"They're necessary," said Diane flatly. She folded her arms tightly across her chest, shoulders hunching in. She was hurt. T'Volis was distressed by this, but hoped it meant she was finally listening.

"You will do your crew very little good if you are dead," she said. "I saw the report of the last incident on the *Bedivere*, and I can see the aftermath of your injuries. Donning appropriate protective gear—,"

"Would have meant one of the four crew died before I could pull them out," said Diane, flatly. "Sacrificing her life to avoid an easily-treated radiation burn was not an exchange I was willing to make."

"You didn't know it would be 'only' a radiation burn at the time," said T'Volis. "You could have been killed, and then all four of your crew would have died, because you would have been unable to assist them."

"I—" started Diane, and then let out a long breath. "It was a gamble."

"And you were lucky. This fits with a pattern of increased risk-seeking behavior over the last three months; you have also turned down multiple opportunities for less-risky assignments in which your skills are sorely needed. Assignments which I know well you would personally prefer to front-line combat."

Pain flicked across Diane's face, quickly tucked away. "I'm where they need me. I make a good soldier, T'Volis. Unfortunately, that's what Starfleet needs right now."

The distress was tangible. Upsetting. What could one say to a partner so determined to tear herself apart, gut the core of who she was on principle? It sounded noble in epic poems. When the being involved was standing right in front of you, when you knew everything she was hollowing out of herself, it didn't seem like a selfless sacrifice. It was sad, and nothing else.

If Diane survived this war—which seemed less and less likely—it would not be as the calm, cheerful woman T'Volis had known. There were hard edges developing, a steady core of rage building, a ruthlessness that showed through sometimes like the flash of a claw—that same thing

she had glimpsed in the cliffside park. She could see it now, because in the wake of her pain there was something closing down behind Diane's eyes. It settled in the new lines around her mouth, smoothing her face into an artificial neutrality that was utterly unnatural.

There was a dreadful finality in the room with them. "I cannot make a bond with someone I am so likely to lose," she said. "Not again." She could feel it all too clearly in her imagination, the bright brilliant edges of Diane's mind going soot gray and flaking, and then the silence.

She could not bear it. She did love this woman, but she could not bear that connection only to lose it, and the loss seemed inevitable. "Please, Diane."

"I want to make that promise to you," said Diane, and then raised a hand and wiped impatiently at her eyes, that very human emotion pushing its way through, inexorable. It was hard to see, her determined defenses failing, and then she raised the other hand and pressed both palms over her eyes. "I really, really do. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to die. But if I make that promise, I'm going to break it, because none of this is about what either of us *want*. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I *can't*."

The relationship had ended there. The conversations, the arguments, the regrets and the *we'll try again* had lasted longer, but T'Volis had begged her, and Diane had said no, because she couldn't have done anything else and still been herself, and through the grief afterward sometimes T'Volis felt like she had let a wild thing go back to the desert, after it had curled itself up on her hearth for a brief and wonderful time.

Chapter 4

She speaks with Diane, gets the update of patient-reported symptoms to compare to the scanner data, then goes back to find that Tyrell and her postdocs have completed the comparative scans. The results are a complete vindication of her suspicions; a markedly changed genome in many cells, others catching up. T'Volis stares at it for a time, the damning base-pairs highlighted, horribly aware this will be in textbooks.

"You know what this means," says Tyrell. It's interesting to see his response; he is clearly torn between distress and fascination.

"We are not solely dealing with a viral infectious disease," says T'Volis. The lines of genetic code unspooling across the screen raise dread in her stomach. She makes it a policy not to react in such a way to the viruses she studies. But this is not a virus. It is a construct, with a single purpose. "This is a delivery mechanism. A delivery mechanism for genetic modification."

"A logical outgrowth of gene therapies," says Tyrell, fascinated and disgusted. "The dual use. Earth's old geneticists, the ones who caused the Eugenics Wars, didn't even take it this far. They wanted supersoldiers. But this..."

"This is a gene weapon," says T'Volis. "It switches off the genes responsible for basic function of the human body. It starts with the lungs, hence the pneumonia, and then spreads. And even if the patient survives..."

"The germ line mutations will ensure their children will be affected by the same afflictions," says Tyrell. "Diabolical."

"An efficient approach for genocide," says T'Volis. "We must counter it."

"I can work on a therapy with a similarly rapid delivery," says Tyrell. "But it's going to take time to replicate and code. They altered a lot there; probably to keep someone from doing exactly that, through the sheer time that would need to be invested." He glances at her. "We got lucky."

T'Volis thinks of this hitting an unprepared population, one where the first patients thought they had a minor cold, or didn't notice their fevers. A population who didn't expect a weapon like this. One occupied with case-tracking, as the sheer volume of patients brought medical systems down, one that would think this was simply an infection. During the war, it might well have succeeded. At the very least, it would have devastated the human species, even with the long work necessary to undo the genetic modification.

T'Volis has examined Dominion bioweapons. This is meticulous, and it is strangely *personal*. Crafted by someone well familiar with Earth's eugenics wars, and well familiar with the horror of genetic modification most humans have to this day. With an intimate knowledge of the human genome, and understanding of diseases now easily treated.

It does not fit the template of a Dominion bioweapon. The Dominion likes efficiency and brutality. A disease that caused hemorrhage, hypovolemic shock and dehydration, organ failure, all within a few days or a week—that would fit the profile. This doesn't. This is slower, it is cruel, and it took a very great deal of work. No. For all it was found in a Dominion laboratory, she doubts it is actually a Dominion weapon. They have gotten it from somewhere.

That is speculation. She keeps it to herself. "You are correct," she says. "A singular case means we can counter it by synthesizing a treatment, even if it will not be produced soon enough to aid Captain Chester."

He frowns. "We'll see about that."

It makes her glance at him with some consternation. Tyrell, when she last worked with him, has seemed to be someone most interested in solving puzzles, not saving lives. The emotion she detects behind his reaction might be simple annoyance at having missed the purpose of the virus, but she suspects it is not only that. There is, perhaps, a personal investment there.

She does not want to read too much into it. She has been carefully shielding her mind since she came aboard, but it is hard not to notice the distress that pervades the ship, projected by so many undisciplined minds. It is uncomfortable. But it also seems that the people here are upset by their captain's predicament.

In a strange way, it is heartening.

Diane takes the news as T'Volis expects her to, quietly and without outward alarm. Without much inward alarm, either. "Well," she says, "I didn't expect good news. And I'm glad we found this bug, though I wish we hadn't found it with my lungs."

An attempt at humor. T'Volis tries to school her face into mild amusement, because Diane will find that comforting. From Diane's expression, she is only partly successful. "What's the prognosis?"

"Unknown. The genetic conditions it is inducing had highly variable courses even when they occurred naturally. We expect that the designers of this weapon were not particularly patient, so a faster-than-natural onset is to be expected. Furthermore, there is the possibility of a second stage; further mutations we have yet to detect in our scans. Using a similar delivery mechanism to reverse the changes is theoretically possible, but the human genome is both unusually large and unusually fragile; addressing and detecting all of them will be difficult."

"And the germ-line mutations?"

That brings T'Volis to a halt. The first response— *you never mentioned wanting children before*— would be incredibly inappropriate. They do not have a relationship that would make it relevant to her.

Diane answers the question for her, anyway. "I'd prefer not to close that door if I didn't have to," she says.

“If we can resolve the somatic mutations, there is no reason we will not be able to do so for the germ line.”

“Right. I’ll worry about living, then,” she says. She shifts uncomfortably in the chair, coughs, wet and racking. “Dr. Tyrell already knows my wishes; this is a threat to Federation security, and you—and the rest of your team—have my full permission to brief any and all parties necessary. Including my senior officers.”

“Understood,” she says. “We will schedule that as soon as possible. Afterward, I will—”

“Afterward, you will get to your quarters and get some rest,” says Diane, as stern as he can while looking like she’s going to topple over face-first. “It must be the middle of the night for you. I’d much rather you not be sleep-deprived before you start trying to save my life.”

There is a certain logic to her position. “Very well,” she says.

The briefing is worse than telling Diane. The conference room attached to Sickbay is comfortable and large, but the various people in it have all crowded up toward the head of the table, and the air is thick with anxiety. There is one other Vulcan, who introduces herself as Commander Salera, but the controlled steadiness of her mind is very little balm when compared with a tumult of people all very worried and very few of them with any concept of mental shielding. The Betazoid counselor who’s just stepped in looks queasy the moment he sits down, and he’s trying very hard to keep his own shields shored up. He’s only partially successful; there is a great bank of very personal sick fear behind them, visible if not palpable.

There’s one short human with cybernetics and a painful radiation of concern; Commander J’etris at the head of the table, looking uncomfortable in what T’Volis imagines is usually Diane’s chair; Dr. Tyrell exhausted at her right hand; a Bajoran man radiating a mixture of anger and anxiety; Commander Salera; a handful of anxious ensigns already taking notes before the meeting has started; and one Romulan Tal Shiar agent, who slides in at the head of the table at J’etris’s left hand and gives T’Volis a look of unveiled hostility and evaluation.

“Subcommander Tanek,” says J’etris, in quelling tones, “this is Dr. T’Volis of the Vulcan Academy of Sciences. She is one of the foremost experts in biogenic weapons in the Federation, and we are lucky to have her. She is also a good friend of the Captain’s.”

“Yes,” says Subcommander Tanek, staring directly into T’Volis’s face in outright threat, “I was aware of that.”

“Subcommander Tanek is our liaison officer from the Romulan Empire,” J’etris says to T’Volis. “There were territorial concerns about our activities in the Gamma Quadrant; his presence is intended to allay any suspicions that might arise that the Federation might have imperialist interests there. And, of course, ensure that Romulan interests are protected.”

“Indeed,” says Tanek. He is still staring. There is nothing but flat hostility from him.

The senior officers receive her report in grim silence. “To be clear,” she says, “the threat to us is negligible. The correct quarantine and isolation procedures followed immediately upon Captain Chester’s return served their intended function. The question that now remains is how to preserve her life.”

There is something odd about Tanek’s reaction. He’s abruptly not looking at her, not looking at anyone, but at the table.

She sets that aside to be considered later. “Obviously, one of our first approaches would be to try to use a similar vector to undo the damage that has been done to Captain Chester’s genetic material. However, rather than suppressing the immune system, the alterations have greatly increased its activity. The risk of an overreaction to the vector we use—to any vector we use—is very high, even with modern immunosuppressive treatments. That immune activity may also become damaging in its own right, if it begins to target healthy cells. We are sequencing the corrupted material now, but, as you are aware, the human genome is particularly long and delicate, and the ways in which this weapon targets its function are equally creative.”

“Does that mean you can’t do anything for her?” says the Bajoran, a pained edge to his voice. Subcommander Tanek still has not looked up.

“It means we are unsure of the best course of action at the moment,” she says. “We expect greater certainty in the next few hours.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to squireofgeekdom for their help with the first scene with Hawthorne!

It's easy to say that they'll have a better idea in the next few hours. It's also easy to tell her assistants that they all will be best served by rest while the sequencers work, teasing out which alterations of base pairs will have what effects.

It is much more difficult to make herself leave Sickbay after them, the low-level distress of the crew oppressive around her.

"How is she?"

An example of that distress greets her a few steps down the hall from Sickbay in the form of the short human with extensive cybernetics. She recognizes him from the briefing, the chief engineer. He is not pleasant to be around; jagged misery, painfully open.

"Boz wouldn't let me keep Gull in the medbay to keep an eye on her -" he gestures up to a floating drone - "so ..."

"She is in good spirits, though the prognosis remains uncertain." She does not mention that the uncertainty in the prognosis is whether they have days or weeks to find a treatment. She tries to remember what his uniform and rank pips mean. Learning Starfleet uniform codes has never been a priority for her. "We have not been officially introduced. You are...?"

"Lt. Commander Piper Hawthorne," he gives her a quick nod by way of belated greeting, and gestures up at the drone again, "Gull. I'm Chief Engineer. I'm. Cap is a friend."

"I am Dr. T'Volis, of the Vulcan Academy of Sciences," she says, a courtesy - he already knows this from the briefing. It takes her a moment to realize he means Diane—it is an odd nickname. "I am glad she has friends here."

She'll need them. If she survives. The thought is painful. T'Volis has seen this coming, and she had hoped it would attenuate the pain. It has not. If anything, the dread and the waiting has worsened it.

He lets out a slight snort. "I - well, I'm not the kind of guy who has much in the way of friends, but she's. Well, she's Cap'. She's got plenty of friends here, and everyone else is pulling for her."

"Your assistance is appreciated," she says. Even if it is simply keeping Diane company.

Hawthorne waves an arm and starts walking. "Is there - is there anything else you can tell me? If there's anything I or anyone on this ship could be doing -"

"There is nothing that can be done for her that is not already being done. The enhanced capacity of your laboratory facilities and staff have proven particularly useful." She pauses. Humans value social interaction extremely highly. "Regular visits are encouraged, but do not expect a high level of interaction. The damage is...considerable."

His face goes blank briefly, and then he snorts, "Yeah, I think Tyrell might try and kill me if I visit much more than I have. Glad the labs are doing their job at least." He looks at her, very seriously. "The second anything else *could* be done, ask for it, no matter what it is. I know humans are prone to platitudes, but that statement is very literal."

"It is appreciated." She assesses him. "You and Captain Chester have been friends for some time, I take it."

"Long enough to be a little too used to visiting her in sickbay. And to know she's very, very good at surviving when no one would have any right to expect it." There's a quirk in his expression. "I was checking on who Tyrell had called in, and realized that she had mentioned your name. I'm glad the person Tyrell called in is someone she trusts."

T'Volis realizes she hasn't expected to be classified as someone Diane trusts, and that it matters perhaps more than it should. "She has always had an increased tolerance for risk."

He snorts. "That's a way to put it." He adds, "I know you briefed us, but - from your assessment, what are the odds the virus was actually Dominion?"

T'Volis weighs her response. "Virtually nonexistent. It does not fit Dominion biogenic weapons profiles. Those are efficient. This one is personal, aimed to strike points of sensitivity in Terran psychology and history. It does not attack the Federation, but humanity specifically."

He doesn't look surprised. "To clarify - how specific? Humanity? Or *her*?"

"Humanity," she says. "Should she have a specific enemy," and Diane has always been good at making enemies, incredibly good, but T'Volis doubts she is *that* good, to have someone design a biological weapon specifically to deal with her, "it is one that is happy to wipe out an entire species to eliminate her. I imagine that list, should it exist, is short. Even with her talents."

"Short but maybe not zero," he shakes his head. "Does it match any patterns with biogenic weapons you've seen before?"

"You have a hypothesis?" She raises an eyebrow at him. "The psychological element of this weapon—humanity's experiences with genetic

modification—is likely to be particularly ineffective for her; she has always had considerably less of a horror of it than the baseline for your species.”

“Yeah, because she has some goddamn *sense*,” he mutters, before continuing more clearly. “There’s a Cardassian splinter group that’s been active in the quadrant, called the True Way. They were the ones who jumped us. I wouldn’t have thought bioweapons would be their style - I think their leader would rather see Cap’ die face to face, not that we’d let that happen - but...” he tilts his head, eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t think they’d frame it as the Dominion. I think they’d want credit. But J’etris is the tactician, and she knows Cap.”

The way he mentions someone wanting to see Diane die face to face so casually, as an accepted fact, is profoundly unsettling. “This individual has wanted to kill her for some time,” she states, before she can help herself. Then she adds, “Regardless, I doubt a splinter group would create such an agent. This is decades of dedicated work, and enormous resources. This True Way seems unlikely to muster the necessary tools, but perhaps they might have used someone else’s existing invention.”

He frowns, considering, and nods.

“I...have not remained current with her activities,” she admits. “Tell me, is she...”

There are possibilities to end that sentence. But T’Volis falls silent, because there are simply too many options. *Is she content? Is she often in this kind of danger? How has she made so many enemies? Has she been injured often?*

After an uncomfortable pause, she says instead, “The Romulan liaison officer seems concerned about her. Do you trust him?”

Hawthorne snorts. “Absolutely not. But it doesn’t surprise me that he’s playing concerned. Whatever the Tal Shiar’s game is, they definitely have him trying very hard to get on her good side.”

Subcommander Tanek has made an overt show of his dislike. It was almost as demonstrative as a human. The way he’d reacted to the news of the gravity of the illness, however...

That was the first thing he did that appeared unstudied.

She puts it aside. The emotional reactions of a Romulan spy are of no relevance to the problem at hand.

Diane tries to get out of bed the next morning, and fails. She gets as far as swinging her feet to the floor, tries to push herself to her feet, and folds over herself. When she forces herself to sit upright again, all the color has gone out of her face.

T’Volis helps her back into the bed. Diane says nothing, not even a joke to diffuse the situation, her expression turned inward and closed off. T’Volis gives her an analgesic and, after scanning her, a muscle relaxant; there are transient spasms, building in force.

After far, far too long, she lets out a long breath and her shoulders relax. From the readings on the biobed, heart rate and cortisol levels, she’s still in significant pain. But her breathing evens anyway. “Thanks,” she rasps. T’Volis rests a hand on her shoulder, and wishes the gauntlet of the protective suit weren’t between them. Humans value physical touch, and physical touch mediated by adaptive mesh and polymers isn’t the same. “I will give you a second dose in ten minutes,” she tells Diane. “It should address the remaining discomfort.”

“Sounds good to me,” manages Diane. She swallows hard, looking gaunt and tired. “No prizes for machismo here, I guess.”

“No,” says T’Volis. “There are not.”

“I’m glad you came,” says Diane, still searching her face, as if the faceplate doesn’t matter. “I know what it must have cost you. I know you were worried this would happen.”

“I was concerned it might happen when I had no way of assisting you,” says T’Volis. “It is a common logical fallacy among sentient beings, but having some measure of involvement in at least attempting to assist you is easier to bear than having nothing to do whatsoever, regardless of ultimate outcome.”

Diane reaches up to put her hand over T’Volis’s. “That’s incredibly sweet of you.”

T’Volis is touched, but she also wishes that Diane would stop this facade. She is dying. She does not need to play the part of the perfect officer even on her deathbed.

“I feel like an idiot,” Diane says to the air after a few minutes longer. “We knew that lab wasn’t exactly secret, and we knew Cardassian dissidents were sniffing around, and yet, I didn’t put two and two together. And so we were all caught unawares and unprepared when they showed up and hit the planet.”

“I do not think it reasonable to lambaste yourself for an exposure that occurred as the result of enemy action,” says T’Volis. “Logically, your enemy attacked in such a way precisely because it would be difficult to anticipate.”

Diane grimaces, moving an arm to cradle her neck, where another spasm forms. “Yeah, but if it happened because I was stupid, it means it was under my control. I’d very much like this to have been under my control.”

“As I noted earlier, that is a logical fallacy.”

“Ah. At least we can be illogical together.” The note of pain in her voice takes any humor out of it.

Are you happy? T’Volis wants to ask. Was this worth it? Is this life all you wanted? But the questions will cause harm, they will be for her own gratification alone, and so she won’t ask them. “Is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable in the meantime? Something

to read, or perhaps music?"

"Ugh." Diane closes her eyes. "No, not really—definitely not music, my head feels like it's about to split open anyway."

T'Polis frowns, checking her readings and then flipping open her tricorder to scan her. She finds what she dreaded; a rapid fluid buildup around the brain. Something else has failed. "T'Polis to Tyrell, prep for emergency surgery. Diane, I need to sedate you."

"Not just a headache, huh?" Diane says, or tries to say, and tilts her head to let T'Polis sedate her.

It is particularly horrible, how her face relaxes so much as she slips into unconsciousness, the pain washing out of it.

Chapter 6

Their response is sufficiently rapid and the surgery effective enough there is no serious damage to the brain. It is a simple surgery, though urgent, but T'Volis feels particularly exhausted afterwards.

"We're going to have more incidents like this, not less," says Tyrell, sounding equally tired.

"You like her," T'Volis says, like an accusation, because Tyrell doesn't indulge in liking *anyone*.

He blinks large dark eyes at her with consternation. "Well," he says after a moment, "I've had worse captains. Besides, I stuck her back together after Cardassia, I take it personally some virus is ruining all my hard work. That eye replacement was *difficult*."

"Logical," she says, with the implication she absolutely doesn't believe him. Her commbadge chirps; Diane is waking up. She goes, so Diane will not wake up alone.

The next day, the coughing starts. Or, re-starts. She coughed plenty in the first few days of infection, but now it changes, deep and wet and bloody. Her blood levels show an overreaction of the immune system, the poetically named human condition of a *cytokine storm*. It killed fast, before modern medicine.

They do what they can, pumping her full of immunosuppressant drugs, persuading her immune system to calm and leave her systems alone, but once she's resting comfortably from that, a secondary infection arises, something else she was exposed to—a fungal pathogen intended for Tellarites, they realize, once the crisis is passed and it's isolated—and attacks her liver and kidneys with vicious effect.

When it is over, she is very weak, and still coughing, and it is still wet and ugly, but the fluids her body was pumping into her lungs have slowed to a trickle and she is not dying for now. She is wrung out and gray, and she does not try to sit up. Her lips are cracked, her eyes sunk in dark, bruised-looking sockets. When she thinks she's unwatched, they close, or stare unfocused at the wall.

She has stopped trying to make jokes. She is not trying to talk more than the bare minimum. She lies there, sleeping when she can, doing exactly as she should, and somehow the cooperation is horrible to T'Volis, who is used to Diane spitting in the face of *should*.

They will have to try the vector treatment when she is a little stronger. When they're not still chasing fungal hyphae through her body for microsurgery. But putting it off is dangerous too.

She coughs and coughs, like her body has forgotten how to *not* cough. T'Volis watches her, numb. It is not that she has given up on Diane's survival, it is not that she thinks it necessary to stop trying. It is simply that she cannot see a way to succeed.

It's late into the evening, and T'Volis is returning to the isolation chamber when she realizes Diane has a visitor. It's well after hours; he's not supposed to be here. But he is—the Tal Shiar agent, Tanek. He is standing by the wall, a hand pressed against the transparent aluminum, and the low murmur of his voice carries down the corridor. T'Volis is close enough to see their expressions, but he is speaking very quietly, and she cannot make out what he is saying.

There are enough differences between Romulans and Vulcans that T'Volis hesitates to name his body language as affectionate, but the expression on his face gives the game away. It's strangely gentle, humor papered thinly over fear, and the way his hand rests on the isolation unit wall is a study in hopeless passion. And Diane's face, as she looks up at him, leaves no other possible interpretation. Humans are so expressive, and she's making no effort to be anything but. She's letting herself look tired, and scared, and appreciative of what he offers her with his own affection, a stark emotional intimacy that T'Volis finds uncomfortable to look at. It is too much. Too human, too demanding. To feel these things is one thing. To put them on your face like that, demand acknowledgement like that...

But here is Tanek, offering comfort, and Diane blatantly showing him she needs it. That she accepts it.

That he is the one person here she does not need to put on her captain's mask for.

And here he is, the Tal Shiar officer, offering helpless comfort to a Starfleet captain, offering what little he can and suffering for it—it's illogical to conclude anything but that her affection is returned. That perhaps she was not even the one to initiate it.

This realization is shocking in its pain.

Maybe Lt Commander Hawthorne is correct. Maybe Subcommander Tanek of the Tal Shiar sees her interest as a mission objective. But that idea doesn't sit well with T'Volis, it doesn't fit with the sad, scared man she sees in that corridor. When he realizes she's there, he straightens up with a farewell to Diane, and stalks back along the corridor, darting a venomous look at T'Volis as he passes.

"He is worried about you," T'Volis tells Diane, after she has suited up and entered the room. Her vitals are fortunately unchanged, but cortisol levels are higher than she'd like, and heart rate is still elevated.

"He's always worried about me," says Diane. Usually this would be delivered with some amusement. It is not. She doesn't even open her eyes, her expression intuned and tight with discomfort. "It's either one hell of an act, or the Tal Shiar gave me the biggest worrywart in the entire Romulan Empire."

She is making light of it. T'Volis pauses in her work. "I would not identify those as the only possibilities."

"If it's anything else," Diane stops, clears her throat, holding down a fit of coughing. Another breath and she fails. T'Volis waits, timing it to

see when it's appropriate to step in with medication.

"If it's anything else," she says again, when it passes without intervention, "he can't afford to have me notice it. It would get him killed. It could get his family killed."

Her own feelings don't factor in, T'Volis knows. She won't ask someone to take that kind of risk for her.

"I see," she says aloud.

"He says he does not wish to have to familiarize himself with the foibles of a new captain," Diane says, doggedly, "not after having adjusted to mine, and if he says that, that's what I'll believe."

"Then I too will accept that explanation," says T'Volis.

Chapter 7

“Shouldn’t repairing the damage be simple?” asks Commander J’etris that evening, as T’Volis reports on their progress. Or rather, lack thereof. “Our genetic technology…”

“The up-regulation of immune activity makes it extremely difficult to introduce the changes,” says T’Volis. “Furthermore, the precision of the tailoring suggests that the immune system may in fact attack healthy cells now. It will be a complex process designing an intervention that not only will address the damage, but evade these responses.”

“So whoever did this really knew what they were doing.” J’etris glares at the tabletop, looking out of place in the small ready room filled with Diane’s things—the family photos, the handful of plants, the calligraphy on the walls. She knows some of these things; a handful were personal effects Diane used to leave with her on Vulcan, and took back after they parted. She knows every line of the palm-sized wooden monkey by the terminal, an Earth one hunched in a pensive posture, a staff in one forepaw and a band around its head; the rough piece of pink quartz poking out from the pot of one of the orchids, the small knot of driftwood sitting by another. There’s a shelf of books whose titles T’Volis once knew in her sleep, the Earth swords on the walls, Diane’s favorite at the top, both lovely and useful with a practice tip in incongruous orange, the ones below it that are mostly just lovely, as Diane had put it. There is almost more of the woman she knew and loved in this room than there is in the body sleeping fitfully in Sickbay.

“They did,” says T’Volis. “But we are continuing to work on it.”

She has no other comfort to offer. The threat of failure has loomed closer. They are running out of time, and from the way J’etris looks at her, she knows it.

“Thank you,” J’etris says at last, her voice rough. “Regardless of outcome.”

Diane’s condition deteriorates again overnight. By morning, they decide it is best to sedate her, in the hopes that absolute rest will be able to do what nothing else can. T’Volis sits with her as she slips, too easily, into sleep. It doesn’t seem right. On some level, she was expecting Diane to fight this, too, illogically and foolishly and instinctively.

The anxiety permeates the whole ship, and sitting that afternoon in the ship’s lounge, datapads piled around her as Tyrell insists on both a change of scenery to keep the mind fresh, and on doggedly continuing to work, T’Volis notes that the ambient noise of the room is several decibels lower than her previous visit, the crew harried and unhappy. To her alarm, her glass of water is quickly refreshed each time it starts getting low—not by any of the lounge’s staff, but by attentive and determined crew. One leaves her a mug of the vilely sweet Terran *hot chocolate*, which mercifully Tyrell relieves her of. Some of them thank her.

Given that her best efforts have translated to very little progress, she does not find this logical. Neither does Tyrell, but that does not stop him from mechanically downing the plates of Earth sweets people keep leaving at his elbow.

There is an affection here, she realizes, and a sense of community, growing closer even in the face of despair, and they are offering that community to her even as they must suspect she is failing them and their captain.

She understands, maybe a little, why Diane is so willing to give so very much of herself to Starfleet, to this crew, and to the crew of the *Bedivere* before them. This is a starship in peacetime—what, then, was it like in war? Humans, as many species do, bond more closely under severe stress.

L’Nar, the youngest of her postdocs, is deep in conversation with a group of beings in Starfleet science blue. Of necessity it’s a grim conversation, but T’Volis can see the way L’Nar inclines her head, thoughtful and interested—the offer of camaraderie is profoundly compelling, especially under the circumstances. T’Volis watches, thinking of the other interactions between L’Nar and the *Interpreter’s* people, and wonders if L’Nar will be seeking that academic post after all.

“May I join you?” It’s Commander J’etris. T’Volis nods assent; Tyrell does not move, but J’etris is accustomed enough to his ways that she settles into an unoccupied seat on their other side anyway. She, too, looks tired.

T’Volis watches her, too. J’etris joined the crew of the *Bedivere* after the end of her relationship with Diane, and so she has neither met nor heard much of the Klingon woman before coming aboard. But she does, clearly, care a very great deal for her Captain and for the rest of her crew; she had been logical, polite, and compassionate. If T’Volis had not seen her in Sickbay seeking treatment for a pulled muscle sustained while beating one of the gym’s dummies into so much scrap, she would find J’etris unhealthily emotionally constrained for a member of her species.

J’etris does not ask whether they’ve had any luck. She just sits, a small bowl between her big hands, and stares right past both of them for a while. Then she says, “Is there any hope of a vaccine?”

Is there any hope Diane’s death will still save lives, is what she means, her intent and her grief as loud as if she shouted.

“That’s fairly trivial,” says Tyrell, shaking himself out of his trance. “Simulations are planned for tomorrow. It won’t do anything for anyone already sick, though.”

“I’m glad we have that much,” says J’etris. “I will tell the Captain.”

Who she knows perfectly well is unconscious. Perhaps because she hopes some part of Diane’s mind will pick up on it anyway, and find comfort.

Diane was part of this, is still part of this even dying, this enormous determined and compassionate whole, and sitting there in the middle of the ship's lounge with everyone grieving and fearing for their Captain, T'Polis has never felt so acutely alone in her life.

Chapter 8

Sedation buys them time, but they find nothing useful to do with it. As the next of what has turned into an endless series of sequencing attempts runs, T'Volis makes use of one of the *Interpreter's* holodeck programs to meditate. Seeing nothing but bulkheads and carpet and artificial light has become painful, and even if she can still feel the sense of filled space around her, the invisible walls of the holodeck leaning in, even the illusion of open rock and growing things is a balm.

She camped in a place much like this with Diane. It was one of their favorites. A refuge.

She has spent much of the last two weeks reflecting on that relationship, on her decision to end it, and here she acknowledges the grief that has cost it—especially under the present circumstances, where Diane *is* dying the death T'Volis so feared. She is not sure that the termination of their courtship has saved her much pain, in the end. She still cares deeply for Diane. It would be worse had they bonded, that is true, but she can know that intellectually and still be hard-pressed to imagine feeling greater distress than she currently does; in none of her worst imaginings did she ever think that she would be the doctor handling the case, and helpless to do anything about it.

Diane is dying. There is no logic in denying that. There's the possibility of a phage therapy, but in every simulation they've run, it kills the patient. Meket thinks he may have found a way around it, but it is very unlikely. L'Nar was the one to say that out loud, the vanishingly small percentage of a chance that it might work, and Meket had said, "It is point zero-zero-seven-five more likely than the next most likely approach," and L'Nar had nodded, and started to run the simulation again. Then they had told T'Volis to go rest, as there was no logic in her spending energy in being idle while they took care of a basic task well within their capabilities.

So she is here, in a small room on a starship pretending very hard to be a Vulcan plateau, with her grief for Diane filing into neat columns, ready for deployment when it is time, and secondary to that is a terrible creeping realization—she does not regret the end of their relationship. If anything, she regrets it less now than she ever has.

She has seen a new facet of Diane's life here, one mentioned in passing and in conversation with Sotek, but never experienced; the tight bonds of a starship crew, the almost fantastic loyalty to one another, the willingness to accept newcomers, the fanatic determination to snatch triumph and life from defeat and death, the total refusal to surrender one moment before they are forced to. She honors it—but it is also totally alien to her, uncomfortable and borderline foolish. And yet, such a profound part of who Diane is, a part that would always have been estranged from T'Volis's own experience, a thing Diane could never have fully shared, even in a meld.

To have a partner who could never share such a profound, basic part of themselves—with whom *she* could not share that... it would have been a disaster, sooner or later. She had chosen sooner, and it is terrible, but she is very sure that *later* would have been still worse.

T'Volis could not bear to be a part of this community; Diane could not be separated from it, even in, as seems likely, death. To be away from sky and wind, to be around so many beings without relief—T'Volis could not have borne that, no more than Diane has ever been able to bear being on a planet for more than two weeks together. She knows this now, in a way she never did before.

She wishes she had realized it earlier. Perhaps it would have made it easier to repair their friendship earlier.

The door hisses open. She does not move, listens to the sound of footsteps making their way toward her; the measured gait of the Romulan. There is a soft sound of fabric as he bends, a disturbance in the simulated sand and rock as he places something in front of her.

"There," he says. "I was hoping you would be intelligent enough to come to this solution yourself, but apparently I must do everything myself on this ship."

He is being more abrasive than usual, but she can hear the brittleness in his voice. She looks up at him, standing rigidly over her with his arms folded a little too tightly across his chest. It strikes her for the first time that he is young, not the usual stodgy middle aged Tal Shiar agents who occasionally appeared at conferences during the war, but an equivalent to her and Diane, perhaps even a little younger. And he is upset.

"Go on," he says, tilting his head at the vial he has placed before her. "There it is."

T'Volis looks at the vial, and then up at Tanek, and says, "I do not understand."

"You understand me perfectly well," says Tanek, a vicious edge like a snarl underlying his voice. "This is the counteragent for the biological weapon the Captain was exposed to. Rather than questioning me, you would better use your time adapting it for use in her specific case."

T'Volis looks at the vial again, and then takes it. If this is a deception of some sort, it is an exceptionally cruel one. "Why are you under the impression that this is the counteragent for this particular virus?"

He gives her a look of low-lidded disgust. "Must I spell it out for you?"

"Apparently so," she says, because her suspicions are forming rapidly, and she has no desire to voice conjecture to him. Not conjecture like this.

"It is a Romulan biogenic weapon," he snaps. "How the Dominion obtained it, I have no idea. I was uncertain until I was able to peruse the data I gained from my visit to Sickbay the other night."

She looks at him, thinking of him standing outside the isolation room wall.

"Really, doctor," he says, sneering, "you don't think that was out of *sentiment*, did you? If a Dominion biogenic weapon killed the Captain, and I did *not* obtain data on it for my superiors, I would not deserve to wear this uniform."

There was no reason for him to put on that show for Diane alone, if she was dying; he had not known T'Volis was there, and she has little doubt that the *Interpeter's* medical staff would have made sure he was not unsupervised, had they known he was there—had he not taken precautions to ensure that no one knew he was there. No, that moment—that was no lie.

Then he is obfuscating now. “Not entirely sentiment, it seems,” she says, her voice very cool, and lifts the vial. She does not quite believe it yet; this seems too easy a solution.

“I would suggest you test it,” he says, trying for dismissive, and now she is listening for it she can hear the cracks in his facade. He claims he only cares about his duty, but she doubts his superiors have given him permission to divulge that this is a Romulan weapon, let alone furnish a counteragent.

“I am surprised you suggest that,” she says, “and that you have not demanded I trust you implicitly.”

He makes an impatient gesture. “Oblige me, Doctor,” he says, “by not being so careless with her in your professional life as you were in your personal.”

The observation cuts painfully, but it is not important.

“Why would you be provided with the counteragent?” she asks instead, though a few possibilities present themselves. Interrogation of a prisoner, for example.

“I have a genetic vulnerability,” he says. “Detected when I first entered training. I am susceptible to elements of the virus.”

The Romulans were serious enough about this weapon that they have provided one of their agents with a means to protect himself in case they decided to deploy it. T'Volis looks at the vial in her hand, then back at him.

“Of course,” he says, and for a second his expression twists in a way he must have picked up from Diane, “there is every possibility that is simply designed to kill me, to prevent...embarrassment. It will of course be your job to ascertain whether it's a viable treatment.”

T'Volis looks down at the vial again. Diane is running out of time. A human would thank him. But this—this is too much to trust. “Why?” she asks.

“Really, Doctor,” he says, and if he has been abrasive and bitter before, it is nothing to what is in his voice now. “I thought you were a reasonably intelligent and perceptive woman. But perhaps you of all people are least suited to understand my motives.”

T'Volis has no patience for this kind of thing, not right now. “Your jealousy is illogical,” she tells him. “As is your expectation I will simply take you at your word in this situation.”

“Don't,” he says. “Analyze that, and see what it is. Its efficacy is all that matters, not whether I can be trusted.”

He jerks his head downward in an acknowledgement that doesn't even bother to be rude, and turns his back on her, stalking out of the holodeck.

T'Volis stares another moment at the vial between her fingers, a small ampoule of clear liquid, ready to be slotted into a hypospray. She does not want to hope.

She gets up and hurries for Sickbay nevertheless.

Chapter 9

“Unbelievable,” says Tyrell, staring down at the readings on his tricorder. He’s been saying that for the last few hours as each round of scan results come in. He said it as they realized this was in fact a counteragent, as he realized its mechanism of action, as they found how simple it was to replicate and reprogram for a human—for a specific human.

Now he’s saying it as he scans Diane, who grins up at them from the bed with her usual impish grin. Her cheeks might be hollowed out, and there might be dark circles under her eyes, but the smile is hers again. “I’m going to take that as a compliment. The nausea’s gone, by the way, thank you for that.”

The initial doses had not agreed with the human inner ear. And emesis in humans occurs at the slightest of provocations. Though usually more an inconvenience than a threat to health, Diane’s condition had been delicate enough they’d spent the last few hours trying to synthesize a potent enough antiemetic to stop it.

Diane had complained vigorously throughout the whole process, itself an encouraging sign. At least she had the energy to do so. She is now complaining vociferously about being bored, and demanding a mobility aid, of any kind, to get herself back onto the Bridge once they know she no longer poses a threat of infection. T’Volis gives it a maximum of twenty six hours after that clearance before she begins to take matters into her own hands.

“The last of the modified cells should convert back within the next half-hour,” says Tyrell, sounding almost offended by it. “It’s a remarkably efficient treatment. The chimeric ability to elude the immune system…” He shakes his head.

“Of course it is,” says Diane. “Everything the Dominion does is efficient. This pathogen is a case in point.” She makes a face. “We really dodged a bullet. Can you imagine what would have happened if this occurred during the war?”

Tyrell lifts his eyes briefly to meet T’Volis’s, plainly displeased. “Yes,” he says, not looking down, “We did dodge a bullet, didn’t we.”

The moment they’re in the decontamination chamber, he turns on T’Volis. “You didn’t tell her.”

“You didn’t, either,” T’Volis says.

He makes a frustrated gesture. “You’re the one he gave it to!”

“I am,” she says. “And I do not think divulging its source is a good idea. Subcommander Tanek gave it to me to save the Captain, knowing full well it would mean his death. I see that as very good reason to do everything we can to prevent his superiors finding out what he has done.”

Tyrell looks at her sidelong, then lets out a long breath. “The man is purposefully aggravating,” he says, deliberate understatement, “and I’d be glad to see the back of him, but…” He hesitates. “Very well,” he says. “As far as we’re concerned, it was one of the unidentified samples we found in the rubble we sequenced just in time. The original sample was sufficient to determine its Romulan origin.”

T’Volis inclines her head in acknowledgement. “I will inform him.”

She finds Tanek in his quarters. “May we speak freely?” she asks, once she has gained admittance. The unspoken question: have you cleared your quarters of listening devices?

He smirks, all disdain and confidence. “Yes.”

“We will inform the Federation that the counteragent was found in one of the laboratory samples. Perhaps there was a contamination that slowed the sequencing process.” She turns to face him, registering the surprise on his face. “Diane would find you dying for her unacceptable. Whatever the cause.”

“Have you told her, then?”

Somehow, it is harder to justify it to him than it was to Tyrell. “I have not. If you wish her to know, you will have to be the one to tell her.”

He snorts. “She would be a fool to believe me.”

“Your own actions would seem to undermine that, Subcommander.”

He looks at her with startlement and then suspicion, and then twists his face with obvious effort into mockery. “Jealousy ill becomes you, Doctor.”

It is a clumsy attempt at offense. She ignores it. “Diane will never ask another to sacrifice their life for her,” she says, “and she had given me to understand she believes seeking your very evident affections will have just such an outcome. Whether this is the case, I leave between the two of you; but she is very unlikely to believe you would lie to her about this.”

“I hadn’t realized the human valorization of romantic love had infected Vulcan as well,” he sneers. “You think I would do something so stupid for mere desire?”

T’Volis lifts an eyebrow at him.

“For a *human*?” he adds, bristling. “No. You do not let something like her go to *waste*,” and he might be talking about her as an asset to his assignment, but the venom in his voice belies that. It is something he feels deeply and strongly about, but there is almost an embarrassment to

the way he speaks like–

–like it threatens him, deeply, something that’s eroded its way through layers of cynicism and anger and found something there that no agent of the Tal Shiar is ever going to be anything but shamed to acknowledge.

“Because she’s your Captain?” she asks, bland, and it elicits the response she was hoping for—he bristles, mouth going flat and disapproving.

“Please. I’m not *Starfleet*, and I’m not prone to their sentiments.”

“Ah. But you are to your own.”

“You of all people are the least qualified to understand my decision,” he says, venomous. She must be very close to the heart of the matter.

“Because I broke off our courtship,” she says.

“You rejected her,” he says, harsh.

“We were ill-suited for one another,” she says. “I had not realized it so acutely as I have now. I do not find this life appealing,” she tilts her head, indicating the starship—*Starfleet*—as a whole, “and she cannot bear anything else. It is intrinsic to who she is, in a way that I did not fully appreciate at the time. She has a far greater tolerance of risk than I do. We were both well of aware of it. Your statement that I rejected her is correct. It was preferential to trammeling her.”

His expression has changed; it’s clear he’s not sure how to respond.

“Whatever your reasoning, it seems that you could not bear to see her die, either,” she says. “You owe me no explanation. Simply know we will do what we can to keep your role in this secret. She would not wish you to die for her.”

“It won’t do me, or her, any good,” he says with finality. “The Tal Shiar are not so easily eluded. They will learn of my role in this. And I will die, whether she wishes it or not.”

T’Volis thinks of Diane, her determination not to seek Tanek’s affections, knowing that it will kill him and perhaps his family, too. *If* they were genuine, a risk T’Volis doubts Diane would allow herself to run. She has placed her ship and crew ahead of her partner once before.

Why, she wants to ask. There is love in it, certainly, but that is not all.

“I can justify the risk to save her life.” His voice is harsh. “If I had risked it for anything else, I would not deserve her interest.”

If he had risked his family’s lives to gratify his own desire. Yes, T’Volis can agree with this; Diane would have no patience for someone willing to sacrifice other lives to secure her affections.

Her silence seems to be doing more than anything else to unlock his motives; he stares at her another long few moments and adds, “She is... a person of a kind far too rare among any of our peoples. *None* of us could afford to lose her.”

“Mnhei’sahe,” says T’Volis, experimentally, and he goes still and intent and disdainful, cynical sneer settling onto his face like a mask. She has struck at the root of the matter; his immediate anger is too strong for anything else.

“I hate to disappoint you, Doctor, but not all of us talk like characters from ancient plays,” he says. “I’m sorry if that doesn’t fit with your cherished stereotypes. Now leave.”

There is no more to be said. She goes.

Chapter 10

“We could take you to Vulcan,” Diane offers. She’s sitting in the command chair, as completely at ease as T’Volis has ever seen her. There are still smudges under her eyes, a hollowness to her cheeks, but a lightness in her expression that speaks of good health, even if the rest of her body has yet to catch up. “We’re ordered back to Earth, and it isn’t if it’s not on the way.”

Her initial inclination is to refuse. But there is no logic in it, only the gratification of long habit, avoiding Diane and her own unsettled mind. Now, with her own ambivalence resolved, taking the most efficient way back to Vulcan is the only reasonable course of action. If it means rebuilding their friendship, this is an additional advantage.

“I would be glad,” she says, and when Diane invites her to sit in one of the auxiliary seats at her side, she sits, looking at the strange sweep of the Bridge and the quiet bustle of people. Their minds are loud, but at least the cacophony is no longer one of distress. And Diane, next to her, is settled, radiating a peaceful happiness like nothing T’Volis has ever felt from her before as she surveys her domain. *Complete*, T’Volis thinks, a conclusion with very little logic to it, but still it fits the moment.

Diane leans over in a quiet moment and says, “I’m glad I could share this with you, even just the once.”

T’Volis thinks of all the times she did not understand, all the times Diane would not have been able to share this with her, all the missed opportunities, and nods. This is not the life she would choose for herself, but now she can see, at least faintly, why Diane has done so.

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