

Early Warning

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Early Warning

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Summary

The starship Reykjavik's well-earned shore leave is cut short by the mysterious and sudden appearance of a wreckage field within Federation space. An investigation of this phenomena turns up some unsettling answers and leads to a most unexpected confrontation.

Chapter 1

April 5th, 2321

Menade Station

Thaxibos Tether, in anchored geostationary orbit of Thaxibos II

Thaxidross System

Xonkinus Confederacy

The Agora Marketplex aboard the Thaxibos tether station Menade was a bustling hub of commercial and social activity around the planet's roughly thirty-seven-hour clock. This meant that a visiting ship's crew could find food, drink, gambling, entertainment and a host of other diversions at any time of day or night.

The Xonkinus Confederacy was the rump remnant of a once considerably larger alliance of systems that had become enfolded by and then largely absorbed by the expanding United Federation of Planets. They had stubbornly maintained their free port status, offering trade and recreation opportunities to ships representing dozens of different Alpha Quadrant governments.

The jewel of the Thaxidross system was the Thaxibos Tether, an enormous space elevator complex connecting the species' orbital shipyard to the surface of the planet by way of a star-ladder. It was an engineering marvel, one that Federation engineers and architects had been studying for decades since First Contact with the Thaxians.

Situated along the upper length of the giant orbital lift were several space stations, each occupying a distinct orbital zone like pearls strung upon a dangling, unclasped necklace.

The *Shangri-La*-class starship USS *Reykjavik* had docked with Menade Station two days earlier, having been granted leave following an exhausting mission to escort colonization ships through a zone of pirate-infested space to their newly established colony planets in the Carina Association stellar cluster.

Menade Station was circular in overall layout, with ascending and descending tiers above and below the facility's mid-line, extending outward from where the tether itself ran through its center. The Agora Marketplex took up a full quarter of the station's volume, containing numerous residential districts, hotels and hostels tailored to a variety of lifeforms and environmental requirements.

The ceiling here was nearly fifty meters overhead, the cavernous space filled with shifting, shimmering holographic art, geometric designs which flexed and folded in upon themselves in a scintillating variety of colors, some of them invisible to the humanoid eye.

On one of the many tiered platforms contained within the marketplex, each rising or sinking in relation to one another at various randomized rates, was a dining area situated among several restaurants and food kiosks. Tables were interspersed among garden boxes and planters filled with exotic flora while an equally colorful panoply of humanoids and non-sapient beings ate, drank, absorbed, and socialized.

A female human approached a large table around which were gathered her fellow senior officers. The young woman wore a modern variation of a Terran summer dress with leggings underneath, giving her a festive, carefree air. She had artificially red-tinted hair that fell to below her shoulders, one of the few times her comrades hadn't seen her with it tightly braided or arranged in a non-nonsense bun while on duty.

Ensign Rachel Garrett was the newest member of *Reykjavik's* senior staff, having been poached from another ship and captain on route to her first posting just days after graduating Starfleet Academy. She was now Chief Science Officer aboard an attack cruiser, having the dubious distinction of heading up a very small, underutilized department aboard what was essentially a warship.

Garrett carried a drink carafe in one hand containing a potent admixture of Denobulan prune wine and seltzer. Though being young and on leave, Garrett was still cognizant of her status as a senior officer and thus had been carefully nursing the drink over multiple hours. She was not one typically given to overindulgence.

She called out to the others, "Okay, can someone please tell me what a ruby-fruit is, and why four separate people have asked me if I have any or if I know someone who can get them?"

Gael Jarrod, a tanned Caucasian human male sporting a rakish goatee and dressed in slacks and a stylish button up shirt laughed, raising his half-empty glass to Garrett in greeting as she approached.

"It's their name for a pomegranate. They just encountered it for the first time a little over a year ago and the whole society's gone mad for it," Jarrod answered in his slightly nasal Oxonian-English accent. "They'll pester anyone who even looks vaguely human, trying to find new sources of pomegranate to import. They're having a devil of a time trying to arrange trade with Earth and some of its colonies where they're grown due to our moneyless economy. Apparently, it's hard to establish an exchange rate with people who don't have a form of currency."

Garrett plopped down next to Jarrod, her smile a refreshing counterpoint to her usually somber on-duty demeanor. "Well, mystery solved, then. I thought a bunch of the locals were having me on. They kept offering me things in bulk, like I was shopping for an entire ship's crew complement or something."

"They all just want to be the next filthy rich pomegranate baron!" roared a compact Tellarite at the other end of the table. Lieutenant Commander Glal, the ship's first officer, was a solidly built, porcine figure of a man, coming to just over five-and-a-half feet tall. He had

shoulder length hair ringing his balding pate, offset by a full, thatch-like beard through which two tusks protruded from the sides of his mouth.

Glal was dressed in a Hawaiian style shirt and Bermuda shorts, both in clashing colors and patterns which somehow accurately represented both his personality and lifestyle.

Seated next to Glal was a human woman in her mid-forties of Hispanic heritage, with an olive complexion and black hair shot-through with premature streaks of gray. She had broad, handsome features, and intense brown eyes which seemed to absorb everything in her vicinity. She was clad in a form-fitting bodysuit with a stylish belt and vest combination, sporting matching boots of faux-leather. A glass of the local variant of whiskey was held lightly in one hand as she conversed with her senior officers.

Captain Nandi Trujillo looked up to fix a mischievous smile on Garrett. “How was the symposium? Aren’t you back a bit early?”

Garrett looked up from where she was conversing with Lieutenant Jarrod. “Ahh— yes, sir. The symposium ended up being a bit of a bust, unfortunately. Not a lot of genuine academic value, more an elaborate sales pitch for a Deltan company’s new sensor suite. I’m not sure who marketed this whole thing as an actual scientific exchange, but they’ve managed to irritate a bunch of people who traveled some distance to attend.”

“*Caveat emptor*,” Trujillo said with a laugh, shaking her head.

Dr. Lawrence Bennett, the ship’s Chief Medical Officer, looked down the length of the table at the others. He was a tall, middle-aged human of European ancestry with salt-and-pepper hair, cut mid-length, and a matching beard. “So, what’s tonight’s itinerary?” he asked.

“There’s a Bolian crystal chorus performing here tonight, and Onwah Durijma is appearing live on Goltha Station two levels up the well,” Lieutenant Arwen DeSilva offered. The stunningly beautiful Portuguese woman was a proud Lisboeta, a native of Lisbon, and served as *Reykjavík’s* Operations officer. She was tall, willowy, with cascading onyx tresses that fell to beneath her waist. Her high cheekbones gracefully accented her full lips and dazzling emerald-green eyes. As usual, while on leave she was scantily clad in eye-catching colors, the crew’s designated fashionista. This ensemble came with large yellow feathers of unknown provenance.

Ensign Farouk Naifeh shook his head with a knowing smirk. “Never going to happen. The Durijma concert has been sold-out for weeks.” The youthful flight officer was dark complected, with black hair cut short and a well-kept mustache that complimented the nearly stubble-short beard that accentuated his jawline.

“We could swing by the gravity bar again,” Bennett offered. “That was a good time.”

Naifeh groaned, eliciting laughs from the others. “Too much like zero-g training for my taste. And I was the one they made wear a space-sick face-mask... for obvious reasons.”

DeSilva snorted, nearly spitting out a mouthful of her drink. “Evacuation of one’s stomach is not an accepted form of zero-g propulsion, Ensign.”

The group’s collective laughter at Naifeh’s expense fell away at the sound of Trujillo’s wrist-comm alerting. She tapped the device, “Go ahead.”

“Captain, we’ve received a priority alert from Command. Station DMS-0149 in the Varpathi system has reported anomalous sensor contacts in close proximity to their position. Whatever it is, the station didn’t pick up anything on approach, and now the objects are practically on top of them. We’ve been ordered to investigate.”

In response to Garrett’s questioning look, Jarrod leaned in to whisper. “It’s one of our dilithium processing stations, the only one within five sectors. For obvious reasons, they’re rather well defended and closely monitored.”

Trujillo stood, the others rising with her. “Understood. Sound a general recall to the crew. I want everybody back aboard in twenty minutes. Anyone under the influence is ordered to stop by sickbay and get sobered up before taking their posts.”

The captain closed the channel and mock-glared at Naifeh. “This is your doing, Farouk. This is the universe balancing the karmic scales for your zero-g vomit-comet hijinks!”

The ensign looked appropriately abashed, though his lingering smirk belied this.

Trujillo raised her glass in a farewell toast to their abbreviated shore leave. “Time to get back to work. What’s our motto?”

The others raised their glasses in unison, crying out, “First to advance, last to retreat!”

They downed their remaining drinks, with Trujillo uttering a definitive, “Amen.”

* * *

The Jem'Hadar shouldn't have been able to get so close to DMS-0149 without being detected, but that was a problem they'd deal with later. Right now, the problem uppermost in Commander Diane Chester's mind was *winning* that battle.

She braced herself in her seat as another shot hit the *Bedivere* like a hammer, and Captain Bonnie Steenburg's clear soprano tore through the clamor of alerts and alarms. "Return fire! Get that one off the *Chandigarh*!"

The entire action had been a flaming mess, from the distress call coming in near the end of her shift, the hastily scrambled task force, the three extra fighters that the station scans had missed. Now, the *Bedivere* and the four other ships of the task force were fighting for their lives.

"Got them!" said Lieutenant J'etris, with vicious satisfaction, and the fighter in front of them went up in flames.

Chester looked down at her own tactical display. "Sir, two have broken off from the main wing." She looked up at the viewscreen, then at Steenburg as she realized what was happening. "They're making a run at the facility."

"Well, that just won't do," said Steenburg. "Tell the task force to form up on us. We're here to defend that station, people."

"*Chandigarh* is falling behind," said Lieutenant Commander Takahashi at Sciences. "Fluctuations in her warpfield, I think she's going to—"

Chandigarh veered suddenly, bucking upward, and collided with a Jem'Hadar fighter just as her warp core lost containment and annihilated both ships in a flare of blue-white light. Steenburg closed her eyes and ducked her head a moment. "Status of the rest of the taskforce?"

"Holding steady. Sir, the Jem'Hadar are accelerating."

"Target their lead ship." But they only got one shot off before another of the fighters dropped down on them, firing. The first two shots brought down *Bedivere*'s weakened shields, the third shot fried the forward phaser emitters; the fourth lanced through the port nacelle, sending people lurching off their feet on the Bridge and the *Bedivere* into a long end over end tumble. Chester barely managed to regain her seat as the remaining ships of the task force shot past them and after the Jem'Hadar fighters already dipping down for the first strafing run on the facility. Steenburg was calling to Lt. Commander Var Bena in Engineering, estimating time to emergency power to pull them out of the tumble while Robles fought the suddenly uncooperative helm, and in between one scanning cycle and another, Chester spotted it—the failing shield on the far side of the station.

"Sir, they need to fall back," she said, and Steenburg turned to look at her, alarmed by the edge in her voice. "The next pass, the refinery is going to blow, and if the task force is that close—"

Steenburg jerked a nod, drawing a breath to warn the task force, but it was already too late. The destruction of the *Chandigarh* was dwarfed by the station explosion, and the *Bedivere*'s superstructure groaned as the leading shockwave of the explosion did its level best to tear her apart, and the debris from the task force shredded into her hull like the claws of an outraged beast. Chester went flying from her seat for the second time in as many minutes, landing on the carpet with a force that kicked the wind out of her; the first lungful she got was filled with the stench of scorched metal and polymers. She coughed, regretted it, pushed herself up as soon as she was sure she wouldn't drop back flat on her face.

"Damage report!" Captain Steenburg was calling, pulling the staggering officers on the smoke-filled Bridge back to their feet. How she was able to talk without coughing, Chester had no idea.

Grimly, Chester climbed the rest of the way to her feet, staggering back to her chair and calling up the interface. It sputtered and flickered under her fingers, and she thumped it with the side of her hand.

"We've lost main power," said Robles from Ops. "Sensors and comms too. The warp core is offline."

"So are shields and phasers," said Lieutenant J'etris at Tactical.

"So we're sensor blind, defenseless, unable to move, and unable to call for help. Did I miss anything?" Steenburg looked around, eyebrows raised, her tone more akin to someone sharing a questionable joke. "Has anyone here got good news?"

"Our automated distress signal is working," said Takahashi, and frowned. "I think."

"That's something. Right," said Steenburg. "We've gotten out of worse," which was, to Chester's fairly certain knowledge, a blatant lie, "and it's time to get out of this. Let's get to work, people."

* * *

Chapter 2

April 5th, 2321
Varpathi System

“We are secured from warp speed,” Ensign Naifeh announced from the Helm station. “We are steady on course at one-quarter impulse, sir.”

“Weaps,” Trujillo called back to Jarrod at Tactical, “give me eyes, 2D.”

A two-dimensional representation of the parsec they had just warped into came to life on the viewer. Approximately one-million kilometers from *Reykjavik* was a dense field of drifting space vessels and debris, the likely aftermath of a savage battle.

Nearby, the asteroid facility DMS-0149 sat quietly, its crew monitoring the unexpected arrival of these intruders.

“Detecting several semi-intact vessels amidst the flotsam, Captain,” DeSilva noted from Operations.

“I’m seeing alloys consistent with Federation designs, sir,” Garrett noted, undisguised surprise in her voice.

Trujillo shot a concerned look at Glal. There had been no notice of any incursion into Federation space in this region, nor the dispatching of starships to the area.

“Hail the dilithium station,” Trujillo instructed.

A moment later DeSilva advised, “Channel open to the station commander, sir, audio only.”

“This is Captain Trujillo of *Reykjavik*.”

“Hello, Captain. This is Commander Bai Huang of DMS-0149,” a woman’s voice responded. “Thank you for responding so quickly. This whole scenario has us mystified and a bit spooked, to be perfectly honest. We’ve got robust tactical systems, but we’re stationary and sitting on top of quite a bit of refined dilithium. A fire-fight here would be problematic.”

“I can imagine, Commander,” Trujillo empathized. “Reports have it that whatever this is, it just appeared?”

“Correct, sir. We’re equipped with a Class-IV sensor suite. Nothing that isn’t very well cloaked should be able to sneak up on us from within three light-years, but this whole debris field just popped into existence on our doorstep less than four hours ago.”

“No response to your hails?” Trujillo asked.

“Nothing so far, aside from what we believe to be an automated distress beacon. We detected some movement shortly after it’s arrival, but the whole area was bathed in some kind of chronometric radiation that’s since dissipated. If there was something moving out there, it either left the area while our sensors were occluded or it shut down.”

“Understood. We’ll go check it out, Commander Huang. Keep your sensors on us and be ready to call for the other ships on route to expedite if we manage to kick over the proverbial hornet’s nest.”

“Copy that, *Reykjavik*.”

Trujillo closed the channel. “Ahead one-eighth impulse.” She pulled her swing-arm console from the side of her command chair and up into her lap, punching in a series of course adjustments. “Mister Naifeh, follow this course around the periphery of the debris zone.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Ops, Science, what are you seeing?” Trujillo prompted.

“I’m picking up at least one *Excelsior*-class, or what’s left of it, sir,” DeSilva noted, careful to keep her tone neutral.

“And a warp nacelle and strut from a *Miranda*...” Garrett added.

“Visual,” Trujillo ordered.

The viewscreen magnified the carnage of the presumed battle’s aftermath. Clouds of wreckage floated lazily while the hulks of several ships could be seen adrift in the debris field, some of them still glowing with furious unquenched plasma fires.

“Find me the source of that distress beacon,” Trujillo said.

“Got it, sir.” DeSilva adjusted the viewscreen to display a sizeable vessel which looked to Trujillo like a much larger and bulkier version of a *Miranda*-class with an under-slung deflector dish and secondary hull nestled between its ventral-mounted nacelles. The ship’s hull was pockmarked with what appeared to be weapons impacts, with several visible hull breaches and a streamer of drive plasma trailing from its port nacelle.

“And we still can’t read the distress signal’s substrate?” Jarrod asked.

“Negative,” DeSilva replied. “Who sends a coded distress signal?”

“Someone at war,” Glal answered gruffly as Trujillo nodded in silent assent.

“I can read their livery from here, sir,” Garrett offered. “USS *Bedivere*, NCC-62845.”

Glal rose from his station and descended into the well, leaning in to whisper, “Check that against our records, Lieutenant,” to DeSilva.

“No such vessel listed in the Starfleet registry, Commander,” DeSilva noted with more than a hint of skepticism as she looked askance at the XO.

“Open a channel,” Trujillo instructed.

“Channel open,” DeSilva confirmed.

“Unidentified vessel, this is Captain Nandi Trujillo of the Federation warship *Reykjavik*. We have responded to your distress call and stand ready to assist with rescue and recovery operations.”

While they awaited a reply, Trujillo looked from Ops to Tactical. “DeSilva, Jarrod, I want to know who they were fighting. Find me something intact, or failing that, enough wreckage to give us some idea who or what can dish out this kind of damage.”

Meanwhile, Ensign Garrett had been compiling a list of registry numbers gleaned from pieces of wreckage large enough for them to be read. She turned to Trujillo from the Science station. “Captain, one of the registries I’m seeing is for the *Chandigarh*. I got the number off a piece of her dorsal saucer.”

Trujillo returned the younger woman’s gaze evenly. “What about it, Mister Garrett?”

“She’s a *Constellation*-class ship, sir, and according to our records, she’s currently under construction at Starbase 17. Not expected to begin shakedown and speed trials for another six months. Hers is the numerically lowest registry of those I’ve been able to identify.”

Trujillo just stared, the bottom dropping out of her stomach as the reality of what Garrett was telling her hit home. “Thank you, Ensign.”

“*This is Captain Bonnie Steenburg of the Federation Starship Bedivere*,” came the response. “*Reykjavik, be advised Jem’Hadar vessels are likely still active in the debris field. Approach with caution. Our warp engines are down and we are on emergency power. We have just restored comms, and our sensors are still down—what’s the status of the station?*”

Trujillo cast a glance at Garrett, who was already on the ball. After a few moments of fruitless searching of various databases, Garrett shook her head as Trujillo prepared to open the comms channel. “Nothing on ‘Jem’Hadar’ in our database, sir, unless this task force was attacked by an Orion frozen dessert. Jan’Ha-da... that’s as close as it gets.”

Trujillo toggled the comms open on her armrest interface. “*Bedivere*, the station appears intact. We stand ready to transport over engineering and medical personnel, should you require such. Can you send along visual referents for the Jem’Hadar vessels, as they may be difficult to recognize in all this debris.”

There was a significant pause before the response, and when it came, it sounded puzzled. “*Sending now. Medical and engineering teams would be welcome, but we’re sitting ducks in here. You’ll be putting your own personnel at significant risk.*”

“Understood, Captain, but risk is what we do. I’ll start sending our teams over now, and then we’ll raise shields and make a circuit of the debris field looking for any more... Jem’Hadar.”

Trujillo looked up to see Glal staring daggers at her from his auxiliary console on the upper level of the bridge.

She assiduously ignored him.

The viewer shifted to display a strange-looking, compact vessel, identified by the accompanying script as a Scarab-class Jem’Hadar heavy fighter.

“At least we know what to look for now, sir,” Jarrod observed dryly.

“What’s a poleron-cannon?” DeSilva queried, still digesting the technical brief that accompanied the visuals from *Bedivere*.

Glal rose from his station and came over to the captain’s chair, leaning in to speak in a whisper. “This has all the makings of a cross-temporal event, Captain. There are protocols for this, and you know that.”

She replied in an equally conspiratorial tone. “And I’m sure they have the same protocols, which is why I’m fishing for as much information as we can get before they realize their mistake and clam up like an Aldebaran shellmouth.”

In a louder tone she said, “Mister Glal, I’d like you to lead the team over to *Bedivere* to assist with medical and engineering support.”

Trujillo turned her attention back to the comms. “We’ve received your data-packet, Captain. Thank you. We’re a bit late to the party. Can you tell us what happened here?”

* * *

“Well, Commander, I have good news at last.”

Commander Diane Chester paused in her repairs, peering down over her shoulder at Lt. Commander Var Bena. Chester was a tall human of mixed Chinese and European ancestry, at thirty young for an executive officer. Her long black hair had pulled its way out of her tight bun over the course of the battle and subsequent, giving off flyaways in every direction, and her dark eyes were red-rimmed. She’d been the officer of the watch when they’d gotten the distress call from the dilithium refinery; she’d definitely been up for at least twenty-six hours, but had stopped counting some time ago.

Bena didn’t look good, either. The usually affable Bolian was all but drooping with exhaustion, but a very tired grimace that bore some resemblance to a smile was playing around his mouth. “Help’s arrived. The USS *Reykjavík* under Captain Trujillo’s sending over engineering and medical teams as we speak. The Captain needs you back on the Bridge.”

Chester very carefully secured the hatch she’d been working on, and equally carefully secured her tools. The only sign of the tension Bena’s remark had provoked was the tightness around her mouth. “Captain Trujillo? You’re sure about that?”

Bena shrugged. “As sure as I can be, with comms in their current condition.” That was, only a few lines functioning, and none of the commbadges.

Chester looked at the closed hatch, and said, “Fuck,” to it very quietly, then slid the rest of the way out of the Jeffries tube. This she did with some care; at a lanky six feet, she’d had way too much experience banging her head on crawlway ceilings.

Bena watched her with some concern, not unreasonable—it wasn’t the kind of news he expected to be received so grimly. “Commander?”

“Tell Captain Steenburg I’m on my way,” she said, “and not to talk too much!”

Then she bolted for the remaining functional turbolift.

* * *

Chester had caught her breath by the time the turbolift doors opened on the Bridge, which stank just as badly of burnt carpet as it had when she’d headed down to deal with damage to the engines. The smoke had cleared a little, though, and the wavering static on the viewscreen had begun to resemble an image. She pulled her uniform jacket into some kind of order, looked around, and inwardly winced.

Captain Steenburg was indeed talking too much. As Chester hurried down to the center seat, she was saying, “We were defending DMS-0149 from a Dominion attack. They’ve been pushing hard in this sector. An attack wing got through our line; as far as we can tell, they destroyed the facility. The explosion did a hell of a lot more damage than the original attack did.”

“Sir,” said Chester, sliding into her seat next to Steenburg’s. “A word.”

Steenburg glanced at her, a *not now, I’m on a call* look.

“Sir,” said Chester again, a little more firmly. “If you’re speaking to Captain Trujillo there, we’ve gone back in time by at least fifty years.” Unspoken: *please, sir. Stop talking. Right now.*

Steenburg gave her a long expressionless look, then turned her attention back to the viewscreen. “*Reykjavík*, you have probably heard my remarkably suspicious XO’s concern. What year is it?”

Trujillo expelled a sigh, as though having been caught by the principal. She touched a control interface, adjusting the audio-only transmission to a visual feed.

Trujillo stood wearing what by the late 24th century would be known by more modern Starfleet personnel as the classic ‘monster maroons.’

“It’s... 2321 by the Terran Julian calendar, Captain. Your XO is correct, it appears your task force and the remains of the ships you were fighting have somehow traveled back in time.”

“The explosion,” said Chester, resigned. “That much dilithium going up at once...”

“We’re lucky it was only fifty years,” said Steenburg. “Thank you, Captain. Unfortunately, the stardate doesn’t make us any less in need of help.”

Chester flashed her a look of alarm at the same time the viewer cleared. She tried to smooth her reaction away, but it was probably too late.

Trujillo smirked, gesturing towards Chester on the viewscreen while looking to her own exec. “See, Commander, she’s no happier than you are. You could form a club. Maybe get matching shirts?”

“Commander Chester is our resident history buff,” Steenburg explained. “And therefore our officer best qualified to determine how to carry out this operation with the minimum of outrage from the Department of Temporal Investigations.”

This time, Chester didn’t even bother covering the appalled look she shot her captain.

Trujillo frowned. “Those bookish time researchers? You have to worry about angering them in the future?” She shrugged. “Regardless, I have personnel ready to beam over, but given the circumstances I can understand if you don’t want them poking around on your ship. Our medical facilities are at your disposal, Captain.”

“Unfortunately, in the future, the nerds have teeth,” said Steenburg with a grin. “Be damned to them; I’ve got a lot of hurting people here and a badly damaged ship. We’ll take any assistance you can give, Captain. Transmitting our casualty list and preliminary damage reports now.”

Trujillo looked to DeSilva, who nodded to the captain as the aforementioned data began to arrive. She gestured to Glal. “Commander, lead the rescue teams over and make sure we’re adhering to temporal-encounter protocols.”

“You mean aside from boarding the starship from the future which contains technology significantly more advanced than our own, sir?” he asked acerbically.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Chester, in much the same tone.

Trujillo produced a genuine smile. “I can tell already, you two are going to get along wonderfully.”

* * *

Chapter 3

* * *

“I can tell you’re concerned,” said Steenburg, a deliberate understatement, and glanced sidelong at her XO. “Out with it.”

Chester looked around at the ready room, a few of Steenburg’s prized orchids askew on the desk, and several completely without their pots—a lot of things had gone flying in that last explosion—and sighed. “We’re breaking every temporal reg in the book, sir. I know we need help, but at what price? It’s not a matter of whether we might be contaminating the timeline, it’s a matter of how badly. They’re going to come over here, and they’re going to see things they shouldn’t, things that won’t be developed for years or decades, and we frankly don’t have the capacity to manage that. It’s an enormous risk, and we’re not just risking ourselves, or them, we’re risking our present.”

Steenburg leaned back in her chair. “Yes. It’s a risk. But we don’t have a lot of choice. We aren’t getting out of this ourselves, Diane. And regulations or no regulations, right now our job is to bring these people home safe. There’s a Federation ship out there able to help. It might be from the wrong year, but sacrificing even one of my crew’s lives with help so close is not something I’m willing to do.”

She watched Chester’s face a long moment, searching to see if the younger woman understood the point she was making. “Sometimes,” she said, “you get backed into a corner, and you don’t get a choice between right and wrong. You get a choice between bad and worse. Right now, we’re in one of those corners, and we’re very, very lucky. Because those people out there offering us a hand are Starfleet, just like us. They’ve sworn the same oaths. They have our values. So right now, the best thing we can do, for the people aboard this ship who trust us, is to trust them to uphold our oaths and our values when we can’t.”

Chester frowned down at the table, uneasy. It seemed like an impossible thing to ask of anyone. Steenburg watched her patiently, and a little sadly; the war had promoted promising young officers like Chester very quickly, and while she was shouldering the exec’s duties well, at moments like this it became clear just how much she’d missed in such an accelerated rise through the ranks. Still too fond of the rules, still looking for the Academy-approved solution.

“Now go get some sleep,” she said. “Before you fall over.”

Chester gave her a dry amused look. “Yes sir.”

* * *

Hours later, reports began to filter back from the rescue and recovery teams sent aboard the starship from the future, and some of *Bedivere*’s moderately injured crew were beamed aboard *Reykjavík* for treatment with those more serious cases left to newer ship’s more advanced medical interventions.

Glal shepherded the away teams, making sure any scan data collected by *Reykjavík* personnel were erased prior to returning to the ship, and trying as best he could to prevent any temporal contamination from affecting the proper flow of history.

He wasn’t happy about it by any stretch of the imagination, but if there’s one thing the old Tellarite knew after more than forty years of Starfleet service, it was how to follow orders.

Trujillo sat in her ready room, trying to formulate how she might broach the subject of this cross-temporal event with Starfleet Command. The longer she waited to report back, the worse the potential consequences for her, but she dreaded surrendering the admittedly illusory control over the situation that she now wielded.

DeSilva’s voice carried across the intraship. “*Bridge to Captain Trujillo.*”

She tapped her communicator in response. “Go ahead.”

“*Sir, we’ve just picked up a distress signal from a nearby Lissepian freighter. They report having come under attack by an unknown vessel, the description of which seems quite similar to the schematics we were provided of the Jem’Hadar ships. The signal was cut off mid-sentence and we’ve been unable to raise them.*”

Trujillo stood. “On my way.” She severed the comm-channel and closed her eyes briefly. “Shit.”

She stepped out onto the bridge a few paces away, just as DeSilva was initiating yellow alert. “Hail the *Bedivere.*”

“Channel open.”

“This is Captain Trujillo to Captain Steenburg. Be advised that we’ve just received a distress call from a freighter in this sector that appears to have come under attack from a ship bearing an uncanny resemblance to one of your Jem’Hadar ships. With your sensors offline just after your arrival here, is it possible an enemy ship managed to egress the area without your seeing it?”

“Entirely too possible,” said Steenburg. She sounded grim, but not particularly surprised. “We didn’t restore even basic capacity until an hour after you arrived. They could have thrown a parade on the way out and we would have missed it.”

“That,” Trujillo assessed, “is decidedly sub-optimal. You haven’t told us much about this enemy, and for just cause, but if one of them is running amok in Federation space, I’m going to need hard facts. Are they as dangerous as I’m presuming?”

“Yes,” said Steenburg. “And the *Bedivere* is in no condition to chase them down for you. Mr. Bena is estimating at least another two days before we’ll be able to warp out of here under our own power, let alone do anything more vigorous. There are two possible courses of action

that ship may take, both of them,” the corner of her mouth turned up as she echoed Trujillo’s phrasing, “decidedly sub-optimal. Either they’ll deliberately attempt to disrupt Federation history—the enemy’s intelligence-gathering ability has been formidable—or they’re running out of white, the drug used to control the Jem’Hadar. Without it, they will go into withdrawal, and anything and everything in their path will become a target.”

Trujillo raised a damning eyebrow. “They use drugs to control their soldiers? I hate them already.” She reached up to close the front flap of her uniform blouse, fastening it at the shoulder. It was a subtle sign to her people, combat was in the offing. “I’m obligated to pursue them and defend Federation lives and property. Given that their weapons systems are almost certainly more advanced than ours, we’re already at a distinct disadvantage. What assistance might you be willing to offer, Captain?”

“I can send my executive officer and my tactical officer with you,” said Steenburg. “They’ll be able to advise you on appropriate countermeasures and tactics.”

“Thank you, Captain, I accept your offer of assistance. We’ll be departing in the next ten minutes. I’ll need to recall Commander Glal as well. Would you prefer we return your injured personnel currently in our sickbay? I don’t want to jeopardize their recovery by taking them into battle again unnecessarily.”

“I think it would be a good idea. Our capacity is a lot better than it was, and I don’t want to impose on yours under the circumstances.”

“We’ll begin sending them back immediately,” Trujillo advised. “Are you able to spare our engineering personnel as well? I suspect we may be needing them.”

“We can look after ourselves, and I agree.” Steenburg frowned. “Frankly, I don’t like the idea of sending you off after them alone, but we’re short of options here; letting them continue to merrily frolic in Federation space while we patch up is unacceptable. I’ll see if we can find a few tricks to tuck up your sleeve. Fighting fair and DTI will just have to lump it.”

Trujillo nodded appreciatively. “I’ll accept any help you can offer, and so long as we can stop the threat, I’m not especially concerned with the political consequences. Lives before legalities.”

That provoked a wolf’s grin from Steenburg. “I think I may just borrow that turn of phrase, Captain.” She glanced at one of the other officers on the Bridge, then back at the viewer. “Your people are on their way over, as are Commander Chester and Lieutenant J’etris. Good luck...and good hunting.”

“Thank you, Captain. I’ll do my best to return your people in their original mint condition. *Reykjavík*, out.”

* * *

“Steenburg to Chester. Locate Lieutenant J’etris and report to the transporter room. We’ve got a stray.”

Chester paused in shrugging her jacket back on, heart sinking as she realized exactly what that meant. A Jem’Hadar vessel loose in the early 24th century. That could be a disaster.

At least she’d gotten a few hours of sleep first. “Yes, sir. Sir... at this point in history, relations between the Federation and the Klingons are pretty tense. J’etris’s presence is going to tell them some pretty significant things about the future.”

“I don’t care if they’re able to read the entire Khitomer Accords on your faces, Commander. We’re in no condition to chase the Jem’Hadar down. Reykjavík is. You two are the best team I can send them, and they’re going to need you.”

“Understood, sir.” Chester scrubbed a hand over her face, clearing the last of the sleep from her eyes, straightened her uniform jacket, and went to find Lieutenant J’etris, the Tactical Officer.

Chester found the Klingon woman peering intently up a Jeffries tube after one of the engineers. “Captain Steenburg’s detailing us to the *Reykjavík*. I’ll explain on the way.”

J’etris looked down at her, one of the few people tall enough to do so, then motioned to one of the lieutenants. “Takahashi, take over.”

Chester could feel J’etris’s concerned gaze on the back of her neck. She waited until they were out of earshot of the repair team before saying, “One of the Jem’Hadar ships got away.”

J’etris let out a long breath. “That is... a problem.”

“Yeah. Just a little. And we can’t chase it down ourselves.” Chester made a face. “We’re headed over to advise them. The Captain’s given us a few things we should take over to help.”

“The odds of a successful confrontation are not good,” said J’etris. “The *Shangri-La*’s currently in service have had substantial upgrades. Are the two of us intended to compensate?”

“I didn’t say it would be easy.”

“That’s the Tactical Officer’s analysis.” The look J’etris gave her was several shades more critical. “And as your friend—you’re nervous. *That* is not about Jem’Hadar, or facing Jem’Hadar in an older and unfamiliar ship. Commander Bena told me you knew this ship by the name of its captain as soon as he mentioned it, and that you knew we’d time traveled because of it.”

Chester scrubbed sweating palms on her trousers. “Yes, well. History nerd. History nerd about this particular ship. At the beginning of the war, I did some research. Wanted to round out my background in tactics with some historical examples, and I stumbled across Captain Trujillo’s logs. She’s *incredible*, J’etris. I mean just...” she shook her head. “We had a lot less friends then, a lot more problems with pirates. The quadrant was a bigger and meaner place. These people did a lot to change that.”

“Present circumstances notwithstanding,” said J’etris, very dry.

“Exactly,” said Chester. “We’ll be working with one of my personal heroes to track down a bunch of Jem’Hadar we let escape before they completely—” she changed what she was about to say as they passed another gaggle of repair crew, “destroy the timeline. And do so without losing any of the *Reykjavik*’s people in the process.”

J’etris gave Chester a look that had very little sympathy in it at all, and a lot of amusement. “Sounds like fun.”

* * *

Trujillo was standing by as Glal materialized atop the transporter pad, along with Commander Chester, Lieutenant J’etris, and a number of engineers carting tool kits.

The captain’s eyes widened noticeably at the sight of the tall Klingon woman garbed in a Starfleet uniform, but she recovered quickly and offered a genuine smile. “Welcome aboard the *Reykjavik*. I trust the two of you have met Mister Glal, our resident goodwill ambassador and all-around ray of sunshine?”

“Yes, sir,” said Chester. “Thank you for all of your help. Captain Steenburg wanted me to convey her appreciation and a promise of, and I quote, ‘something strong and probably illegal, once we dig the drinks cabinet out’ upon our return.” She looked around the compartment, taking in what was to her a part of history, then turned to introductions. “I’m Commander Diane Chester. This is Lieutenant J’etris, our Tactical Officer. Permission to come aboard, sir?”

“Granted, Commander, Lieutenant.” Trujillo gestured to the corridor. “Your captain sounds like a woman after my own heart. Let’s convene with my senior staff in the briefing room. You can bring us up to speed on our adversary.”

Glal stepped down off the dais with a grumble, moving to stand beside his captain. “Their ship is... impressive, Captain,” he allowed grudgingly.

“I have no doubt,” Trujillo replied, standing aside to let the two officers from the future pass into the corridor beyond.

* * *

Chapter 4

* * *

Reykjavik's conference room was devoid of view ports as it was situated behind the bridge, sharing the command center's protective sheath of tritanium and duranium composite armor.

The walls of the compartment were covered in faux-wood paneling, a callback to the ancient sailing ships of Earth's seas. The bulkheads held images of previous Starfleet vessels named *Reykjavik* interspersed with photographs of the ship's namesake, the Icelandic capital city.

On one bulkhead was mounted the ship's seal, an inverted yellow triangle emblazoned with the dragon-head prow and sail of an ancient Viking longboat bearing the ship's name, registry and motto. U.S.S. *REYKJAVÍK* NCC-3109. 'First to Advance, Last to Retreat.'

As Trujillo and Glal entered with their new guests, the assembled officers rose to their feet from their positions around the conference table.

Standing at attention were the ship's Operations Manager Lieutenant Arwen DeSilva, Chief Engineer Lt. Commander Kura-Ka, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Lawrence Bennett, Chief Security Officer Lieutenant Gael Jarrod, and the junior-most of the senior staff, Ensigns Farouk Naifeh and Rachel Garrett, of Helm and Sciences respectively.

Kura-Ka was a bulky Zaranite, whose broad, flat face was hidden behind a mask that provided him a supply of his world's fluorine-rich atmosphere.

At the sight of Garrett, J'teris hesitated, for a moment openly staring. Chester nudged her along with a reasonably subtle elbow, and J'teris stopped staring, but in such a careful and overt manner that it was in some ways more glaring. Chester tipped Garrett a small smile by way of apology, though her eyes too were very wide.

Trujillo made the introductions, registering the shock on some of her officer's faces at the idea of a Klingon in Starfleet service.

The captain gestured for the two women to have a seat and then took her own, prompting the other officers to resume theirs.

"So," Trujillo began, "this enemy is called Jem'Hadar, and we can surmise they're very dangerous. What more can you tell us about them that would be beneficial to know before engaging them?"

Chester took a deep breath. She'd been trying to balance temporal regulations against the dire nature of the current situation. Captain Steenburg had made it clear that she felt the current situation won out, and with the news of the escaped Jem'Hadar ship, Chester could only agree. Still, she couldn't say she was thrilled about smashing the Temporal Prime Directive to bits, especially to a captain she admired.

But anything less than full disclosure would put these people at a hell of a lot more risk, and getting the *Reykjavik* destroyed would cause a lot more disruption to the timeline than disclosing too much about the enemy. They were offering to clean up the *Bedivere's* mess; she owed them better than that.

"About five years ago, we made contact with an entity in the Gamma Quadrant called the Dominion. Suffice it to say, it did not go well. The Federation and Dominion are now at war, and the Dominion's aim is the conquest of the entire Alpha Quadrant.

"The Jem'Hadar are the Dominion's genetically engineered soldiers. I believe we have already transmitted the relevant files. What I would like to highlight is that Jem'Hadar do not eat or sleep; they are solely dependent on a drug called ketrecel-white, which the Dominion uses to control them. Without it, they will attack and kill anything they encounter, before turning on each other. Stranded in the past, it's only a matter of time before they run out of white, and become even more dangerous than they currently are."

Jarrod began taking copious notes on a data-slate, scribbling with a stylus as he absorbed the briefing.

"We will need to make modifications to the *Reykjavik's* shields. Jem'Hadar poleron weapons will punch through them as they are now. Lieutenant J'teris will provide you with the necessary details."

Jarrod glanced to Kura-Ka, the two officers exchanging a look at that unwelcome news. It sounded as if they would have their work cut out for them.

Dr. Bennett raised hand, waiting for Trujillo to acknowledge him. "So, you're telling us there's no chance of any kind of negotiation with these people? By now they have to realize they've time traveled, and that the war they're fighting is decades in the future. That wouldn't give them any pause?"

"They will see it as an opportunity to destroy the Federation before it can become a threat," said Chester. "And shortly thereafter, as the white supply is depleted and withdrawal sets in, they will not be thinking of very much at all." She gave Dr. Bennett a sympathetic look. "I wish a diplomatic solution were possible. But the Jem'Hadar believe that the leaders of the Dominion are gods; they are fanatics, and have no hesitation about going to their deaths if it means our destruction."

That revelation seemed to suck the oxygen out of the compartment.

Trujillo took the opportunity to get her crew focused. "The escape of this enemy ship is unwelcome news, but given that almost anybody could

have stumbled across the aftermath of this battle, we're the right ship in the right place at precisely the right time. If these Jem'Hadar want a fight, we're the best crew possible to give it to them. *Reyk* was built for battle, and fighters is what I've helped forged all of us into over the past four years."

The assembled officers sat a little straighter in their chairs, sharing nods of agreement and even an awkward smile or two.

"I realize all my knowledge comes from historical records and logs, sir, but I couldn't agree more," said Chester. "Even in our time, the *Reykjavik* has a reputation. We're very lucky to have you here to pull our fat out of the fire, and clean up our mess."

Trujillo inclined her head approvingly. "We've set a course at maximum warp for the freighter's last known coordinates and we'll keep our ears open for any other sightings of that ship."

"The freighter that was attacked," said J'etris. "Was that in or near any active shipping lane? If there are a lot of targets, they may stay in the area. They may even use those attacks to lure Federation vessels in. As Commander Chester noted, most ships of this time aren't going to have much of a chance in a fight with them."

DeSilva fielded that question, answering, "The Lissepian freighter in question was in transit along the Puaruta trade route between the Culiv Cluster and the Rudyard Colonies. It's a highly traveled route, and if they're actively hunting there'll be no shortage of targets."

"Then that sounds like a good place to start our hunt, sir." Chester looked to Trujillo for approval.

"And so it begins."

* * *

Trujillo terminated the comm's-link to Starfleet Command after a frustrating conversation with Vice-Admiral Untlu. She had divulged that she was presently involved in a cross-temporal event, and that a future enemy ship was loose in Federation space. To end the threat while not further contaminating the timeline, Trujillo had asked that all Starfleet vessels be instructed not to engage the threat vessel under any circumstances, as they would be vulnerable to the Jem'Hadar's advanced weaponry.

Untlu, a mercurial Tellarite, had been openly skeptical, and Trujillo had been forced to stake her reputation and her career on the fact that she had correctly assessed the situation and was capable of resolving it to the satisfaction of both Starfleet Command and the nascent Department of Temporal Investigations.

The admiral had grudgingly allowed Trujillo a twenty-seven hour window in which to locate and destroy the offending vessel before sending in a task force of some fifteen starships that was presently being assembled.

The ready room's door chimed, prompting Trujillo to bid her caller enter.

Commander Chester stepped into the compartment, with a brief and unashamedly awed glance around before she straightened her shoulders and reported, "Shield modifications are almost complete, sir."

Trujillo waved her hand towards a chair facing her desk. "At ease, Commander. Please, take a seat. Can I get you coffee, tea, or something stronger?"

"Coffee, thank you sir," said Chester, settling into the chair. "I have the feeling it'll be a long few days." She made a face. "We've certainly had enough of those recently."

Trujillo moved to the replicator, producing two mugs of coffee emblazoned with *Reykjavik*'s sigil and registry, handing one to Chester before resuming her seat. "I take it from the state of your ship and the look in your eyes that it's been a long war." It was a statement, not a question. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I can only imagine how soul-sapping such a conflict might be. We see a lot of action, but they're mere skirmishes compared to a drawn-out war of attrition."

"It has," said Chester, taking the mug and wrapping her fingers around it, holding it for a moment before she took a sip. Her carefully formal expression relaxed a little, and she just looked very grim. "It doesn't look like it's ending too soon, either. The Dominion isn't going to back down unless it conquers us. Their Founders don't like chaos—anything they can't rigidly control. They find us very upsetting." Her smile was tight but amused, as if the distress of these Founders was some satisfaction.

She took a longer drink of the coffee, and her smile turned a little more relaxed.

"I'd always suspected the Federation would eventually stumble across someone it couldn't talk its way around. I'm actually surprised it hadn't happened earlier."

Chester paused with the cup partway to her mouth. That grim amusement came back into her face. "Yes, there's quite a lot out there that's not friendly. We got lucky with the Dominion, in a way; they weren't ready for us. Not that that hasn't stopped them from doing a hell of a lot of damage." She looked around the ready room again. "I confess, I've read a lot of your mission reports and logs, sir. When it became clear we were going to be at war for a while—and that I was probably going to end up in command a lot faster than I'd expected—I spent some time studying up on tactics, emphasis on real-world historical examples. The *Reykjavik*'s logs were some of my favorites; I admire you and this crew very much, sir." She met Trujillo's eyes directly.

"That's very kind of you to say, and I'm gratified we could provide some inspiration under such trying circumstances," Trujillo answered, touched by the younger woman's candor.

"It was very much appreciated—and continues to be. I'm very glad you're the ship that answered our distress call. I just wish we were meeting

without a stray Jem'Hadar ship in the mix." Chester raised her eyebrows, looking wry.

Trujillo smirked. "As do I, but if Starfleet service in your time is anything like it is now, we seem fated to be dealt those kinds of cards on a regular basis."

That startled a genuine laugh out of Chester. "You're certainly not wrong! The history records certainly agree with you." She looked a little wistful. "It was one of my fields of study, before everything went to hell."

The captain inclined her head towards her guest. "Help me place this in historical context, Commander. A predatory species from the future lands smack in the middle of a largely peaceful era of the Federation's existence. You said that if they'd figured that out, they might try and rewrite our history. In what way?"

Chester's eyebrows went up. "Fishing for spoilers, Captain? Peaceful doesn't necessarily mean uneventful." Her gaze flicked down to her coffee, and she frowned, clearly thinking hard. "There's disruption to the timeline, and there's wading into it unprepared," she said, half to herself.

Her mouth set as she came to a decision, and she looked up again. "The risks I'm seeing fall into two major categories: personnel deaths or the wrong political destabilization at the wrong time. There are plenty of promising young officers out there whose deaths will have profound effects on later events. While I'm not sure I have strong evidence the Dominion knows exactly who those people are, their intelligence capabilities are remarkably thorough, and it can't be ruled out." She hesitated again, wrestling with the next words. "The destruction of the *Reykjavik* would be one way in which they could accomplish this kind of damage.

"Then there's the risk of political destabilization. It's a peaceful time, yes. But not exactly placid; you've got all sorts of tensions running under the surface right now. Consider what might happen if a mysterious ship launches a few vicious attacks along the Klingon border, and vanishes to leave the Federation holding the bag. What the Jem'Hadar can't accomplish by themselves, they'd be perfectly happy to let someone else finish."

Obvious surprise settled over Trujillo's features as she pondered the import of Chester's words. "I'd actually been thinking more along the lines of them targeting someone like Ambassador Spock or some other such notables. It hadn't occurred to me that *Reykjavik* and her crew might be enough to upset the temporal apple cart."

"For want of a nail..." Chester quoted, looking wry. "Certainly, an assassination of Ambassador Spock would be immensely disruptive, but the Jem'Hadar will be well aware that their time is limited. We're closer to hand. The Klingons are closer to hand. And subtle assassins they were not. The Dominion has other agents for that kind of work, and it's deeply unlikely they'll risk one on a frontline ship."

"Well, that's something," Trujillo allowed, followed by a sip of her coffee. She took a long moment to probe the younger woman with her eyes, evaluating her perceptions of Chester since she'd come aboard. "You hate this. War, I mean. You were raised and trained for better pursuits, I'd gather. But... unless I miss my mark, despite your distaste for it you're very good at making war."

"You're right." The wry expression stayed, but it became significantly sadder. "I was torn between joining Starfleet, and joining the Diplomatic Corps. I went with Starfleet—my grandmother was an engineer, before she retired—to be a First Contact specialist. I wanted to be out there, making new friends and helping people. Not finding better ways to kill them, or giving orders that will get people who trust me killed. But what I want isn't important right now." She lifted and dropped a shoulder in an unhappy shrug. "It needs doing, so I had better try to do it well."

Trujillo gave her a single nod. "Then let's finish this and send you home to win your war, so you can go back to being a diplomat. The Jem'Hadar made the mistake of provoking the two of us. Now they'll pay the price."

* * *

Chapter 5

* * *

Ensign Rachel Garrett sat alone in the small astrometrics lab, collating incoming information from Starfleet Command regarding the possible whereabouts of the mysterious Jem'Hadar ship. She had moved here from her bridge post with the XO's permission, as the lab offered greater image resolution than the standard bridge science station.

Young and inexperienced though she may have been, Garrett attacked problems with a single-minded determination that impressed her superiors. The troublesome future-enemy vessel was ultimately just another problem to be solved by the application of data, analysis, and reasoned speculation.

The doors slid open to admit Lieutenant J'tetris. "Ensign Garrett, right? May I interrupt?"

Garrett glanced up from her monitor with an immediate smile. "Certainly, Lieutenant. How can I be of assistance?"

There had been none of the hesitation or reticence J'tetris had experienced from other personnel aboard ship. Perhaps Garrett was too new to have absorbed the xenophobia some of the others clearly struggled with at the sight of a Klingon in Starfleet uniform.

It was unpleasant, but far from unexpected, and in some ways, sadly familiar; the shortlived conflict between the Federation and the Klingon Empire had likewise been an uncomfortable time to be a Klingon in a Starfleet uniform, and at times J'tetris had thought rather bitterly that any ease around her fellow officers had been dependent on letting them forget she was Klingon. Ambivalent though she was about her family and species, it sat very ill with her.

She'd been braced for more of the same here, or worse. Garrett's reaction, or lack thereof, was very welcome indeed. And, frankly, what she had hoped for. "I have data on the effects of Jem'Hadar small-arms. I hope we will not be boarded, but we should be prepared. I would like to discuss them with you."

Garrett blinked, clearly confused. "I'd be happy to, but wouldn't that be more appropriate for Dr. Bennett? He'd be the person treating the wounded."

"I thought it prudent to consult both of you," said J'tetris. That wasn't entirely the case—she'd also been looking for an excuse to talk to one of her personal heroes. She was not going to admit that. There was damage to the timeline to consider, and also Chester's justified outrage.

The young human stood and gestured to a nearby chair. "Please."

J'tetris handed over a PADD—Chester had insisted all the data they brought over be transferred to period-appropriate ones—before seating herself. "They're polaron-based," she said. "Note the anticoagulant effects on most humanoids."

As the other woman's attention shifted to the PADD, she took the opportunity to look at her more closely. The sacrifice of Captain Rachel Garrett and the *Enterprise-C* was what had made peace possible, and by extension, J'tetris's career in Starfleet, not to mention her human family. She valued both highly, and more so, she aspired to the spirit and courage that Garrett and her crew had embodied in placing themselves between the Romulan attack and people who had been their enemies as often as not.

Garrett studied the data-slate, her expression pinched. "Well, that's... horrific. A weapon that causes the victim to bleed to death if not killed outright by the initial blast?" She looked up at J'tetris. "Why— who deliberately designs cruelty into a small-arms weapon?" Garrett waved her hand irritably, having answered her own question. "These Jem'Hadar, obviously, but whatever for? Needless savagery for the sake of terror?"

"Exactly that," said J'tetris. "Brutality and fear. Or the threat of them. The Dominion is an imperial power, over a thousand years old, and it doesn't keep control over all its territories through simple force of arms. Imperial powers seldom do. It uses the threat of the Jem'Hadar, and to be effective, that threat must be overwhelming, and the price of defiance total annihilation. Dominion rule sounds like a series of polite requests—but if you refuse those requests, the Jem'Hadar arrive, and your neighbors will think of you the next time they hesitate in complying. And that weapon," she tilted her head at the PADD in Garrett's hands, not bothering to keep the disdain from her voice, "is the Jem'Hadar, and the Dominion, in a nutshell. It is smart, it is efficient, and it is flagrantly and gratuitously cruel."

In a moment of purely astonished dread, Garrett turned a horrified expression on J'tetris. "How will you defeat them?"

"Pluck and luck?" said J'tetris, with grim sarcasm. She sobered immediately. "But the alternative is unacceptable."

Garrett turned away, momentarily overcome. "I don't envy you your task."

"It won't be easy, but we've got better tools to fight back than we did even a year ago, and it isn't as if this is the first imperial power the Federation has faced." J'tetris almost made a face—now she was sounding embarrassingly like Chester. "And we have allies. The Dominion isn't going to stop with the Federation, and fortunately, the other powers in the Alpha Quadrant understand that." *And you'll play no small part in that.*

Garrett turned back, her expression skeptical. "The Federation and the Klingons? On the same side? That's remarkable."

"Less so than you'd think—though I won't say it hasn't had its tense moments." J'tetris grinned, enjoying this immensely. "And it's a good

thing it happened before the Dominion showed up, too.”

The science officer stopped herself before asking more questions, though she desperately wanted to know more about what lay ahead for the Federation in the coming decades. She held up the data-slate. “Thank you for this. I’ll make sure Dr. Bennett is fully briefed on the savagery of their weapons.”

* * *

Glal entered the ready room at Trujillo’s beckoning. It had taken two presses of the annunciator for him to gain admittance.

“We’re ten minutes out from IP with the last known coordinates of the freighter, Captain,” he informed her dutifully.

Trujillo was sitting in her chair behind the desk with her back to the hatch, her expression unreadable. “Thank you, Commander,” she said in a low voice.

Glal remained still, waiting for his eyes to adjust fully to the lowered illumination. “Is everything alright, sir?” he inquired, worried about her state of mind so soon before potential combat against such a dangerous adversary.

“Not as such, no,” she answered.

He hesitated, not used to seeing her so distracted. “Anything I can help with, sir?”

“I doubt it,” she said with a sigh. “I’m... engaged in some needed self-reflection.”

He took a seat, uninvited, leveraging their long relationship. “Is now really the appropriate time for that, sir?”

“Probably not,” she conceded. Trujillo turned in the chair to look at him for the first time since he had entered the compartment. “How many times have I voiced the desire for a real conflict, an honest-to-goodness bare-knuckle brawl that would shake the Federation and Starfleet out of their complacency?”

He snorted gently, a half-laugh. “More than once to my recollection.”

“A war, Glal. Use whatever military euphemism you’d like; I’ve been wishing for a war. Something that would enable me to use *Reykjavik* to her full potential while proving to Command that I’ve been right all along about Starfleet needing to step up our readiness posture.”

“These Jem’Hadar may be formidable, Captain, but it is only one ship,” he deflected.

“No, that’s not it,” she countered. “I’ve been blithely wishing for this thing without taking into consideration the real costs of such a conflict. Then I come across Commander Chester, a woman who’s been caught up in just such a war. She’s been thrust into the very scenario I’ve been yearning for, Glal, and it’s tearing her apart.”

“Chester strikes me as being very capable, sir. She appears to have endured her war well enough, all things considered.”

“On the outside, perhaps,” Trujillo said. “In talking with her, it’s readily apparent that this war is taking a considerable toll on her. The anguish and the loss of bloodletting on a scale which the Federation hasn’t yet known, not even in the Klingon War.” She rubbed her eyes with one hand. “I’ve been a selfish fool, my friend, wishing for such horrors just to test my mettle and that of our crew. Meeting the living, breathing result of such a war, a historian and a diplomat forced to take up arms, made to endure the deaths of so many comrades, entire worlds reduced to cinders...”

“She told you all that, sir?” Glal’s expression grew pinched.

“She didn’t have to. I’m well versed at reading people, Commander.”

“That you are, sir,” he agreed.

“Bridge to captain,” Garrett’s voice issued from Trujillo’s communicator. *“We’ve detected wreckage consistent with that of a Lissepian freighter. Sensors confirm a polaric energy signature emanating from the debris field.”*

“Acknowledged. On my way. Please summon Commander Chester and Lieutenant J’etris to the bridge.”

She shared a look with Glal. “Time to go step into the line of fire again, Mister Glal.”

Glal rose to his feet in unison with his captain. “Someone has to do it, sir. Might as well be us old soldiers.”

* * *

Chapter 6

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The pair exited out onto the bridge, Glal following as Trujillo made her way to the captain's chair that Lt. Jarrod was just vacating.

Trujillo's presence triggered a chime to sound, prompting Jarrod to announce, "Captain on the bridge."

"As you were," Trujillo said, forestalling those personnel at non-critical stations rising and coming to attention. "Sitrep."

"No signs of the Jem'Hadar vessel on sensors, sir," Jarrod advised as he moved to resume his place at the Tactical station.

"Maintain sensor sweeps and see if we can't find a warp or impulse trail leading away from here," Trujillo ordered. "Any sign of intact escape craft?"

DeSilva fielded that query. "Negative, sir. It appears two escape vehicles were launched, but they were destroyed in close proximity to the freighter's remains."

"Trujillo to Engineering, have you completed the simulations on the shield modifications?"

Kura-Ka's slightly digitized voice replied, "*Affirmative, Captain. The generators have been re-tuned to operative at a higher phase range. This will utilize more power and will increase the strain on the generators themselves, sir, so we'll want to activate shields only when combat is imminent.*"

"Understood. Good work, Commander."

The bridge doors opened to admit Commander Chester and Lieutenant J'etris. The two women looked at the debris, then at each other, grim. "It's very likely they're still in the area, sir," said Chester. "They like to jump any would-be rescuers while they're preoccupied looking for survivors."

Trujillo appeared equally somber. "And despite our general warning of an aggressor ship in the area, this is still a high-traffic region with a lot of merchant ships in transit."

Chester looked around at the *Reykjavik's* bridge and spent a moment really absorbing the sheer surrealness of the experience. She'd stood on a holodeck recreation of this bridge, running through some of the *Reykjavik's* battles, as she had with other battles and other starships. That had been early in the war, when she'd thought she could study for battle, as if viewing saving lives like an exam score would make it any easier to fail. Even when she learned it didn't help, not that much, she'd kept coming back to the *Reykjavik*, a ship made for battle in every way she wasn't.

The surreal part wasn't so much standing here. It was what was waiting for them, out there. It had never occurred to her to run any of the historical simulations against the Jem'Hadar.

Garrett looked up from her sensor displays at the Science station. "There are still dozens of vessels out here, sir. They must have thought Starfleet was exaggerating the threat this ship poses."

"You can't fix stupid," Glal growled in response.

DeSilva touched a hand to her earpiece comms receiver. "Sir, I'm getting a priority signal over several of the general distress frequencies. A Caitian transport vessel, the *Ull'roall*, says they're under attack from an unidentified vessel. They say the attacker's cut through their shields like they aren't there." DeSilva stiffened noticeably, her expression hardening. "They say they're carrying over four-hundred passengers, crew of twenty-nine."

"Time to intercept at max warp," Trujillo asked curtly.

"Twenty-seven minutes, Captain," Naifeh dutifully replied.

"Plot course and execute at best possible speed," she ordered, toggling the intra-craft on her armrest interface. "Trujillo to Commander Kura-Ka, I need you to give me every bit of speed you can squeeze from your engines for the next half hour."

"*Understood, sir. You'll have it,*" the chief engineer promised before closing the channel.

"Ops, tell the Caitians we're coming and to hold on. Is there any place they can run to where they can hide?" Trujillo's grim demeanor had grown flinty, the Starfleet officer in her warring with the soldier who was, for the moment, helpless to defend her charges.

She looked to Chester and J'etris. "Any chance they'll last until we get there?"

Chester looked at J'etris. "If they can find somewhere to hide, yes," said J'etris, her voice very flat, and she left the second part unspoken.

"Sir, *Ull'roall* reports their warp engines have already been disabled. They're on impulse power and report multiple hull breaches. They're..."

she swallowed, “they’re pleading for assistance, sir.”

Something had closed down behind Chester’s eyes, an icy calm. “We need the Jem’Hadar to pay attention to us,” she said. “We’re a bigger threat, and they’ll break off as soon as we’re an imminent threat. So we need to be imminent, not a threat that arrives in half-an-hour.”

Trujillo glanced at Glal, who shook his head silently in response. A similar gesture met her gaze from Jarrod. They were too far away. Not enough speed, not enough time.

J’etris looked at them, and then at Chester, and shook her head. Chester’s mouth went tight. She looked down at the PADD in her hands, her fingers briefly skimming over the surface—still looking for another option, even if it was doomed. Find a way to appear as if they were arriving sooner, no; they didn’t have the technology to do that even in her time. Broadcast a lie about having a VIP aboard; too easily dismissed as a falsehood, even if the Jem’Hadar were still acting rationally. Jem’Hadar didn’t rise to taunts or insults, so simply broadcasting *hey ugly, come and get us* wasn’t going to work, either. After a few moments, she lowered it, having found no more solution than anyone else had. Her expression had not changed at all.

Garrett looked up from her scopes with an expression of surprise. “Sir, sensors have detected a *Munro*-class vessel inbound, transponder ID’s it as a Border Service cutter, the *Greyhound*. She’s on an intercept course for *Ull’roall* and the Jem’Hadar.”

“Damn it!” Trujillo pounded a fist on her armrest. “I told Command to get all our ships out of the area.” She gestured to Ops as DeSilva threw a glance back at her. “Get me that ship on comms,” Trujillo ordered.

“Channel open, sir.”

“*Reykjavík* to *Greyhound*, change course. You are moving to engage an advanced threat vessel with weapons that negate Starfleet shields. You have no chance against that ship. I repeat, break off.”

The viewscreen flickered and the bridge crew was treated to the image of the smaller, more compact bridge of the cutter. Seated in the captain’s chair was an older male human with thinning gray hair and a well-trimmed beard of a slightly darker hue. He was clad in a variation of the standard maroon uniform jacket with a stylized combadge bearing the crossed anchors and circular life-preserver of the Border Service set atop the traditional arrowhead.

“This is Captain August Blakley of the *Greyhound*. I’m aware of the threat ship’s potency, and of Starfleet Command’s chickenshit orders. Regardless, I’m not going to hole up at some star-station while vulnerable civilian ships are being picked off by these bastards. And our sensors indicate that you’re screaming in here at top speed, so who are you to tell me to back off?”

“I’m Nandi Trujillo of *Reykjavík*, Captain. We’ve just received shield modifications that took us hours to implement that will hopefully give us an edge against this ship. I’m not questioning your crew’s skill or bravery, there’s just very little chance you’d come out on top in such a contest.”

“I appreciate your concern, Captain Trujillo, but despite the odds I’m not going to sit here and watch these people be slaughtered. Hopefully, we can keep this threat vessel occupied until you’ve arrived on scene. We’ll run interference for the transport for as long as we’re able.”

Someone nearby announced they were now within weapon’s range and Blakley cast a glance back at his crew before returning his gaze to the viewer. “Looks like this is about to kick off.”

“Captain Blakley, I suggest you focus your efforts on rescue operations for the freighter’s passengers and crew,” said Chester. “As Captain Trujillo has said, your shields and weapons won’t do you much good there, but you are there, and if you can start pulling people out, that’s something we can’t do just now.”

“Open fire!” Blakley called to his Tactical officer in the background before addressing Chester. “I’d considered that, but this attacker has the edge in maneuverability and speed at impulse. We have to keep moving and the transport’s shields are still up. If you can give me so—”

The image jerked and there was a flash in the background as a bridge console erupted in a shower of sparks and debris before the transmission cut out abruptly. Chester let out a heavy breath.

“There was nothing we could have given him that would have turned the battle in the last thirty seconds, sir,” said J’etris to her softly.

DeSilva’s voice was tempered with resignation. “*Greyhound* has engaged the Jem’Hadar ship, sir. They’re in close proximity, and I’m reading a lot of weapons activity.”

“For what it’s worth, Captain,” Garrett observed from her station, “it’s taken the heat off the transport ship. They’re trying to egress the area at impulse while the attack ship’s engaged with *Greyhound*.”

Trujillo threw a look towards the *Bedivere* officers. “Lieutenant J’etris, please take the auxiliary tactical station and assist Mister Jarrod with weapons control during our engagement. Commander Chester, please take the station opposite that of Mister Glal so that I’m afforded both your counsel.”

“Aye sir,” said J’etris, heading for the station and quickly familiarizing herself with its layout.

“Yes sir,” said Chester, finally fully turning her attention from her futile efforts to rescue the transport and the *Greyhound* and taking the station indicated. She wanted to keep trying. It went dead against her every instinct to stop, but right now her attention needed to be on the

Reykjavík and keeping this crew alive.

The hollow feeling was at least familiar, and something she could put aside until the battle was over. She fixed her eyes on the main viewer, willing with all her might the little indicators of the Federation ships not to go out. This was far worse than being on the *Bedivere*, where she at least had more to do, worse still because none of these people should have ever been in the front lines of this war, not even Captain Trujillo, the happy soldier.

The minutes seemed to take an excruciating eternity to pass, with the nearly unbearable tension broken only by intermittent reports from Ops and Sciences.

“Reading diminished power signature from *Greyhound*, sir. She’s losing speed and maneuverability. Detecting debris and radiation leakage in her wake,” DeSilva indicated.

From Garrett, “Transport has achieved three-quarters impulse speed, still drawing away from the Jem’Hadar and heading in our direction.”

“ETA now thirteen minutes, thirty seconds,” Nafieh reported.

Chester ran through the modifications they’d made to *Reykjavík* again, standard Jem’Hadar tactics. They had time to consider their approach; was there any further information she could provide? No, she was forced to concede, there was not. She had been thorough in compiling the briefing material for the *Reykjavík*’s crew. She wished for a moment she had been less so; she passionately wanted something to do, other than sit here and wait for all those people to die.

Trujillo directed a text message to Chester’s console. *‘This is where your command persona comes into it. You’ll have to sit here, with nothing to do but hear reports, and remain the steady hand on the tiller for your crew’s emotional state, regardless of what you’re actually feeling.’*

A flicker of grim amusement broke through Chester’s cool facade. She glanced at Trujillo, barely turning her head, and typed her reply. *‘Thank you, sir. But with all respect—this sucks!’*

In lieu of mordant laughter, Trujillo cleared her throat, struggling to maintain her almost-in-battle face. She turned towards Chester, speaking in a voice aimed at her alone. “It always has, and it always will.”

Chester nodded, glad of the acknowledgement and the half-moment of levity.

“Explosion, sir, in the twelve-isoton range. Some kind of missile weapon impacted *Greyhound*. I’m seeing a debris cloud at her last known coordinates, gamma and theta radiation... no escape vehicles detected.” Garrett’s face was a mask of cold professionalism as she delivered the news, her expression remaining carefully neutral so as not to betray the roiling emotions beneath.

Chester closed her eyes a half-moment longer than a blink, letting out a long breath, all the reaction she allowed herself. She’d seen that before, too many times.

The bridge fell silent at this unwelcome announcement, however expected it may have been.

“Status of the transport? Distance from the Jem’Hadar?” Trujillo pressed.

“Transport is at five-hundred thousand kilometers from the attack ship and is maintaining three-quarters impulse. She’s still leaking radiation and I’m detecting thermal variances in her warp reactor,” DeSilva observed.

“She’s running hot, sir,” called the petty officer manning the Engineering station. “Unless they throttle back, they’re in danger of triggering an emergency shutdown of their core or causing an overload.”

Trujillo shifted impatiently in her seat. “Helm, will we reach them before the Jem’Hadar?”

“If both ships maintain the same speed and course, that’s affirmative, sir.”

No sooner had the words left Nafieh’s mouth when the attack ship’s position on the tactical plot map shifted drastically and almost instantaneously.

“Warp jump,” DeSilva called out. “They executed a short range jump at warp and are now within firing range of the transport.”

Trujillo bit back a frustrated curse, checking her armrest display for their updated intercept point with the transport. Seven minutes away yet. Too long. She toggled open a channel to Engineering.

“Commander Kura-Ka, we need everything you can give us, short of tearing the nacelles from their struts.”

There was a pregnant pause before the Chief Engineer replied, *“Reactor now at one-hundred-twelve percent of rated output, Captain. There will be damage to the injectors and field coils.”*

“Understood, and thank you.” She cut the channel. “Helm?”

“Now at warp twelve-point-seven, sir. Revised ETA three minutes, eight seconds.”

The crew could feel the strain on the ship through the vibration in the deck plates as *Reykjavík* came just short of tearing herself apart in her race towards the stricken passenger vessel.

“Weaps,” Trujillo called to both Jarrod and J’etris and the standing tactical consoles flanking her command chair, “I want a full barrage of torpedoes ready to fly the instant we drop out of warp, provided the Jem’Hadar ship is far enough away from the transport. If it’s too close, we’ll stick to phasers until we can pry the enemy away and allow for photorp deployment. Clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Jarrod replied simply.

“Clear, Captain,” said J’etris. “It shouldn’t take much prying, sir. They’ll know we’re the bigger threat.”

“*Por favor, que así sea,*” Trujillo muttered under her breath.

Jarrod looked across to J’etris. “You want phasers or torpedoes?”

“Torpedoes,” said J’etris, and flashed him a grin full of teeth.

“Phasers it is for me, then. You’ve fought them before, I haven’t. What should I be looking out for?” Jarrod asked pointedly.

“Close fast strafing runs. They’ll want to get behind and above us and target our nacelles,” said J’etris. “They’re maneuverable, too. Targeting will be challenging.”

Jarrod nodded, adjusting his auto-targeting algorithms accordingly. “That’s helpful, thank you.”

“Two minutes,” Naifeh updated, his eyes fixed on his console.

Trujillo looked to Chester. “You’d established they’re fanatics, not beyond suicide runs if the occasion warrants. May I presume there’s little point in offering them quarter if we’re somehow able to cripple their vessel?”

“Even if we persuaded them to surrender, we’ve never been successful in replicating ketrecel white—the drug the Dominion engineered them to be dependent on.” It was an ugly thing to acknowledge. “We’d just be condemning them to a longer death, and they know it.”

“Fair enough,” Trujillo acknowledged. “My conscience is sated.”

Chester’s wasn’t, for all it was an inescapable conclusion, but she kept it out of her face. In her opinion, it was one of the worst things about the Dominion—with the Jem’Hadar, they forced you into the same merciless calculations they reveled in—they made you think like them.

“*Ull’roall* is taking additional damage,” DeSilva reported. “Reading multiple hull breaches and their shields are failing.”

“Hold on a little longer,” Glal coaxed from his seat, not realizing he’d uttered the thought aloud.

Chester glanced at him, sympathetic. They were her thoughts exactly.

At the sixty-second mark Trujillo activated the intra-ship to address the crew.

“This is your captain. In less than a minute we’ll engage an enemy vessel that has already consigned one Starfleet crew to oblivion today, the brave compliment of the cutter *Greyhound*. This enemy is unlike any threat we’ve faced previously, and we must give them our very best. This ship was designed for battle, and like all of you it has been forged in conflict and tempered in many prior engagements. I ask each of you to perform your duties to the utmost of your ability so we may vanquish this foe and restore the peace. Trujillo, out.”

“Twenty seconds,” Naifeh intoned, activating his seat restraints.

Chester followed suit.

Trujillo glanced over at Chester, sighed, and activated her own, commanding, “Okay, our future friends are right. Buckle-up everyone.”

At the two standing tactical stations, integrated support frames for the occupants’ legs and lower back slid up and around them out of the deck, clamping around their legs and torso. J’etris stiffened, glanced at Chester. Clearly, she would have appreciated more of a warning about historical safety features.

Glal leaned in toward J’etris. “Sorry, we just had those added.”

Jarrod’s hand hovered above his console. “Weapons lock, Captain?”

“Affirmative, lock weapons. There will be no challenge hails, they’ve already demonstrated their intent clearly enough.”

Heeding her chief engineer’s advice on the stresses the new configuration would place on their shield-grid, only at the last moment did Trujillo order them raised.

Naifeh began the countdown to sub-light, “Dropping out of warp in four, three, two... one.”

Chapter 7

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The streaking star-scape vanished, the rays of light collapsing into single stars to reveal the battered transport *Ull'roall* being hounded by the strange, beetle-shaped attack ship.

"Fire phasers, hold on torpedoes until the transport is safely out of the detonation envelope," Trujillo ordered. "Helm, pursuit course. Get on their tail and do your best to stay there."

As the Jem'Hadar ship flashed past on the main viewer, Trujillo spared a glance toward Chester. "You said they preferred slashing, strafing attacks."

Chester nodded, very glad the transport was still there. "They're fast and maneuverable, and they make the most of it—especially when they're working together."

Reykjavík held position behind the Jem'Hadar vessel, peppering the smaller ship's aft shields with orange bursts of stuttering twin-streamed phaser fire. The enemy's shields held firm against the onslaught, and in response the attack ship launched a brilliant white projectile from an aft-facing launcher that slammed home against *Reykjavík's* forward shields with staggering force.

The deck lurched and personnel were thrown forward against their restraints. A chorus of grunts and muttered curses resulted and even Trujillo looked impressed.

Chester glanced up at J'etris, who said, "The modifications to the shields are fully effective."

Glal blanched. "That was effective? Felt like we got hit with an asteroid!"

J'etris grinned. "Yes, but we're still here."

"Forward shields holding at seventy-nine percent, Captain," Jarrod advised, silently alarmed at the amount of shield degradation from a single impact.

The attack ship pulled relative-upward and vanished from the viewscreen in a maneuver *Reykjavík* couldn't hope to follow.

Naifeh struggled at the helm to maintain an approximate trailing position as the ships looped over. "I'm losing her, sir!"

"Reinforcing aft and dorsal shields," said J'etris. "They'll come down on top of us and target the nacelles. The center of their ventral hull is a weak point if we can punch through their shields." She was already targeting torpedoes to do just that, and as soon as the Jem'Hadar ship dropped down to begin its run, she fired.

"Do it," Trujillo confirmed the order, pulling her swing-arm console up and into her lap from the side of her chair.

Reykjavík loosed a salvo of six torpedoes from her three forward-facing launchers, which arced hard over, cutting into the attack ship's enviable turn radius. The vessel suddenly juked hard to port, then back to starboard before flipping over and diving relative to the course of the incoming ordnance.

"Mãe de deus!" DeSilva exclaimed without meaning to do so.

Only the last of the six torpedoes managed a proximity detonation, exploding just close enough to impact the smaller craft's ventral shields as it pulled away.

"That was... impressive," Trujillo allowed grudgingly. She referenced her laptop console before ordering, "Helm, hard about to zero-two-zero-mark-three-five-zero. J'etris, that should give you an aft torpedo angle on them."

"Continuing phaser fire with all facing banks as they transit around our target perimeter, sir," Jarrod called out. "Multiple hits, but no shield penetration as yet."

"And this is *after* they've taken all those hits from *Greyhound*," Glal noted dourly.

"And they're more maneuverable," said Chester. "We're not going to make a lot of progress until we deal with that." She called up a map of the sector on her console, looking for better terrain that might restrict the Jem'Hadar's movements. The results were not promising.

J'etris let out a growl of frustration as the attack ship eluded her next spread of torpedoes.

Reykjavík's phasers gamely blazed away at the darting attack ship, which continually rolled back and forth to absorb the impacts on different quarters and thereby prevented any specific shield grid from being whittled down to the point of collapse.

Naifeh, used to having an advantage in maneuverability due to *Reykjavík's* overpowered impulse engines, struggled to keep pace with the Jem'Hadar and keep the starship's most potent weapons systems aligned with the smaller ship.

Another improbable maneuver brought the attack ship relative nose-down towards *Reykjavík's* dorsal perspective, and the attacker sent three seething, bluish poleron beams crashing against the starship's shields.

Reykjavík bucked wildly, thrown momentarily off course and sent into a lateral spin as Naifeh fought to regain control.

Jarrood was thrown back against his support frame, grunting as the whip-sawing jolt snapped his head back and threatened whiplash should he survive this encounter.

Trujillo looked from Glal to Chester, her expression pinched. "This isn't working. Ideas, people."

Glal looked flummoxed, which in Trujillo's opinion was a bad omen.

"Mines?" J'etris offered. "If we start kicking mines out aft of us, they'll have to start altering their trajectory to avoid them."

Chester nodded. "We'll have to control how they come to us. The easiest way I can see to do that is to play possum, which should draw them in close for an efficient kill. But we'd better be pretty sure of getting *them* when we do it, because they won't fall for it twice."

"Their shields aren't nearly depleted enough yet," DeSilva called back from her post at Ops.

"And that's not changing soon," grumbled J'etris.

Chester glanced at the chart on her console again. "There's a nearby system we might be able to use, but it would require we leave the transport." She glanced at Trujillo. "I don't think that's an option, sir."

"It's not," Trujillo confirmed. "With their firepower, they could have finished off that transport long before we arrived. They're using it as bait. If we run, hoping they'll follow, they'll destroy the transport before pursuing us." She turned to J'etris. "Start laying mines behind us at random intervals. Gravitic sensitivity with thruster capabilities. Program them to detonate only in the vicinity of the attack ship."

"Yes sir," said J'etris. She got to work.

Another strafing run, this time from their port-quarter, slammed into the shields with a jackhammer blow. The engineering station on the upper bridge level exploded, flaying the occupant of that seat with plexipolymer shrapnel that caused the woman at that post to gasp and then slump against her safety restraints. Additional, albeit less lethal detritus rained down throughout the rest of the bridge.

"Port shields down to twenty-eight percent; moderate hull buckling port side, primary hull," DeSilva called out over a cacophony of alarms.

A fusillade from *Reykjavík* as the Jem'Hadar raced past her bow resulted in a prolonged phaser barrage and two photon hits out of a volley of six, thanks to Jarrood and J'etris' expert coordination.

Glal freed himself from his restraints long enough to move to the side of the stricken petty officer at the Engineering station, checking for a pulse. He closed his eyes for a moment and looked to Trujillo, shaking his head before retreating to his post.

Chester and J'etris shared a look, J'etris openly concerned. There had already been far too many deaths, and no way of knowing the impact on the timeline. They had to end this, and quickly.

Trujillo absorbed the death of her crewmember, adding it to the tally of those aboard the destroyed freighter, the damaged transport, and the doomed crew of *Greyhound*, none of whom would have died in the 'original' iteration of this timeline. She clung to the illusory control she wielded over this situation, damning herself for failing when it really counted. So many battles behind her, so much experience, and yet none of it was helping in this most desperate of circumstances.

"Voli-Vox!" Glal blurted suddenly.

Trujillo looked askance at her XO, wondering if in the heat of the moment he'd slid off the proverbial rails. "The Tellarite game?"

He nodded vigorously. "Exactly!"

"I don't see how lassoing a *kivinch* from a chariot has anythi—" Trujillo stopped mid-sentence, her eyes widening. "Of course..."

She dropped her eyes to her laptop interface, typing madly at the controls. "Commander Chester, please take control of our primary tractor beam emitter from your station. The next time that beetle comes in range, we're going to lower our shields and snare her. The tractor beam itself should prematurely detonate or throw off anything they send back towards us long enough for us to bracket their ship with torpedo spreads."

"Should?" Garrett gawped from the Science station.

"They just hit one of our mines, sir," DeSilva alerted. "They're adjusting the trajectory of their attack run."

"What kind of forces can our inertial dampeners compensate for?" Chester asked, transferring control. "This won't do anyone any good if we get ourselves turned into paste."

“Engineering,” Trujillo called, “all auxiliary power to inertial dampeners. We’re about to try something reckless and I don’t want us turned into Salsa Roja.”

“*On it, Captain,*” Kura-Ka answered with all the resignation of a man marching to the gallows.

“And make sure everyone is strapped in,” said Chester, her eyes on her display, fingers hovering over the controls. “All right. One Nantucket sleigh ride, coming right up.”

The attack ship circled around, dipping in for another pass. Chester waited. The moment before it came within range she called, “Lower shields!” to Jarrod and pounced.

The tractor beam flashed out, catching the Jem’Hadar in the forward ventral plating, where the ‘thorax’ of the beetle it mimicked would have been. It bucked, pitching up hard and to starboard, and this time, they followed.

The jolt threw Chester hard against the restraint harness, and she was suddenly *very* glad of the archaic safety measure. Without it, she would have gone flying. As it was, keeping hold of them was a hell of a job as they tried everything in the book to shake *Reykjavik* off. Chester grinned, wide and predatory. *Let them try.* It was beyond time to squash this bug.

Trujillo grunted at the jolt and the disconcerting sense of acceleration bleeding through the dampeners. “Fish *on!*” She called over her shoulder to the tactical officers flanking her. “Kill their engines!”

“With pleasure, sir,” said J’etris.

A flight of torpedoes raced ahead towards the wildly slaloming attack ship, gripped tightly in the cruiser’s tractor beam. Its engine nacelles were free from the beam’s grasp and vulnerable to the multiple impacts of the missiles in concert with Jarrod’s raking phaser fire.

“That’s it!” Trujillo crowed uncharacteristically. “Pour it on!”

A Jem’Hadar torpedo launched back towards them corkscrewed madly away, its targeting sensors scrambled by the tractor’s energies. An accompanying poleron blast, however, found its mark and lanced into the unshielded rim of *Reykjavik*’s saucer, blasting through several compartments to explode deep in the saucer’s interior.

Reykjavik shuddered, alarms wailed, and the bridge lighting flickered as the console now reconfigured for engineering functions became a riot of flashing red indicators.

An unmanned station next to Garrett’s science board crackled and sparked and the young officer drew her hands back just in time to avoid severe burns from arcing streamers of electrical current sizzling across her own console’s surface.

The chaos on the bridge was so distracting that Trujillo nearly missed the sight of the Jem’Hadar ship’s starboard nacelle exploding just as *Reykjavik*’s tractor emitter burned out.

“We’ve lost the tractor beam!” Chester announced. She looked up at the viewer and the Jem’Hadar limpingly trying to right itself, trailing atmosphere and plasma. There was vicious satisfaction in her voice as she added, “But it looks like they’re hurting a lot more.”

“Raise shields, all weapons continuous fire. Let’s finish this!” Trujillo growled, leaning as far forward as her restraints would allow with her fist clenched.

More torpedoes slammed home into the primary superstructure of the attack ship as rippling phaser fire scored back and forth across its hull. The ship slowly moved to come about just as its port nacelle was blasted free from its pylon to spin away on a random trajectory.

“Their shields are failing!” DeSilva blurted, heedless of bridge decorum now.

Naifeh piloted *Reykjavik* in a makeshift orbit, circling the Jem’Hadar vessel while keeping the cruiser bows-on to the attack ship as the starship worked to exhaust its torpedo stores and phaser energy.

“By the Great Hoof, what does it take to kill one of these things?” Glal exclaimed, dumbfounded at the smaller vessel’s resilience.

“A hell of a lot,” said Chester, “but we’re getting there.”

A final, blinding explosion heralded the end of the Jem’Hadar ship, the blast’s wavefront crashing against *Reykjavik*’s flagging shields and causing the deck beneath Trujillo’s feet to shudder yet again.

The captain sagged briefly in her chair, exhausted by the fight which had lasted mere minutes. She gave herself until the count of ten to tap her reserves, then straightened and released her safety restraints before standing.

“What’s our situation?”

DeSilva turned in her seat to address her captain. “Damage report, sir. Explosive decompression in several sections on Decks four, five, and six. Pressure doors and forcefields are in place and holding. Fire suppression systems have been activated and damage control teams are responding. Sickbay reports injuries and fatalities, but no firm numbers as yet.”

Chester ducked her head, using the excuse of unfastening her harness to hide her unhappiness at that; out of the corner of her eye she caught J'etris casting a look of transparent relief at Garrett, and hoped no one else was going to read too much into that.

Trujillo nodded wordlessly at this and took a moment to take measure of the bridge. She turned back towards the viewscreen, addressing Naifeh at the helm. "Get us back to the transport, best possible impulse speed." She then looked to Glal and Chester, "Make preparations to render aid to the passengers and crew of *Ull'roall*." Trujillo turned to Jarrod and J'etris as they unfastened their leg and waist harnesses. "Make sure every bit of that ship is either completely destroyed or beamed into our shuttlebay for return to *Bedivere*. When we're done here, as far as history will be concerned, this never happened. We'll simply have hunted down a particularly well-armed brigand, whomever Command wants to pin this on."

Chester nodded her agreement and relief. There was going to be a lot more work, but at least the immediate nightmare was now a spreading cloud of wreckage. It was a potent reminder not to take their present technologies too much for granted.

Trujillo yearned for the seclusion of her ready room so that she could find her emotional equilibrium in private. She had been found wanting in this scenario, and only the sage counsel of their temporally displaced counterparts and her executive officer had secured victory. It had been a humbling experience for her, a reminder that no matter how good you were, there was always someone out there who was better.

She resumed her place in the captain's chair, accessed her laptop interface, and began taking stock of her ship's condition.

* * *

Chapter 8

* * *

Twenty-three flag-draped photon torpedo tubes rested atop support platforms at equidistant intervals throughout *Reykjavik's* shuttle bay. The makeshift caskets were arrayed behind the captain's lectern, each one illuminated by a cone of light projected from overhead. Flags and ship's standards were carried by the members of honor guard; the flag of the Federation, that of Starfleet Command, and *Reykjavik's* sigil all held aloft.

A call on the bosun's whistle brought the crew to attention.

The service began, as they nearly always did, with the traditional words.

"We are gathered here today to pay final respects to our honored dead," Trujillo said, her voice carefully controlled. "We have lost twenty-three members of our crew in addition to the seventy-two souls aboard the stalwart Border Service cutter *Greyhound*."

"The sacrifices of our fallen brethren are not in vain, as our efforts saved the lives of hundreds of civilians, perhaps more, placed in mortal danger by the depredations of a merciless enemy. Each of those who lay down their lives in defense of their fellow sentients did so knowing full well what was being asked of them."

Trujillo had given this kind of eulogy more times than she cared to remember, but never for so many. She was justifiably proud of the fact that despite *Reykjavik's* typical high-risk mission profile, the numbers of personnel lost under her command were surprisingly few. Not this time. This battle had cost them dearly, and *Reykjavik's* sacrifice was nothing compared with that of *Greyhound*, whose entire crew had given their last full measure.

She gave each of their fallen comrades from *Reykjavik* their due, and then gave a more general testament to the captain and crew of *Greyhound*, none of whom she had known.

The service concluded with Chief Petty Officer Fraser playing the funerary dirge *Going Home* on the bagpipes to the accompaniment of Lt. Commander Kura-Ka playing the harp-like Zaranite *ketuska*. The pairing shouldn't have worked, but somehow the harmonic dissonance between the instruments made the song even more stirring, a haunting lament.

Glal called the crew to attention, and then dismissed them so that the personnel could say their goodbyes individually.

He glanced up as Trujillo was deactivating her data-slate and collecting herself. "Nicely done, sir."

Trujillo stepped down off the dais, nodding to Glal. "Thank you, Commander."

The pair walked over to where the senior officers had gathered, joined by Chester and J'etris. Chester had her hands tightly clasped behind her, grim lines around her mouth and grief in her eyes. J'etris, next to her, was looking with equal grimness at the line of caskets.

"This shouldn't have been their war," said Chester quietly. "But this may have been one of its most important battles—even if we don't get to tell anyone what really happened."

"They came here looking to kill and to destroy," Trujillo answered, "and it was our duty to stop them. This isn't on you, either. This was a freak accident, a bizarre confluence of events that brought all of you here. Without your help it would have been impossible to stop them without far greater loss of life than we ultimately suffered."

Chester's look turned a little wry. "That could describe this whole war—a series of ugly freak events. I'm glad we were able to rescue something from it, and that we could be of assistance. That doesn't make me regret it any less."

Trujillo appeared thoughtful. "Nor I, Commander. Nonetheless, I'm grateful that it was your ship that survived the battle and the cross-temporal event, and that your captain selected you and Lieutenant J'etris to accompany us. Seeing that fifty years hence Starfleet is turning out officers of your caliber gives me hope for the future."

That made Chester flush pink from chin to hairline. "Thank you, sir. That means a great deal." She glanced at J'etris, whose reaction was limited to an expression of contained satisfaction. "To both of us."

Glal addressed Trujillo. "We're about fifteen minutes out from *Bedivere* and the debris field, sir."

The captain favored their guests with a small smile. "Here's hoping they've been able to repair much of the damage in your absence so that Captain Steenburg can get you home." Her expression tightened with the realization of what they would be sent back to. "Not that we're in any hurry to see you go, of course."

"Tempting," said J'etris, a little wistfully, "but we do have a job to get back to."

"That you do," Trujillo agreed soberly. She looked to Glal. "Commander, please make arrangements with *Bedivere* to retrieve their personnel and to collect the Jem'Hadar wreckage we managed to take aboard."

“Aye, sir,” the XO affirmed smartly.

* * *

The *Bedivere* was indeed mostly repaired and moving under her own power, holding a safe distance out from the debris field. Captain Steenburg even looked as if she might have slept sometime in the last twenty-six hours. “Captain Trujillo,” she said, evidently relieved, “I take it from your return you were able to hunt down our stray. Though perhaps I should be offering you our repair crews now?”

Trujillo inclined her head from her seat on the bridge, the command center still showing visible signs of damage from the battle. “We’re patched up for the time being, Captain, though I’m certain there’s a dry-dock berth in our near future. The offer is appreciated, nonetheless.” She checked some figures on her armrest interface before adding, “We have wreckage from the Jem’Hadar fighter aboard, awaiting transport to your cargo bay. All the Jem’Hadar bodies and biological tissue were annihilated in the final explosion of their ship, so there are no remains to transfer over.”

“Happy to help any way we can,” Steenburg said, “and thank you—we’re standing by to receive them. I’d like to extend an invitation to you and your senior staff to join us for a drink or three. I suspect we’re in enough trouble with DTI that one after-battle party more or less won’t make much of a difference.”

Chester passed a hand over her face, clearly torn between horror and amusement.

Glal lowered his head, courting defeat at the hands of his captain’s taste for post-battle revels.

“Come now, Glal. You can’t object to a wake for those lost aboard our ships, can you? We fight and we drink. This is what we do,” Trujillo chided him.

“We are going to be in so much trouble,” muttered Chester.

A crewman stepped forward, handing two small wooden boxes to Trujillo, who thanked the young petty officer before turning to Chester and J’etris. “But first, a little memento of your time with us aboard *Reykjavik*.”

* * *

The *Bedivere*’s lounge had not fared well in the fight, but the wreckage had been cleared away, at least one of the replicators was working, and if there were still scorched patches on the floor, everyone present was pretty accustomed to the smell of burnt carpet by now. The drinks cabinet had indeed survived the attack, including some of Steenburg’s younger brother’s home-brewed mead. “Special occasions only,” she said, opening a bottle and offering it around. “He’s been sending it with me my entire career—at least he’s gotten *better* at making it.”

“It packs a punch,” Chester said by way of warning.

“Duly noted, Commander,” Glal said, pouring a round for the assembled officers.

Trujillo held up her glass in a toast. “To absent friends and comrades, fallen in the line of duty. May we always hold their honor sacred, and make them proud in the land of the living until we are reunited in Valhalla...” she shot a pointed look to J’etris, “...or *Sto-vo-kor*.”

J’etris returned the look with a grin.

Steenburg held up her glass as well. “May we remember and uphold that for which they gave their all, and defend it with similar courage.”

“Here, here!” Trujillo agreed. “*Salud*.”

They drank, and the toasts continued in multiple tongues from many worlds.

Then the stories began, the kind that became bigger with each retelling.

Trujillo poured the potent mead from the decanter into the glass with unsteady hands. “So, I told them that I’d informed their House of what they’d done, and unbeknownst to me, his father was only a figurehead. The Lord’s wife apparently held all the real political power in the family, wielded through her husband’s voice on the High Council.” Trujillo paused to take a sip of the bracing golden liquid, savoring its sweetness. “So, this Klingon warrior drops his blade, sinks to his knees and wails, “You told my *mother*?”

J’etris cackled. “I’ll keep that in mind for the next time we have a run-in with my extended family. I usually have to settle for breaking something over my cousins’ heads.”

Steenburg, mid-sip, made a face that illustrated how well previous encounters had gone.

“Nothing like family,” Trujillo chuckled.

“California hippies and traditionalist Klingons.” It was J’etris’s turn to make a face. “It’s a match made in hell.”

Trujillo shook her head, almost drunk enough to titter. “Birkenstocks and bat’leths, who would have guessed?”

“Oh yes. My mothers were very serious about making sure I stayed connected to my culture.”

Glal nodded sagely, raising his glass to emphasize the point. “Traditions are important. I’m not calling the Federation a *Homo Sapiens*-only-club by any stretch, but it would be quite easy to become subsumed by the all-pervasive human mega-culture. Your food, your holidays, even your music... it’s everywhere.”

Trujillo gave her XO an exaggerated side-eye. “My goodness but you’re cranky all of the sudden. Do it. Tell me to get off your lawn.”

“Bah!” Glal waved her away drunkenly, prompting laughter from the others. He sat down next to Chester, fixing a squinty, watery gaze on her.

“Be careful when you get home,” he told her. “I can’t imagine fighting a fleet of those things, let alone whatever they use for capital ships.”

“Believe me,” said Chester, with feeling, “you don’t want to see them. The fleet or the capital ships.” She took another swallow of her drink, glancing around the room. “We’ll be careful. As much as one can, in war.”

He nodded slowly. “I almost wish we were going in your place. We old soldiers are built for this, molded by decades of conflict. You were explorers, scientists, and diplomats thrown into a grist mill.” He glanced down into his now empty glass. “I guess we’re all old soldiers now.”

Chester huffed a laugh. “I’d try to tell you it’s not as bad as all that, but I’m not that good a liar. It’s not that we haven’t had horrors lurking around our borders in the past—it’s just they haven’t been the whole job before. Any advice from an experienced XO to a much less experienced one?”

“Help your captain see what she’s not apt to. All of us have blind spots, and an exec’s job is to help the captain see what they might not otherwise. Be the Yin to her Yang, to use a human aphorism. And always be ready to step into her shoes at a moment’s notice, because you’ll never know when that moment’s going to arrive.”

He stared at Trujillo, who was now sitting at a table near the bar in quiet discussion with Captain Steenburg. “I’ll retire long before she promotes, I think. I don’t know what she’ll do without me...”

Chester looked down at her drink, swirling it gently. “Retirement isn’t a bad way to lose an XO,” she said quietly. “It’ll be all right. Though as I’m only three months into the position, I might not be the best one to talk—I remain unendingly grateful that Commander Faisal left notes. He’d been working with the Captain for more than ten years.”

Glal smiled a fatherly smile. “You’ll be great at it. You already are.”

* * *

By the bar, Steenburg eyed the conversation between their respective executive officers and said, “I suspect I’m going to be saying thank you very frequently to you, Captain. You saved our bacon, finished the job we couldn’t, and I think working with you has done my XO a world of good.”

Trujillo sipped at her drink and nodded. “You fought them so hard you got thrown back in time, Captain. That’s a burden I’ve not experienced. You also gave us everything we needed to stop the threat by entrusting me with two of your officers.” She nodded towards Chester. “Diane’s good, better than she knows. Still inexperienced, but war has a way of accelerating that learning curve. She’ll make a formidable commanding officer one day. She’s certainly got a wider range of skills than I do to call upon. Chester’s going to be the kind of captain you can send on any mission profile, not just chasing pirates around and bopping them on the head.”

Steenburg nodded her vehement agreement. “She’s good at that, too. The trouble is keeping her from going and doing it personally—but I don’t know a single good captain without that problem. That’s why the universe gave us XOs.”

“I’ll drink to that, Captain,” Trujillo acknowledged with a laugh, raising her glass.

* * *

Epilogue

* * *

“You think they got home in one piece, sir?” Glal asked in the confines of Trujillo’s ready room.

“I hope so. We saw them slingshot around that star and vanish in an eddy of chroniton radiation. I have to believe that they got back to their temporal point of origin,” Trujillo said.

“I wish we could know how their war ended,” he said, issuing a gloomy sigh.

Trujillo nodded. “Fifty years or thereabouts until the entire quadrant is fighting for its collective life. I’ve been banging the drum for Starfleet to engage in more weapons and shield research for nearly ten years, and now I’m going to have to shut my mouth lest Temporal Investigations accuse me of trying to alter the future.”

Glal snorted derisively. “Who cares what they think?”

“According to Captain Steenburg, sometime between now and then DTI gets some teeth.”

“Ooooooh,” Glal wagged his thick fingers on both hands dramatically, “scientists and bureaucrats with teeth! So intimidating!”

“The captain seemed suitably concerned, so I’m going to take her word for it,” Trujillo countered. “Even in our time a critical report filed by one of their agents could cause trouble for an officer without sufficient patronage or political cover.

“The next few weeks will be difficult. While the ship’s under repair, we’re all going to be interrogated by Temporal Investigations personnel. Every detail of our encounter will be dissected and analyzed. Not talking about it with each other after such a grilling will be the hardest part.”

She looked pointedly across the desk at her XO. “Which means, my friend, that after this conversation concludes, we never talk about this again. Not in private, not over drinks in some quiet corner of a bar on Argelia. Never again.” She raised an eyebrow. “That’s an order. This never happened. Are we clear?”

“As Arcadian crystal, Captain,” he replied.

Trujillo poured a measure of Don Julio for each of them, pushing Glal’s glass across the desk to him. She raised her own. “To the brave crew of the starship *Bedivere*, most of whom have yet to be born.”

They drank to that, and true to their word, they never spoke of it again.

* * *

The war was over. It had ended a little over a year after the *Bedivere* returned to its own time. And it had exacted a heavy price.

What was left of the *Bedivere* was spread out over the Deep Space Nine wardroom table. There wasn’t much, just the few personal effects rescue teams had managed to salvage from the wreckage still on Cardassia. They were saying they’d try to salvage more, but the stubbornly smoldering fires throughout the ship’s carcass made that incredibly unlikely.

Chester looked down at the scant detritus, shoulders hunched. She was still moving slowly, courtesy of the extensive surgeries that had rebuilt her abdomen from the equally extensive damage a Jem’Hadar knife had done. She was still waiting on the last of a series of reconstructive surgeries that would allow what remained of her optic nerve to accept an artificial eye. In the meantime, she’d been running into things a lot. J’etris had taken to walking on her right side, covering her blind spot, without a word. Chester was grateful, but she hated needing it in equal measure.

There were a hundred and thirty seven survivors of the destruction of the *Bedivere*, of a crew of seven hundred fifty, and the majority of them had died in the first forty minutes after Chester had taken command. She’d been told by enough people that it was a miracle there had been any survivors at all, with a crew trapped aboard a crashing starship; she was heartily sick of it. It was like they expected her to simply accept having lost so many.

There were a lot of things here that would never be claimed. Chester reached out to run careful fingers over the battered remains of a pot from one of Captain Steenburg’s orchids, minus the plant that had occupied it, then lifted it. She’d get it back to Steenburg’s brother.

“Diane,” said J’etris, and Chester turned around, then turned a little further to compensate for her eye, finding J’etris with a cup in her hands. It took her a moment to recognise it. J’etris put it into her outstretched hand, and she turned it carefully to find the engraving intact: *U.S.S. REYKJAVÍK NCC-3109. ‘First to Advance, Last to Retreat.’*

The wooden box Captain Trujillo had presented it to her in had of course been obliterated—but the duranium coffee mug had hardly a scratch.

Chester weighed it in her hand, sniffed, using the back of her sleeve to wipe at her face. “Of course,” she said. “Of course this survived.” She gave J’etris a damp, wobbly smile. “I don’t know why I even bother to be surprised.”

“Do you think it will help you with your decision?” J’etris asked, her voice quiet.

Chester tucked the orchid pot under her elbow and turned the mug over in her hands. “I certainly know what she would say,” she said. “They’re offering me a state-of-the-art warship. I don’t want to be a soldier. I think—I mean, I hope—that’s not what Starfleet needs right now. Admiral Ross says he wants people to bring us back from our military role, but...”

“You think it is far too likely you’ll be pulled back into that role,” said J’etris.

Chester bobbed her head in a small, unhappy nod. “I’m good at it. Starfleet is very good at using your strengths.”

J’etris gave her a long thoughtful look. “I don’t think I have ever met a single person who’s succeeded at using any strength of yours that you weren’t fully willing to give them. And war is hardly the only thing you’re good at. In fact, it might be the least helpful of your current skills just now.”

“And leaving for the Diplomatic Corps right now would feel like running away,” said Chester quietly, still rolling the mug over and over in her hands. “I’m no good at that. And it doesn’t seem right. Not after...” She stopped, staring at the engraving again. The quiet hum of station systems filled the air; there were very few survivors still on their feet, and for the moment they had the room almost to themselves. The officer logging visitors and activity was politely ignoring them, likely inured to such conversations. The *Bedivere* was hardly the only ship lost.

“I’d always assumed it was one of grandmama’s friends who sponsored my application to the Academy,” Chester said, after a long while. “A retired Admiral taking an interest in me? It seemed like the only reasonable explanation. Grandmother’s network is expansive.”

J’etris looked down at the mug, up at her friend’s face with burgeoning suspicion. “What exactly was this retired Admiral’s name?”

Chester looked up at her, the corner of her mouth turning up—the closest to a smile she’d gotten in weeks. “Admiral Nandi Trujillo.”

Her attention returned to the mug in her hands. “I think I’m just realizing how much that is to live up to,” she said softly. “I guess I’d better get started.”

* * *

END

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