

My Shadow's Crown

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Summary

The USS Interpreter is a mess. What was theoretically a state of the art warship is in reality a delicately-balanced mess of competing malfunctions and a mismatched crew still learning to rely on one another. And yet, the Interpreter and its crew are one of the few resources Starfleet has in the Gamma Quadrant.

But now, they're being stalked--by an implacable enemy that knows them better than they know themselves. The crew of the Interpreter is going to have to shape up and learn to trust each other or fall to their very worst selves...

...Literally.

Chapter 1

The bridge of the *Ascendant* is beautiful. Its commander wouldn't tolerate anything else. Carvings ornament the real wood around the consoles and the arms of the command chair. The decking is polished and gleaming. Gold glitters in detailing along the edges of the tactical arch and the command chair and the plush smaller seat next to it. The style is eccentric, a hodgepodge of different Earth cultures and times; Han Dynasty China rubs shoulders with Napoleonic Europe. It feels like a throne room, all eyes drawn to the occupant of the center seat.

She is tall, a big woman with broad shoulders, her long dark hair swept up in an elaborate style reminiscent of Old Earth Chinese court dramas. She's dressed in white, a tight, square shouldered jacket with gold epaulets on the shoulders, another echo of Old Earth's sailing ships, the impaled Earth of the Terran Empire on the left side over her heart. The right is heavy with medals, decorations. A swept-hilt rapier hangs at her waist on her right side; a dagger on her left, and her hands are gloved. Her face is round, coming to a sharp point of a chin; her mouth, brilliantly red even in the low light of the nightshift, is tight at the corners with dissatisfaction, and her dark eyes are cold and watchful. There is a pettish cruelty in her face, a sharp thoughtfulness with no humor or tolerance in it, and as she stares at the datapad in her gloved hands, the frown between her eyebrows tightens into menace.

"I want it," she says to the tiny old woman next to her, so small and richly dressed she looks like a doll. "That *she* has it—she who doesn't know *anything*, this pampered complacent fool who's been *handed* everything—I want it. *I* could do so much with it."

"I could do so much with it," says the tiny old woman, gently. "For all of us."

The first woman's eyes drop, a silent apology. "Yes, grandmother. But—"

The old woman reaches to pat her hand. "I won't break your toy, little one. Never fear."

"We have suffered so much," says the first woman, fierce, and her eyes flick around the bridge. The black-clad crew there don't meet them, flinching under her gaze. "Even these people don't know. Don't *understand* what it was like under the Alliance, because they *ran away*." The cruel edge in her voice jerks shoulders rigid across the bridge, fear a visible ripple. They're accustomed to her moods; they know what that tone means. A few eyes flick starboard, to where the body of the last man to challenge her authority hangs in stasis. She admires it briefly when it catches her eye, like a piece of art. "How our people had *everything* taken from us. They were comfortable." Her gaze goes back to the padd in her hands. "And so were *they*. So smug in their interference. Well, their meddling has damaged us enough. Let's see how they like being on the other end of it." She puts the padd aside, as if it doesn't matter to her; the diagram of a ship glows there. *Armistice Class* and *Controlled Information* catch the light a moment before it powers off.

"What about her?" Grandmother asks. She tilts her padd so her granddaughter can see it, the golden brown curve of a face, dark eyes, dark hair swept up in a tight knot. "What will you do with her, then? This is not the record of a fool."

First Admiral Diane Chester of the Resurgent Terran Empire leans back in the command chair of her flagship and steeple her elegantly white-gloved fingers, and in the dimness her smile is like a bloody curve. "Her? Fool or not, *she* had better hope I find her useful."

Chapter 2

Captain's Log, Stardate 53570.5: We are in orbit of Deep Space Nine, undergoing repairs and vole mitigation, having fallen victim to the same infestation as the station. I am not optimistic about our odds of success. The Interpreter is a large ship, currently at a third of the complement she was designed to carry; every time we root out one nest, two more pop up in areas we thought we'd cleared.

Captain Diane Chester pauses in recording her log and makes a face. She has a feeling that the voles will be with them for a long, long time. The number of hidey holes on the ship has seemed to have multiplied a hundred fold since the voles came aboard; it's impossible to root them out of all of them. The number of times someone's told her they got the main nest, only to find a new nest...

She rubs both hands over her face. She spent most of the war bone-tired. She thought a year after its end, she'd feel less exhausted. But it's like she'll never be able to sleep enough again in her life. Counselor Rala probably would tell her it has to do with trauma. Chester herself strongly feels it's to do with the damned voles. State of the art warship, one of the best crews in Starfleet—or at least the potential to be one of the best crews in Starfleet—and a bunch of vermin are getting the best of them.

She drops her hands to the table, and looks at the blinking light that indicates a paused recording, a tall lanky woman with long dark hair bundled loosely at the nape of her neck, an expression of thoughtful consideration in her dark eyes. She's young for a starship captain—thirty-three next month, in fact—but then again so are most of the new crop of captains in the wake of the war. She does not feel young, though. Painfully unprepared sometimes, yes. But after the war, most certainly not young. Thanks to dermal regenerators, the Battle of Cardassia hasn't left scars across the golden brown of her face—but there is an artificial eye in her right socket, where a Jem'Hadar soldier gouged the original out, and there are days she wakes up with the phantom of a knife in her stomach, the sliver of cold where no cold should be.

The external scars are so much easier to deal with, because she was lucky. She's still here. Her crew—more than 600 of the 750 aboard the USS *Bedivere*—isn't.

She saved only a little over 100. And no matter how often her superiors tell her it's a triumph, that it was incredible anyone survived the crash on Cardassia at all, she cannot believe it. She would not be the commander she wants to be if she could accept it. Her life seems like it'd divided in two—before the wreck of the *Bedivere*, and after. She doesn't feel like she has any right to continue; on the bad days she feels like she's living on stolen time.

Life goes on, she reminds herself sternly. Life goes on, and her regrets will do nothing to save the dead. All she can do is make something out of it. Move forward from the war, and repair what is still there to fix.

Now she's in command of the *Interpreter*, one of the many young starship captains struggling to shoulder the gap left behind by the deaths of more experienced officers.

Chester stares at her terminal a little longer, sighs deeply, and takes another gulp of her coffee before starting the recording.

Vermin are a minor consideration, she continues, as current reports from our outposts in the Gamma Quadrant—along with those of our scant allies—are rapidly trending toward the disturbing. Multiple disappearances of ships in the last week, including several not carrying supplies of value (piracy is a growing problem in former Dominion space), planets abruptly cutting off communications and diplomatic relations, and misinformation and disinformation about Federation and allied activity are a handful of the reports I have been examining during our repairs. That the Gamma Quadrant is restive after the collapse of the absolute governing power of the last thousand years is no surprise. The problem is the exact form that restiveness will take. Whatever it does, we'll be some of the first people dealing with it. And as it has yet to form a pattern—something we can act on...

She pauses again. That's trending toward speculation.

I dislike being surprised.

Pause, again.

Our next assignment, pending vermin control and the engines restored to proper functioning, is a general purposes patrol around Sector Gamma 2522—wave the flag, offer help when requested, and otherwise be a comforting and steadying presence. Demonstrate that a Federation starship in orbit is a good thing. It's a tall order, but I think we could all use an opportunity to be friendly, after the last few months.

She ends it there and gets to her feet with a groan, stretching. Her personal effects, such as they are, dot the desk and standard-issue furniture. There are a few framed pictures of her parents and her grandmother, outside their Berkeley restaurant. A painting of mountains—the Sespe Wilderness in California. Calligraphy—hers side by side with her grandmother's far more elegant hand. Still, given the size of her quarters, they look like an afterthought, a handful of things trying to make a hotel room look homey. She's been debating pulling out the few decorations she has for Lunar New Year just to have *something* more on the walls.

The captain's quarters on *Interpreter* are outright palatial, even by Starfleet's indulgent standards; they were once intended to be flag officer quarters. When the war ended, and Starfleet found itself without a need for a ship to pin down the center in a large fleet action (at least not one with a foe of similar technical capability) they chopped off a third of the Admiral's quarters, rearranged a few walls in the original Captain's and XO's quarters and called it a day. There's been a sort of domino effect of added room; every single member of Chester's senior staff are rattling around in more space than they know what to do with. Midranking and junior officers have shared the wealth; *Interpreter* originally would have carried flight crews and ground combat specialists, and their officers would have had quarters, too. No shared rooms here. In fact, they've still got a lot of unoccupied living spaces.

Which would be much more enjoyable if the ship goddamned *worked* half the time.

Chester pauses on her way out the door, checks the light in the alcove there and tries turning it off and on several times, without success. She sighs heavily. Another argument for the decorations. This ship can use all the luck and prosperity it can get. She keys open her door. She'll take advantage of the downtime to go aboard the station, spend some time at Quark's and see what old friends she can catch up with.

Besides, the USS *Armistice* is due in later this evening. Captain Sotek is one of her old friends from the Academy. Maybe the *Armistice* has the same vole problem; maybe Sotek's figured out something she hasn't, maybe he's just as bewildered as she is. Either way, it'll help make her feel better.

Chester usually meets Sotek on the upper level of the Promenade, these days, by unspoken agreement, near whichever window their ships can best be seen. Both it and Quark's are something of a walk from the transporter platforms the *Interpreter* crew have been assigned, but she doesn't mind.

It's strange how things can start to feel like home. Deep Space Nine, during the war, was behind the lines most of the time, and the port to which the *Bedivere* returned most often. Even now, the tension eases out of Chester's shoulders when she materializes. Dim light, the permanent slightly musty smell—it means being back in Federation space, back with other Starfleet ships and officers and time to relax, at least a little.

She takes the long route. The war might be over, but at times like this she wonders if she's going to be dealing with its fallout her entire career—if everything she does will be defined by it in one way or another. It's an unpleasant thought. She joined Starfleet to be an explorer and a diplomat. To meet new peoples, see new things, make new friends and above all else, *help people*. She never wanted to be a soldier, and she's very afraid that now her every reflex and instinct are too thoroughly those of a warrior.

It's not something she wants to be. It's not something *Starfleet* should be.

A captain should be able to trust her instincts, but how can she trust something honed in battle in a time when peace is vital?

It's a very unhappy thought. It's one that's nagged her constantly over the last weeks. And it's one she needs to figure out how to deal with, because sooner or later, it's going to be tested. And when the time comes, she cannot afford to allow it to make her hesitate.

Movement up ahead, another person in the hallway. Chester is surprised—it's a big station, and the outer rings are usually quiet. Then she recognizes who it is coming toward her in the low station light.

It's Tanek.

Subcommander Tanek, her Romulan liaison officer, heading her way. She immediately changes course to avoid him.

The man is an ass. The Tal Shiar has found the single most irritating person in their ranks especially for her. They have inflicted this literally gigantic—he's something like another ten centimeters taller than her, and she already towers over most other humans—pain in the posterior on her, with his constant snide comments, his refusal to be useful, his endless ability to craft individualized feuds with each and every one of her crew. With the rather strange exception of Commander J'teris, but maybe he's aware that the Klingon woman could break him like a twig if she was so minded. He is the single most obnoxious sentient being Chester has ever met. He tried sparring with her last week, perhaps assuming that he would naturally be more adept with a sword than she was (of course he was sure that innate Romulan superiority would give him an edge in an art she's been practicing since she was *ten*), and wiping the floor with him was the best thing that had happened to her in the last month.

He's definitely holding a grudge about that. And she's not in the mood for whatever bon mot he's been crafting since then. She is not, in fact, in the mood for any of his sneering or stupidity. Not that anyone ever could be. She did not want him aboard her ship before she met him; now her feelings are a great deal stronger. But the Romulan Empire and the Federation are theoretically trying to play nice these days, and the Romulans want someone keeping an eye on Federation activity in the Gamma Quadrant. It's either the liaison officers or tripping over cloaked warbirds every other week, and the liaison officers are the lesser of the two evils. At least, so the Admiralty seems to think; personally Chester would very much like to lock them in a room with Tanek for a few hours and see if they reevaluate that decision.

As she swerves into an intersecting corridor to avoid him, she catches the shift of shadow in the dim mouth of a doorway behind him. There is a woman there.

Chester pauses. Tanek is moving toward her where she stands in the intersection, frowning at a padd in his hands. He has not seen her; neither has the woman behind him. She's intent on him, and Chester is tucked well around the corner. Chester watches her—Romulan, shorter than both of them, a sharp-edged beautiful face under the standard-issue Romulan haircut. Civilian clothing, oddly enough; most of the Romulans on Deep Space Nine are military in some form or another. And while Romulan and human body language are very different, there's something wrong about how the Romulan is moving. Chester would lay money that she's stalking Tanek, like a hunter with prey.

She's not eager to get involved. For one thing, anyone wanting to jump Tanek in a deserted corridor has her sympathies; she's assuming it's because they've met the man. For another, she doesn't want to get herself entangled in whatever the hell Romulan drama is going on here.

But this very common sense approach comes hard up against her duty as a starship captain, and that duty is not to let her horrible pain in the ass self-centered snarky twit of a liaison officer get himself killed, because he is one of her officers. A dead Tanek, unbelievably enough, may actually cause more problems than a living, grumbling Tanek.

So she hesitates, and waits. She will greet them as they come level with the corridor, and whatever the hell is happening here, if it's something bad, should be quelled by the possibility of outside interference. She can talk to the man if it means possibly saving his life.

Very unhelpfully, the woman moves before Chester can casually interfere, lunging for Tanek's broad and unprotected back. Chester catches the gleam of a blade. The decision is made for her. She launches herself at Tanek, shouting a warning as she does.

He's very big, bigger than her, but she's judged her leverage correctly and brings him down flat on his back in a perfect tackle. She *feels* the breath go out of him, partly because she's none too careful in how she lands. *Let* him wheeze for a few seconds, that pride of his could use the deflating. She catches a glimpse of his face, of the rare and total shock stamped there, before she twists to meet the next attack she's sure is coming. One hand goes down to the disruptor at his waist, the only weapon available; she's mildly surprised to find it set to stun even now—they had a hell of a fight about default weapons settings when he first came aboard. She knew he was cooperating with her insistence to have his weapon set to non-lethal levels while working with her crew. That he's kept it there seems uncharacteristic.

She levels the disruptor. "Put the weapon down."

Only to find his attacker standing there, knife in hand, with an identical expression of surprise.

"*This ?*" she says, scandalized. "Tanek, *really ?*"

"Drop the knife," says Chester, because the knife seems like the easiest of the problems before her. "Now, please."

The Romulan woman returns it to her belt. She's in civilian clothes, layered and subtle shades of probably gray, a woman of average height and even more attractive up close. Her sharp pale eyes search Chester's face, then return to the gasping Tanek, who, Chester realizes, should have shoved her off by now. She glances down at him and has the brief satisfaction of seeing him even more gobsmacked than his murderous friend.

It's brief, because if Tanek is looking that confused, it means he's so shocked he's let go of his usual iron control of his expression. Tanek being honest in any way whatsoever usually presages disaster.

And is he *blushing ?*

"A human," says the woman, and her voice is shading toward gleeful. "A Starfleet *human ?*"

Tanek's eyes flick up to Chester, and he manages, "She does not know what she's doing, Nivaan."

"Looks to me like your human knows perfectly *well* what she's doing," says Nivaan, grinning. "She brought you down like she's had *practice*."

Chester frowns, suspecting Nivaan does *not* mean in the gym. Has she stumbled into some weird Romulan sex thing? "I think one of you owes the human an explanation."

"She doesn't know," says Tanek, an edge Chester might call desperation in his voice.

"I really don't," says Chester. "How about you clear this up, Mr. Tanek? Perhaps you could introduce me to your friend here?"

"This is..." Tanek pauses. "My now *former* fiancée."

"As of thirty seconds ago," says Nivaan. At Chester's perfectly blank look, she adds, "When you knocked this idiot to the ground."

"You were breaking off your engagement," says Chester, carefully. "By trying to kill him?"

She nods. "Though I would only have *actually* killed him if he was very stupid about it."

Chester looks at Tanek for more of an explanation and finds him looking anywhere but her.

There's a silence.

"I suspect there's something you're not telling me," says Chester. "One of you had better fix that. Now, if you would."

"She really doesn't know?" says Nivaan, her voice thick with delight.

"Madam, if you are not going to be helpful, I will ask you to be quiet. Subcommander Tanek. Kindly explain."

Tanek won't look at her. Tanek is looking everywhere *but her*. "You have just proposed marriage to me, Captain."

"*What ?*" To her shame, Chester freezes, realizing her position. She's straddling him, a hand on his chest and the other holding his disruptor; he's pinned flat under her, staring up at her and perhaps also too shocked to move, and because Murphy's Law always, always is in full force, it is at this moment that one of the doors slides open and a tousled crewman sticks his head out into the corridor and goes, "I called security."

Chapter 3

“We may be lucky to get out of this without a war,” says Admiral Ross, sounding a little incredulous himself. “The Romulans are demanding your head on a platter. Couldn’t you have just…”

“Allowed an apparent assassination attempt on a foreign officer under my protection to go forward uninterrupted?” deadpans Chester. “It was tempting, but seemed like a bad idea at the time.”

“It’s a hell of a mess you’ve dropped us in, Chester.”

You’re not the one who just proposed to the worst person you know! “Of that, I am painfully aware, sir.”

“Admiral Toreth is livid,” he says. “Apparently, she’s one of his extended family. She also informed me that Subcommander Tanek’s mother is also livid, and quite powerful, especially since you chose to make your proposal in such a, and I quote, ‘flagrantly obscene manner’.”

“You’ve seen the security recordings,” says Chester. “It was very much not my intention to do anything of the sort.”

“And we don’t know enough about the finer points of Romulan culture to understand exactly what you did, or if the Romulans are even telling the truth about this. Your friend Captain Sotek is one of the very few Starfleet officers who might—I’d suggest talking to him. I’ve sent a query to others of our diplomatic staff, but it will take time to get a response.”

Sotek spent the last few months of the war assigned to the Federation mission to Romulus. He might indeed. But it’s certainly discouraging that he’s considered an expert.

Also, the idea of explaining to him exactly what she’s done is a horrible one.

“In the meantime, we’ll do what we can. We certainly are all familiar with cultural misunderstandings in this line of work—even ones where one party isn’t receptive to the explanation. We can handle the Romulans.”

“Thank you, sir. If it’s worth anything, I feel like a complete idiot.”

“If it had been a genuine attack, and you hadn’t intervened, we’d all be in one hell of a worse situation.” He shakes his head. “But I won’t tell you that I *don’t* wish you hadn’t chosen that particular corridor to walk down.”

“Well,” she says, “I’d like to make it perfectly clear that I’m not marrying him.”

“If only that was the problem at hand.” He shakes his head. “There’s one bit of possibly good news here. Admiral Toreth wants to speak with you personally. She sounded like she was willing to consider some kind of compromise, but wouldn’t say what it was.”

“How likely is she to stick a knife in my back?” Chester means it as a joke, but Ross’s face clouds over.

“Believe me, I had to talk her out of it.”

“Captain Chester,” says Admiral Toreth, and turns a little to level a very unpleasant smirk at Chester. She’s standing by one of the windows in her sparsely appointed office that somehow manages to still look more lived-in than Chester’s own quarters do. “Do come in.”

The usual swarm of staff aren’t present. It’s just the two of them, and the Admiral’s bodyguards. It may be Chester’s imagination, but the two officers are looking at her with more than the usual threat. Like they’ve already determined five efficient ways to kill her and are now entertaining the more elaborate methods.

Cultural misunderstanding, she reminds herself. *It happens. This is part of being in Starfleet—dealing with the fallout.*

“Admiral Toreth,” she says. “Thank you for making the time to see me.”

“Something that pleases you a very great deal, I’m sure,” says Toreth, somehow incredibly sarcastic without much inflection in the statement. “I’d offer you a seat, but we’re *well* beyond courtesy now.”

“So I have gathered. I apologize for my error and my interference in what was clearly a highly sensitive cultural event. I had no intention of impropriety; I was concerned for the Subcommander’s welfare.”

“Of course you were,” says Toreth and sweeps a disdainful evaluating look over her. “Humans assume that all other species share their softness and sentimentality.”

“With all respect, madam, one individual attacking another with a knife is usually a fairly straightforward situation. You entrusted Subcommander Tanek’s safety to me when you assigned him to my crew. Failing in that obligation was out of the question.”

“Captain, you misunderstand me.” Toreth looks sidelong at her. “I do not care about your reasons. Neither does Subcommander Tanek. And his family, particularly his mother the Senator, *certainly* do not. You are an alien who has presumed to proposition a child of one of our most illustrious families in a presumptuous and obscene manner. It’s a profound insult. Certain of his mother’s faction are already calling for armed reprisals. The Federation has once again shown its true face, they’re saying. Look at how they’ve humiliated one of our soldiers, a man simply here to serve his Empire and promote peace between our peoples.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” says Chester. “I had no intention of proposing marriage, or propositioning Subcommander Tanek. Our relationship is

purely a professional one,” *despite his tendency to be an enormous jerk*, “and I intend to keep it that way. If there is any remedy or apology I can make, I would appreciate being informed of it.”

“Your superiors have made it clear that killing you is unfortunately out of the question,” says Toreth.

Chester keeps her face still, which is probably a giveaway in and of itself. She assumed that Ross saying the Romulans were calling for her head was an overstatement. Apparently it was not. “I would hesitate to disobey their wishes,” she says, her voice very dry. “Is that the only appropriate response, then?”

“Allow me to make your position absolutely clear, Captain. Tanek is a child of one of our highest houses—one in disgrace at the present time, but dignified nevertheless. Were you Romulan—” She looks Chester over and huffs a small laugh at the absurdity of the idea, “your actions today would have been offensive enough. *You* are of no high family even among your own people. As I understand it, your mother is a food vendor, and your father studies insects.”

Chester just raises her eyebrows, a *that matters?* expression.

“As it is, you are *not* Romulan.” Toreth leans back against her desk, folding her arms. For someone so supposedly incensed on behalf of her kinsman, she seems pretty pleased with herself. Then again, the Romulans are probably planning to milk this for all it’s worth. “And as Admiral Ross has made it clear that killing you would be more diplomatic trouble than it’s worth, our options are sadly limited.”

“I would imagine Tanek would have some kind of a say in whether he accepts my proposal,” says Chester, still very dry.

“He does,” says Toreth, “which is again why it’s a pity your death is not an option. Your actions were a profound insult, and he would have been well within his rights to kill you for it. And his mother has made it clear to me that if he failed to do so, as an albeit distant member of the household, the duty would fall to me.” Another tight unpleasant smile; her eyes glitter with genuine amusement. “You have made some very powerful enemies with this little incident, Captain.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She can only imagine what might have happened if they found out how many *other* times she’s hauled Tanek’s stupid carcass out of trouble. “Look, Admiral, I meant no disrespect to Tanek or to his—your—House. If that’s not an option, can I break it off on my end?”

“An alien woman laughably far below his station deciding that he wasn’t *good* enough for her?” An eyebrow goes up, and derision twists Toreth’s face. “You would compound the insult a hundredfold.”

Chester bites back her annoyance, resists the urge to bury her face in her hands. “Very well then,” she says. “Clearly our peoples do not yet understand each other—what would you propose, Admiral? I am sure you have an idea, or the displeasure of my superiors be damned, you *would* simply kill me. The Gamma Quadrant is a large and dangerous place, and I’m well aware of my own reputation.”

“None satisfactory as of yet,” says Toreth, and her fox’s smile grows wider. “The diplomats will be very busy indeed handling it. I’m sure there are some appropriate reparations they’ll settle on.”

Chester’s heart sinks. She can imagine the sorts of things the Romulans will ask for, in order to ‘forget’ this incident.

She wonders what the hell Tanek thinks of the whole mess. If he’s pleased with himself right now, having won this diplomatic advantage for his people. Or if he’s as embarrassed as he looked when she first flattened him.

Who is she kidding. It’s the former. He’s probably delighted.

“So what happens in the meantime?” she asks. “I’m sure allowing the insult to sit and fester isn’t ideal. And I’m sure that simple diplomatic reparations don’t entirely address an insult of this magnitude.”

“They do not,” says Toreth, “but we are a practical people. It may yet be dismissed as a girlish escapade. Your age will aid that, at least—by our standards, it’s laughable that you’re in command of a starship—and we will simply...I believe the human term is *sweep it under the rug*.”

“How fortunate.”

Toreth’s wintery smile returns. “Yes. You should be *fully* aware how fortunate you are that we are not pursuing this issue. You are a loutish stupid impulsive alien girl, and that is the reason you are still breathing.”

That’s a bit much. “Admiral, I do believe you’re in danger of enjoying yourself.”

Toreth’s expression makes it clear just how little she thinks of *that* sally.

“Will you be reassigning him, then?” Maybe there’s a silver lining to this absolute shitstorm. Oh, she’ll still have to deal with some variety of Romulan garbage, she knows that, but not having to deal with Tarek’s particularly enraging flavor of Romulan garbage would almost make the whole mess *worth* it.

“No,” says Toreth. “That would be conceding the gravity of the insult, making, as you pointed out, the reparations insufficient.”

Dammit. “Very well. Will that be all, Admiral?”

“This is my government’s official stance on the matter.” Toreth gives her a considering look. “My cousin may yet decide to take matters into her own hands.”

So a Romulan Senator may have significant personal motivation to kill her. Fantastic. “Should she do that, Admiral, I would take it as a kindness if you were to remind her I was the one to offend her...and to leave my crew out of it.”

“She may just require that reminder.”

Subcommander Tanek of the Tal Shiar does not panic.

If he were ever to allow his anxiety to master him—which he will not—it would be about something of actual significance. A Borg incursion. A threat to his House and family. The imminent destruction of all civilization in the Alpha Quadrant. It would not concern a young, foolish Starfleet captain, or a cultural misunderstanding, or an incident that, while embarrassing, his superiors have already assured him will allow them to wring significant concessions from the Federation.

But he cannot settle his mind. She brought him down hard, absolutely dedicated, a ferocity in her expression completely out of character with her soft complacent species. For a moment, he had actually wondered if she meant it. That possibility, terrifying in its implications and utterly ridiculous to expect from a human, is one he still cannot fully discount.

The alternative, of course, is that she’s playing another game entirely. There must be some advantage to this. His superiors are sure it was mere stupidity and ignorance that drove her; they’re accepting the Federation explanation of a cultural misunderstanding at face value. But he knows Chester better. He has studied her record in more depth than they have, aiming for an understanding of the officer he would have to work with, and, when this brief truce reaches its inevitable conclusion, dispose of. He has seen her cornered and in combat now, and he has fought her himself—the last, the most informative, confirmed his suspicions.

Chester may be young, but she is not inexperienced, she is not impulsive, and she does not do anything without a reason. There is a great deal of thought going on behind that blandly pretty face and those placid human eyes, a wiliness and ruthless strategic calculation that would do any of his own trainers proud.

She must have done this for a reason. The idea a blunder this monumental would be anything but intentional is a laughable idea. The worst part of it is, Tanek cannot identify what it must be, or what she is up to, and his superiors won’t even consider it. Either this is somehow genuine, which is horrifying in and of itself, that she believes it will *work*, or Captain Chester is three steps ahead of him, enacting some complex plan to defang him, use him against his own people, and he cannot see what it is.

It is that, and not the idea of her looking at him with something other than barely-concealed disrespect, that makes him feel like he’s suddenly on uncertain ground. Whatever she is doing, she has outmaneuvered him to an alarming degree. His superiors believe they will gain a great deal from this incident. Tanek knows they will not. It is never a good idea to ascribe an incident to the stupidity of a foe. Particularly one you know is anything but stupid. It is this looming threat that alarms him. Chester is using him. How, he does not know. She saw her chance, and she took it without hesitation, putting her plan into motion with vicious efficiency.

It alarms him. But it does, on some level, merit a degree of grudging respect.

Chapter 4

The Deep Space Nine gossip mill is hard at work as ever. No sooner has Chester slid into place at a table at Quark's then the Ferengi bartender is there at her elbow. "Celebrating the happy event, Captain? Where's the lucky man?"

Starship captains don't flee at the prospect of public embarrassment, but Chester comes very close to bolting. Quark looks at her expression and raises his cocktail tray defensively. "Forget I said anything. I'll just bring you something strong, shall I?"

"Just a coffee," she says. She's not sleeping anyway.

"A coffee," he repeats. She just looks at him. "Very well, Captain. A coffee." He tucks the tray under his arm and walks away, shaking his head.

Why the hell did she think it was a good idea to come here? She glances around; she is getting the oh-so-casual over the shoulder looks of today's hot gossip. She doesn't even bother to be surprised. If Quark knows, everyone knows.

The coffee arrives. She manages a thank you, then pretends it's a lot more interesting than it actually is.

The chair across from her scrapes out, and someone thumps heavily into it. "So, what did you do?"

Chester looks up and blows out a long breath of relief at the sight of the tiny blond Trill across from her. "Rilas? What are you doing here—I thought the *Negotiator* was on that aid mission to Gamma Neevi II?"

"We blew three plasma conduits and the port warpcore when we got jumped by pirates halfway there," says Captain Rilas Jel'n, stretching. "Sotek had to come fish us out and tractor us home. Whole ship smells like burnt carpet."

"And the pirates?"

Rilas lifts and drops a shoulder, her delicate features grim. "Abruptly retired."

Yeah, from breathing, thinks Chester, looking her friend over. Rilas doesn't share Chester's compunction about being a soldier. She spent the war in Starfleet Intelligence. Most of her activity has yet to be declassified—whatever the hell she was up to, though, Chester knows it was bad. The Rilas she knew before the war and the one sitting in front of her are two entirely different people. Rilas still acts the part of the bubbly troublemaker she was in the Academy and when they were all junior officers together, but there's a hardness behind her eyes now, a greater willingness to go immediately for the throat.

None of them have much sympathy for pirates after the last few months. And in a crippled ship, alone and far from help, no one's going to argue with Rilas's call to defend her people by any means necessary.

But Chester isn't sure she likes it. It feels in her mind a little too like the flat viciousness she sank into during the war, when there was an ugly job to be done. It's still with her, the rapid cruel calculations of survival. Pushing back against it, with the fear of endangering your crew—it's a terrifying and delicate learning curve.

"Glad you're here," she says. "Who's got the aid mission?"

"The *Defiant*," says Jel'n. "We'll be here for the next two weeks. At least. My engineer says she'll be able to salvage the core, she *thinks*. Hey Quark, what's the strongest thing you can legally sell me?"

There's a little wrangling. Quark believes in profit, but also in liability. That settled, and Rilas also settled with something gently frothing and fuchsia, she says, "Enough about me. What did you *do*? The Romulans are like a kicked Earth anthill, and all I got out of anyone was it was about you."

Chester groans.

"She proposed to her Romulan liaison officer," says Quark in passing, because he's an enormous asshole who likes being the center of attention.

"You *what*?"

"It was an accident!" says Chester. "I wouldn't—I have better taste, Rilas!"

Rilas tilts her head. "That's worse," she says. "You understand that *is* worse, right, Diane?"

"Oh do I," says Chester. "Look, what I saw was some other Romulan about to stab him—not that I don't *sympathize*—and I stepped in to help and apparently, when you interrupt a *ceremonial breakup* you're basically announcing your passionate love for one of the participants, so here we are. It's a diplomatic crisis, and precipitating it feels *amazing*, let me tell you."

Rilas lets out a long breath and sits back in her seat. "Wow. Of the three of us, I wouldn't have guessed *you'd* be the one to do the accidental engagement thing. That's more my line."

It is, of course, then that Sotek glides up, a tall man even by Vulcan standards, and lightly built, even by Vulcan standards; he and Chester are of a height, but he looks almost flyaway next to her. An academic before his husband noted his boredom and chivvied him into joining Starfleet, he still retains a professorial air. That profoundly nonthreatening demeanor, coupled with naturally owlsh expression, has served him extremely well in many negotiations.

Now he says, "I think it unwise that we have this discussion in a public venue. Perhaps one of our ships would be appropriate."

Rilas gives him a concerned look. "Not it. My ship smells like horrible burning."

"My quarters, then," decides Sotek.

From the look of things, the *Armistice* is in the best shape of the three ships. There's no scent of burnt plastic, and while Chester doesn't ask Sotek about the voles, she sees no sign of them when they beam aboard. Sotek's quarters are in a far better state than either of theirs, though that might just be Vulcan minimalism working in his favor. Whatever he's done, his quarters feel lived-in.

"I haven't put up any of my pictures yet," says Rilas. "They're in a pile on my desk. Old habits, you know?"

They know. Rilas didn't even have a desk of her own for most of the war.

Sotek settles them in the seating area with its generous window and bank of plants, offers water—weaponizing Vulcan custom to ensure they don't continue to consume stimulants or depressants at this time of night, Chester notes wryly as she accepts—and then sits down opposite her with an air of careful concern. Chester feels like a student in the process of failing an important course.

"The rumors I have heard are disturbing enough," he says. "On their basis alone I would suggest that you avoid being alone on the station for the foreseeable future, and encourage Admiral Ross to deploy the *Interpreter* as soon as possible. But before I make any further suggestions, I would like to hear the events in question from you, rather than the... unreliable informal information network of the station."

So he's already been listening to the gossip, and found it bad enough to bring them back over here.

"She proposed to Subcommander Tanek on accident," says Rilas, with no mercy in her voice.

"Is this so?" asks Sotek gently, his attention on Chester. It is the exact expression that's the reason she started calling him *gēge*, *older brother*, at the Academy—at first by accident, and then on purpose. He was appalled at first, and then, as he looked into traditions of human elective kinship, took the role almost a little too seriously.

But right now, she's not ashamed to admit that this is absolutely what she needs. So she tells him the whole ridiculous story.

As she speaks, Sotek goes graver and graver. When she gets to the part about tackling Tanek, he says, "That would have put your body between his and his attacker, correct?"

"Yes," she says. "It seemed like the safer option under the circumstances."

He slowly reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. "Please continue."

Oh. She's fucked.

When she finishes speaking, he says, "The issue is not so much that you merely indicated your interest in courting him. It is that you have done so in a formal and archaic way that is not only unusually...ardent, but is also what a social equal or superior would utilize. Unfortunately, as the Romulans see it, you are neither."

"Yes, Toreth gave me the speech. The hell do you mean by 'unusually ardent'?" Rilas lets out a strangled honk of laughter; Chester glares at her for being unhelpful in the extreme.

"You placed yourself between him and danger, which is not something another Romulan would have done lightly. You also took his weapon to defend yourself and him. That implies a..." He pauses, evidently searching for a delicate enough word. After a moment, he turns his gaze to her face, looking for some cue there, the concern on his own unusually strong. "A certain intimacy," he decides.

"Oh," says Rilas, a little faintly, and sinks down with her head on the table, trying to muffle her giggles.

Chester blinks at Sotek. "What kind of intimacy?"

"The usual kind."

There is a stifled noise from Rilas.

"I feel the need to reiterate there was a woman with a sharp knife standing over us," says Chester. "Very strongly. And, before either of you ask those concerned questions I can *hear* lining up in your nasty suspicious minds—he's also the most annoying person I've ever met, and I barely tolerate him, let alone want to marry him!"

"The logic of your reaction, unfortunately, has little bearing in your present situation," says Sotek. He's being sympathetic. She can tell by his choice of words, and the way he's not quite looking at her. "The fact remains that you have inadvertently made an unusually explicit and passionate proposal of marriage to the Tal Shiar agent assigned to your ship, and he has not rejected you. I believe that there is very little indeed that will discourage his female relatives from most earnestly trying to kill you."

"Hold on. What do you mean, he did not reject me?"

"If he did not immediately fling you off him, or shoot you, or display his displeasure in dramatic and fatal fashion, he has not rejected your advances."

"I think that was surprise."

“He is an experienced agent of the Tal Shiar. I very much doubt he was immobilized by shock.”

Chester groans and buries her face in her hands. “I hate him.”

“The circumstances are indeed unfortunate.”

“Toreth says I can’t even dump him without making it worse.”

“That is unfortunately true.”

“So what the hell can I do?”

“Get off the station and hide,” says Rilas. “How do you even do this, Diane. How do these things keep happening to you.”

“Allow our diplomats to do their work,” says Sotek. “It is their profession. In the meantime, Rilas is correct. Your presence will only be inflammatory at this point.”

Chester groans and drops her head into her hands again. “I feel so stupid. This is the worst diplomatic incident I’ve caused in my *life*. Also I proposed to literally the worst person I know. He is an unbelievable fucking shithead.”

“Colorful human idiom will not aid the situation. However, please understand that had you done what you did under any other circumstances, your actions would have been laudable. It is only the specific circumstance of interrupting the separation of a couple that constitutes this kind of proposal.”

“So I got really, really unlucky,” says Chester.

“You could have gotten unluckier,” says Rilas. “Remember how his sister is *my* liaison officer? She wanted me to let you know she understands it was an accident, and she’ll give you a running start once their mother tells her to kill you.”

“Given Romulan and human physiology, that is unlikely to alter the outcome of a confrontation.”

“Thanks a lot, gēge.” Chester takes a sip of the water for something to do with her hands. “If it were Tanek, I wouldn’t be worried. He decided to fence with me last week—didn’t go well for him.”

“It is very likely he was trying to assess the threat you posed,” says Sotek, “and gain a better understanding of you in the process. His job, as an agent, is to understand you and be able to predict your actions and reactions. Should the truce end—which I am sure the Romulans see as an certainty, rather than a possibility—his task will then be to neutralize you and your crew as efficiently as he can. Do not take a victory in sparring too much to heart; he can afford embarrassment to further an eventual victory. And do not,” he catches and holds her gaze, “take any offer of a deepening personal relationship, platonic or otherwise, as anything but a tactical decision to further his assignment. He would be wise to play on the mutual embarrassment of this incident as an excuse to move further into your confidence. Indeed, I would have expected him to have attempted something similar earlier.”

“You mean you’re worried he’s going to seduce me?” says Chester, hears her voice squeak on the edge of laughter. “Have you met this guy, Sotek? Please, have one conversation with him, you’ll understand.”

“Nevertheless, kindly remain cognizant of the risk.”

“Going to agree with Sotek here. Your species has a whole genre of entertainment about young women dedicated to their careers throwing everything away because they fall in love with annoying men,” says Rilas. “What’s with that, anyway? Why is it never the other way around?”

“Twentieth century sexism, mostly,” mutters Chester. “Fine. I won’t enact the plot of a romcom with my Tal Shiar assigned idiot, even if we did just get engaged, even if he does somehow remove his head from his ass and get over his entire personality.”

“That is all I ask,” says Sotek, and because she knows him very well she can see the humor lurking at the corners of his eyes. “In the meantime, you are hardly the first and will not be the last Starfleet officer to find herself in this position. There is no immediate action you can take, but the Diplomatic Corps are very good at their jobs.”

Sotek will never simply say something like *it will be all right*—Vulcans don’t do platitudes. But this is basically the same thing. She gives him an unsteady smile. “Thanks. I’m looking forward to this being a humorous anecdote.”

“It is very likely to become one,” he says, “and no more. Much like the vole infestation I am told both of our ships are currently suffering.”

He’s got the voles too! That cheers her up no end. Rilas turns an incredulous look at both of them. “Voles? You *both* have voles? How do you have *voles*?”

“Deep Space Nine,” they tell her, almost in chorus.

“I’m going to have to tell my chief engineer that,” says Rilas, smug. “Our engine problems might just be getting off lightly after all.”

Chapter 5

Ross wants Chester off the station as quickly as Chester wants to *be* off the station; the vole mitigation comes to a ‘good enough’ conclusion, repairs are finished up (for now), the crew recalled, and the *Interpreter* heads for the Gamma Quadrant to show the flag and hopefully not suffer any catastrophic failures in the process. The Deep Space Nine repair crews seem to think they’ve headed off the major problems, at least.

But they always think that, and they’re usually wrong. If there’s one thing the Armistice Class is good at, other than looking scary on paper, it’s inventive new ways to break.

Two days later, in the middle of the night, Chester’s eyes snap open to the sound of her door chime. She’s on her feet and headed across her quarters before the sound fades, adrenaline bringing her fully awake without any need for coffee. Someone at her door means comms are down, at best—she stuffs her bare feet into her boots as she opens the door.

Standing in the offshift-dim corridor, she sees exactly what she expects—her chief engineer in a similar state of disarray, a small indignant human who gives her a perfunctory glare by way of greeting. He’s in a hastily donned engineer’s uniform, which puts him one over on her pajamas.

She looks down at him. He frowns up at her, his brown hair sticking out at all angles over the cybernetics that wrap the back of his head, freckles and the dark smudges under his eyes, stark against his pale skin.

“All right,” she says. “What broke this time, Mr. Hawthorne?” She makes a face. “Aside from comms.” He wouldn’t be here in person otherwise.

“The warp cores desynchronized.”

Chester’s stomach drops. That’s about as bad as it can get. “Have I got time to change?”

Hawthorne glances down at the cartoon hedgehogs on the buttercup yellow of her pajama pants. “Please do.”

It’s not that Engineering hasn’t already seen her pajamas—several of them, too many times, too many midnight emergencies to avoid that—but Hawthorne doesn’t consider them appropriate PPE. Chester ducks back into her quarters and dresses in the dark with the speed of long practice, deftly tucking her wrist-thick sleep braid into something that resembles a regulation bun.

Too many midnight calls during the war, and too many now. She remembers her grandmother warning her to never be the first person to test a new technology, let alone a ship—or volunteer her ship to test a new technology. The *Interpreter* manages to be all three at the same time. A powerhouse warship on the drawing board, she ran into rushed production for the war, corners cut because of resource shortages and timelines and some of her new design elements never made it through labyrinthine Starfleet approval processes. Others did. Not all of them are the ones Chester would have prioritized.

And then the whole thing was refitted for peacetime. The poor ship is a frankenstiened mess of purposes, not just technologies, temperamental and struggling at the best of times.

Chester reaches out on reflex to pat the bulkhead. “Not your fault,” she tells the ship, then opens the door. “So why are comms down?”

“High levels of neutrinos,” says Hawthorne. “Some other kind of interference. Sounds like Lieutenant Vixx is prioritizing us not blowing up before finding out why we almost blew up.”

“I see,” she says, and heads for Engineering. He falls into step with her, glaring at the padd in his hands. Hawthorne doesn’t do anything *but* glare around her. The last time she saw him smile was when a replicator malfunction knocked her flat on her back under several tubas. “This have anything to do with the readings you warned me about this afternoon?”

“Probably everything,” he mutters. “Could have been. Could also have been an outside influence. The shared field is very delicate.”

Chester makes a face. Warfields can be combined. The interaction, however, is dangerous and touchy—sudden unexpected encounters, even gentle ‘brushes’ of leading edges, can have the same effects as a collision. Ships can merge warfields to aid a damaged comrade, and sometimes to follow one another, but it’s delicate work with explosive results if it goes wrong.

That merging is what’s going in on the *Interpreter*’s engine rooms, all day, twenty-six hours a day. *Interpreter* has two cores, for redundancy and a number of other advantages her designers were *very* excited about—among other things, she should be able to sustain a high warp indefinitely, the cores trading the strain, and the interaction is *thought* to protect the ship from certain risks. But Chester, in her three months of command, isn’t sure that either argument is worth the headache the two cause. She’s heard some of Hawthorne’s engineers naming the two, ascribing personalities—and the single constant in those personalities is the two cores can’t stand each other.

She can’t say it’s unreasonable. The *Interpreter* is constantly at war with itself, the port and starboard cores in a computer mediated détente.

Or. Theoretically mediated.

Chester looks up at the erratic flashing of the starboard core, then at the slower but equally erratic flicker of the port, folds her arms, and sighs. “Suggestions, Commander Hawthorne?”

“A full refit at an appropriate shipyard.”

“I meant for our current problem.”

He shoots her a quick frown. “We’re going to have to shut everything down. Cold reboot of the cores in diagnostic mode, figure out why they desynchronized, and how to keep them from doing it again. Then we’ll power down again and fix it; I’m not having my engineers working on a live core.”

“How long?”

“Three days, give or take.”

They’re in the Gamma Quadrant. Too far to limp home on impulse. And by no stretch of the imagination, friendly space. “We’ll be sitting ducks for three days,” she says. “That’s a long time to hang around in this neighborhood defenseless.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, acidic, “would you *prefer* to blow up?”

She favors him with an exhausted look. “I’m concerned about someone else coming along *to* blow us up.”

“That seems like a problem under your jurisdiction,” Hawthorne says, already busying himself with one of the consoles.

No comms. They won’t be able to yell for help, and Chester isn’t sure she wants to. *Negotiator* is out of the question, still undergoing repairs at Deep Space Nine; Sotek and the *Armistice* are four days away in the opposite direction, from their last communication. *Defiant* is six days away by now, finishing *Negotiator*’s mission.

They’re on their own.

It’s the Gamma Quadrant. The *Interpreter* is out here in the first place because she theoretically *can* manage to be on her own for long periods, defend herself even at half-capacity. Chester runs a hand down her face, staring at the cores, and wishes with all her heart that for once, she had a chance to fight with her poor mess of a ship at *full* capacity. “Can we take the cores down one at a time?” Hawthorne gives her an incredulous glare. “Mr. Hawthorne, no one’s going to reach us for four days at the least. We’re in highly hostile space. If someone does show up, we’re going to need to be ready to defend ourselves.”

“I’ll see what I can do to keep weapons functional,” he says. Then, grudgingly, “I suppose it’s possible to do it one core at a time, but we’d need to shut down completely for the resynchronization process. And it’ll take longer.”

“Give me options,” says Chester. “Send them to Tactical as well. And get me comms as soon as you’ve made sure we’re not going to blow up immediately.”

“Yes, Captain,” he says. He doesn’t sound happy about it, but Hawthorne never sounds happy about any of her orders.

“Thank you, Commander. I know you’ll do your best.” Chester leaves him to it, and heads for the bridge.

J’etris is already on the bridge, a great deal less ruffled than Chester herself feels. “Any news from Engineering?” she asks.

Chester gives her Klingon XO a very wry look. “They’re working on options. Guess it’s our turn for engine trouble.”

“Except, unlike the *Negotiator*, we don’t have anyone to give us a tow.” J’etris grew up on Earth—a little down the coast of California from Chester, in fact—far more comfortable with the idiom of her human family than the Klingon family that still refuses to acknowledge her existence. She and Chester were the two surviving senior officers of the *Bedivere*; she was the tactical officer when Chester was first officer. They spent the months of medical leave after the end of the war together, for want of anyone else who understood—a lot of backpacking California’s wilderness. A lot of talking, deciding what to do with themselves, whether they could stay with Starfleet, after everything. As soon as Chester decided, yes, she would stay, J’etris had made up her mind.

There are three people in the universe Chester knows almost as well as she knows herself. Sotek and Rilas are two; J’etris is the third. Chester requested her as her first officer. She can’t imagine having a better person at her back.

“Options,” says J’etris. “I don’t care for any of the ones Hawthorne’s proposed, and he hasn’t cared for any of mine.”

“I imagine for good reason on both parts,” says Chester, joining her in front of the viewscreen. “Even if we could call for help, there’s no one out here who would reach us in time.”

“I suggest deploying the runabouts and shuttles in a defensive perimeter,” says J’etris.

“That’ll make us look mighty unfriendly.”

“That’s the point. Do you want to try and launch the only vessels aboard with propulsion and weapons when an Orion pirate drops out of warp on top of us? We’re going to look vulnerable anyway; let’s at least look intelligent about it.”

Chester nods. J’etris cocks her head at Lieutenant Fult, the Tellarite tactical officer. “Get shuttles and runabouts ready to launch. Deployment pattern beta.” Fult nods her acknowledgement and starts to scramble the shuttles.

Chester glances sidelong at J’etris. “You’d already worked out the deployment patterns.”

J’etris grins back at her. “After I heard about what happened to *Negotiator*, I suspected we might have similar problems. I like being surprised about as much as you do—and we’re a pretty tempting prize out here.”

“You can say that again,” says Chester, and lets out a long breath. “Here’s hoping Mr. Hawthorne can keep us at enough power to at least put shields up if we need them.”

Shields are a more reasonable request than all weapons systems. Hawthorne doesn’t show up at the senior staff briefing, still too busy getting the cores under control; they’ve decided to shut all of it down, trusting the shuttles to keep an eye on them. The reserve power holds steady; Chester finds herself very, very glad that the designers of the ship built redundancies into that, too. Maybe they had an idea of how delicate the warp cores would turn out to be.

Though this is crediting them with more foresight than she generally tends to.

She’s very glad that the Armistice Class have yet to be approved to carry families. This is anxiety-inducing enough with only Starfleet personnel aboard. She thinks of the reports she’s read of ship disappearances, and thinks it would be an awfully good time for anyone thinking about jumping out on them to do so. There’s no help coming. And if they’re attacked, seriously attacked, there’s almost nothing she can do. She’ll be faced with a choice between surrender and destroying her ship in a hopeless fight, and which she goes for will depend on their opponent.

She wants better solutions. But they’re in a very bad situation, and they all know it. Lieutenant Fult is running her people through security drills, and wheedled Hawthorne into lending her a few of his people to get some augmentations to the runabout weapons. Chester won’t be able to fight the *Interpreter* properly if they get jumped, but they’ve got two runabouts and six shuttles out there who will be at least able to put up a token resistance.

At least it’s given her something to think about that *isn’t* the mess with Tanek.

Speaking of which, she hasn’t seen him since that whole incident—the whole incident that seems ridiculous now, sitting in hostile space just waiting for someone to jump out and mug them. She knows he’s aboard, the crew roster and computer agree on that. But he hasn’t shown his face in days.

Maybe he’s just as embarrassed as she is.

Serves him right. Whatever the Romulans say, that’s as much his fuckup as it is hers.

Hawthorne is estimating comms back in the next two hours. Chester hopes he’s right. Knowing there’s someone on the way will do a hell of a lot to make her feel better, even if it doesn’t actually do them any good. There’s also been a suggestion of using the shuttles to tow them, but it’s not like it’s going to move anything particularly quickly, and if they do get jumped, they’ll need their getaway to be fast.

At some point there’s going to be nothing more to do. She needs to accept that. But with the stakes this high, it’s very hard.

She lets out a long breath, and stretches out on the couch in her ready room. This feels far more like home than her quarters. She reaches over to fiddle with one of the ceramic cats her grandmother gave her, and sighs.

“Computer, lower lights to twenty-five percent.” Then she turns over and composes herself to at least nap before the next disaster hits.

Ensign Nask Aja is deep in a Jeffries tube, prodding at a conduit in the hopes that unplugging and replugging the damn thing will do the job. She’s a tiny slip of a Bajoran, dark curls tightly braided against her head, with wide brown eyes in a square face, a determined jut to her jaw. She wasn’t old enough to fight in the Resistance during the Occupation; but she certainly hung around the fighters, cleaning weapons and asking questions and sometimes throwing stones when a distraction was needed. Starfleet is... confining, but pleasant in its way; the memory of missed meals does a lot to remind you to appreciate replicators.

She joined during the war, because she understood war. She went into Engineering because it was a place you could be clever, cause a lot more trouble for a lot less expense, be strategic about how you fought. And now it’s peacetime, and she’s got a diplomat of a captain and a safety-obsessed worrywart for a commanding officer, and Nask Aja might have given up right there if the ship weren’t such a flying disaster.

But the *Interpreter* is *such* a disaster. She loves it for that. In the Academy and her first posting to the *Hood*, Starfleet was offputtingly perfect, sometimes not quite real in its perfection—even during the war. And then the war ended, and she was posted to the *Interpreter*, where *nothing* works the way it should, and it feels like being home. She doesn’t spend much time feeling useless here, that’s for sure.

And that’s what she needs.

Nask worms her way deeper into the ship’s guts, her microwelder clamped between her teeth, tricorder in one hand and the other steadying her on the ladder. Commander Hawthorne would have a fit if he saw her right now, but what minor safety violations the Chief Engineer can’t see can’t send him into a shouting fit. Besides, she gets the feeling that those shouting fits are good for him. Therapeutic, at least. Prophets know he spends enough time biting his tongue around the Captain, for reasons she’s still not managed to shake out of him. Personality mismatch, she’s guessing, even though a small guilty part of her feels she ought to be taking Commander Hawthorne’s part in whatever weird standoff the two of them have going on.

Damn, these conduits are *fucked*. Some of it’s the voles, but it’s not all voles. This ship was built in a hurry, like the fighters at home, and there are mistakes all over the place. If she ever starts forgetting how close the Federation came to losing, she just needs to look at these Jeffries tubes, at the slapdash way this ship was thrown together, a last desperate prayer in the face of annihilation. The *Interpreter* is a *real* ship, not one of those prissy pieces of art where six designers argued for months over the shape of the seats in waste extraction. She was built as a workhorse and as a last hope, and Nask loves her for it. If anyone tries to promote or transfer her off this ship, she’ll fight them tooth and nail. Other ships may work better—other ships may *work*—but *Interpreter* has a *personality*.

She hears something up ahead. She freezes. Someone is in the Jeffries tubes with her, and it isn’t a vole.

They're not Starfleet either. That noise—something was off about it. Something is wrong about it. And Nask hasn't lived this long by ignoring her instincts.

Slowly, she slips her tricorder back into her jacket, takes the microwelder out of her mouth, and plays with the settings, an unpleasant little smile tightening the corners of her mouth. Starfleet doesn't tend to be creative with the tools to hand, not unless you *really* scare them.

She eases forward, moving with the surety of her knowledge of the ship's bowels, and very soon she finds the source of the noise; a Bajoran woman all in sleek black, crouched at the junction of two of the tunnels. Long habit is what quashes her reaction into a simple indrawn breath through her nose—it looks like Major Kira, from the station.

Nask's eyes narrow. It can't be Major Kira. She has no reason to be here, dressed like this, and the possibilities that leaves are all bad. Nask doesn't care which one's the right explanation. Whoever, *whatever* this is in *her* ship is a hostile entity.

Nask's decisiveness and willingness to take risks have earned her both reprimands and praise, and most recently Commander Hawthorne's worried ire, but this time they save her life. As the impostor turns her head, Nask lunges for her, pressing the microwelder against her jaw. "Stay very still," she tells the woman, who is an *exact* replica of the Major even this close. "This is a microwelder. I've changed the settings so the fieldlimit of the laser element is now four centimeters. It's designed to slice through conduits, and it most certainly will slice through *you*."

The impostor's hand eases away from her belt, probably from a weapon. "What a nasty suspicious mind you have, my dear," she purrs. She raises her hands and spreads her fingers in a languorous and graceful gesture as unlike the Major as can be imagined, and tips her head back. It's only then that Nask catches a glimpse of the other side of her face, and it's only because she's seen worse that keeps her from reacting; a long ragged scar runs the length of the impostor's face, the eyelid sagging over an empty socket and the shell of the woman's ear shredded, as if someone had seized her earring and ripped it from flesh. "Very well. Take me to your Captain. Tell her..." the impostor's mouth twists into an unsteady smile, "...the Intendant will see her now."

Chapter 6

From one side of the forcefield, Chester stares at the Intendant with exhausted resignation. From the other side, the Intendant stares at Chester like someone promised a grisly shuttle crash and presented with an overturned bicycle instead.

“You’re so *plain*,” says the Intendant. “And *frumpy*.”

Chester just draws in a long breath and looks at her. “What the hell are you doing on my ship.”

The Intendant is still staring. “You’re really *nothing* like her, are you?” she says, glee creeping into her voice. Her remaining eye is too wide and too bright and the smile spreading across her face is too big. Maniacal, relief and hate a potent mixture.

Chester just waits. She’s read the reports about the mirror universe, and about this woman, and it’s better to just wait. With the brig forcefield solidly up. According to the reports, the Intendant has a habit of stabbing people.

Chester’s gotten about three more hours of sleep, which is a hell of a lot more than she got most of the time during the war, and she’s glad of them. An unexpected intruder—this unexpected intruder—is certainly not an emergency she anticipated. And when Hawthorne called her, indignant incredulity in his voice as he reported Ensign Nask, a soft-spoken agent of general chaos, but not Chester’s first guess at a crewmember who’d take hostages first and ask questions later, had captured an intruder, she’d had to ask him to repeat himself, which had endeared her to him no further.

And now she’s standing in the ship’s brig, too large like the rest of the ship, designed to hold *many* prisoners, and staring down a woman she’s only ever read about.

Lieutenant Fult is standing some distance back from her, radiating disapproval at their prisoner, but so far content to have Chester this close—there is the forcefield, after all.

“You’re no fun, are you,” says the Intendant, annoyed by Chester’s lack of response. Her pacing brings her right up by the forcefield, where she settles and tips her head back with a pout to look at Chester. “Just a Captain. Oh, she *hates* that.”

Chester folds her arms and stares her down. “All right, let’s start with the basics. Who is she?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” says the Intendant. “She’s *you*.”

She looks at Chester’s nonplussed face and laughs, throwing her head back. “Oh, so stodgy too. Have I come to the wrong place?”

Chester just stays silent. It seems like the best option.

“My dear,” says the Intendant, now conciliatory, “I realize this is a lot to take in, but you really must believe me. Your life depends on it. As does,” she looks around, then down, shakes her head as her gaze flicks back up to Chester, “your entire crew.”

Chester sighs and keeps looking down her nose at the other woman.

“You see, your counterpart is an *ambitious* woman.”

“This somehow does not surprise me,” says Chester, unimpressed.

“Oh, so you *can* be funny. That’s better. *I like* funny. I’m here to *help* you, Captain. Don’t look at me like that. It makes you seem so boring. I’m here to help you, because you’re going to need it.”

The sing-song trill at the end sets Chester’s teeth on edge. “Madam, if you think I am going to do anything but return you to your universe as soon as we’ve figured out the transporter frequency—”

The Intendant is already shaking her head, a rapid nervous motion. “Oh. Oh no you won’t. You’re having trouble with your engines, aren’t you?”

Chester freezes. The shock doesn’t reach her face, but the Intendant picks up on it all the same and laughs again. It would be a nice laugh coming from someone else, but it makes Chester want to reach in there and throttle her.

“Why do you say that?” she asks, keeping her voice pleasant.

“Because she did it, of course. Look, can’t we have this discussion somewhere else? Your quarters, maybe?”

“Absolutely not.”

The Intendant tsks, takes another round of the cell before coming back to the forcefield, shifting with nervous energy. “She wants your ship, Captain,” she says, all earnestness. “And what the First Admiral of the Resurgent Terran Empire wants—” she draws in a breath through her nose, tipping her chin up, and tilting her face so the horror of her empty socket and the ragged scar down her cheek are fully visible, and her voice goes dry and bitter, “she *always* gets.”

“Then I very much doubt you’re here without her permission.” There’s a bravado to the Intendant’s movements, a nervousness. It’s probably explained by the missing eye, but...

She has no reason to come here and put herself in further danger. She has no reason to help them. She would have already asked for asylum if

that was what she was after, played up the fleeing refugee role. This...

The Intendant is picking up on the suspicion in her eyes, and Chester can see her decide to change tacks. "I didn't have a choice," she says. "She's *good* at not leaving much to choice." Tears cloud her remaining eye, and she turns away, tipping her chin up. "I have suffered, *so much*, since the Alliance fell and that—barbarian—took the reins of the Terran resistance. I tried to be good to the Terrans, I *really* did, but they left me no choice. Of course," she laughs, a fragile noise on the edge of hysteria, "their new 'republic' didn't last so very long, did it? Poor, stupid Smiley, so full of his ideals. It turned out that the *one thing* he couldn't handle was his own people."

"And what do you mean by that?" asks Chester. Exactly what happened after the defeat of the Alliance in the other universe is unknown, and garbled, coming as it did from Quark and Rom.

"We...didn't stamp out the old Terran Empire entirely," says the Intendant. "There were some, in exile, who left when Spock's reforms began, and when we conquered the Empire... more joined them. And after the Alliance collapsed, they came back."

That has the potential to be very bad. "One moment," says Chester, and taps her commbadge. "Chester to Bridge."

"*J'etris here.*"

"Yellow alert. Our engine malfunction might not be coincidence; I want security sweeps of all decks. Work with Hawthorne to get sensor sweeps going; we might have some cloaked ships out there too. The mirror universe is up to its old tricks."

"*Understood.*"

"Still inseparable, even here," says the Intendant. "So strange a pair. *She* had every reason to hate the Klingons, you know."

"You were saying about the exiled Terrans," says Chester, and gives the Intendant a hard look. It's alarming to see the other woman quail under it. Like she's seen it before, and like, when it comes to her counterpart, it precedes something much worse.

"They came back," says the Intendant. "And they ground Smiley and anyone who wouldn't line right up with them into the dust. But your alternate," she stabs a finger at Chester, who just refolds her arms and continues her unimpressed stare, "your alternate, she'd been with the rebellion, and she toed the line. Oh, how she did." The smile she flashes is sharp with anticipation of another's pain. "She betrayed everyone. Even me! She'd grown *up* on Terok Nor, *orphaned*—sometimes I think if I'd just noticed, she might have been something *else*, something better, but no." She presses a hand over her chest, a wounded expression coming into her eyes. "So much potential, and what she did with it..."

"My counterpart grew up as a slave in your ore processing center," says Chester flatly, because the stream of histrionics is profoundly annoying. "And you're upset she turned on you."

The Intendant draws in a shocked breath. "Of course you wouldn't understand! I did my best for the Terrans. But sometimes they were just so...just so..." She gestures, clearly expecting Chester to finish the sentence. Chester does not. "So stubborn," she finishes.

"Imagine that," says Chester, still flat.

"Your counterpart," the Intendant draws in another dramatic breath, "betrayed her own crew and swore loyalty to the Emperor personally. The Terran Emperor favored her after that. Ships, the best of the fleet—and then the whole fleet. She's the Emperor's right hand now."

"Interesting," says Chester. "And what interest does the Emperor's right hand have in my ship?"

"She wants it," says the Intendant. "I came to warn you."

"Did you now," says Chester. "I'm sure you got her to let you go somehow."

"Me?" The Intendant gestures to her face. "Look at me! I'm no risk to *her*. Not anymore. She let me go."

"You're working for her," says Chester evenly. "She's good at not leaving you much choice, you said."

"I could work for you!" The cracks are showing now; there's open desperation in the Intendant's face. "I would be *good* at working for you. Look, I don't need to tell you any of this. But she needs your ship. The Alliance isn't beaten yet. Not even close! The Terrans are fighting a battle on all fronts, and she's going to need a lot of help, even with all the technology their Emperor has brought back from exile, and she's cornered. She found out about your ship, and she wants it. She thinks it could turn the tide."

"That's useful to know," says Chester. "Thank you. I'll take it under consideration. Some details would be appreciated, however."

"Details? Details! I come here and warn you about a threat and you demand *details*? Do I *look* like she told me *details*?"

"You must have played a significant role in her plan," says Lieutenant Fult. She tips her head and offers the Intendant a tusked smile. "She wouldn't have let you out of her sight otherwise."

"Maybe you could tell us something of your role," says Chester, glad of Fult's input. She's significantly more experienced than Chester herself, a career security officer stubbornly refusing promotion or transfer. Her teams during the war had some of the lowest mortality rates, and it wasn't for lack of action.

"My role was simple," the Intendant says. For all her easy manner, her eyes dart, trapped—she hasn't thought of a way out of this one. She sidles closer to the forcefield, lowering her voice so Chester has to lean in to hear her. "I was supposed to plant a device that would make it easier to beam in and out of this ship. And then," she lowers her voice still closer, tilting her head up to look at Chester, eyes low-lidded until they suddenly aren't, and her hand darts out *through* the forcefield, fisting in the front of Chester's jacket and hauling with unnatural strength,

and Chester finds herself abruptly off-balance, stumbling toward her, and the hum of a transporter fills her ears as the Intendant finishes all but in her ear, “*be a distraction.*”

Hawthorne is juggling ten things at once. “Oh yes,” he mutters as he works, trying to figure out how to start up their warp engines in a way that won’t *kill them all*, “give me *options*, Hawthorne, this is perfectly *reasonable*, Hawthorne, your first solution isn’t going to be good enough, *Hawthorne*, never mind I’m not an engineer, never mind that you have years and years of experience over me, never mind you *know how to prevent us from blowing up*, Hawthorne, just get it done in half the time with a quarter the resources, *I have every faith in you*, Hawthorne.”

Someone moves behind him. “Whatever it is, I’m busy,” he snaps. “You know, trying to keep us alive.”

“I need you to come with me.” Hawthorne straightens up and turns, all the better to glare at Tanek.

“I said, I’m busy,” he snaps. “Are you running errands for the Captain now? That a Romulan engagement tradition?”

“And I said,” Tanek looms closer, and a hand like iron wraps around Hawthorne’s mouth, Tanek’s arm pinioning his own to his side, “that you are coming with me. *Now.*”

His tricorder clatters to the deck. Hawthorne tries to yell, kick the bastard’s knees as he’s lifted off his feet. It’s like kicking a brick wall. There’s the chirp of a device activating, and Hawthorne has the time to think, *oh FUCK*, before the world dissolves in transporter shimmer.

Chapter 7

“What happened?” This is *not* a situation J’etris has ever wanted to find herself in, but Captain Chester has a predilection for disaster.

Lieutenant Fult grimaces at the holding cell. “Evidently we missed something on our guest,” she says. “I’m guessing a field polarizer of some sort; she reached right through the forcefield to grab the Captain, and then transported out. The Commander is trying to determine what *exactly* she did.”

J’etris glances at Lt. Commander Salera, who’s scanning the field and cell thoroughly. The Vulcan is completely focused on her tricorder; whatever she’s seeing, it’s not what she was hoping for. “Wasn’t she scanned?”

“She was,” says Fult. “I’m hoping we can figure out how she hid it so well, too.”

J’etris folds her arms. “It’s not the first time they’ve abducted one of our officers,” she says. Deep Space Nine had Captain Sisko kidnapped right out of Ops. That memory makes the current situation chafe a little less. “Commander, compare your scans to those of previous recorded encounters with the other universe. It may be an outgrowth of one of those technologies.”

Salera nods her acknowledgement and adjusts some settings on the tricorder. J’etris’s commbadge chirps. “*Ensign Nask to Commander J’etris,*” a voice says, high with anxiety.

“J’etris here. What is it, Ensign?”

“*Sir, Commander Hawthorne is missing.*”

J’etris looks at Fult, who taps her badge as well. “Fult here, Ensign. I’m sending a security team.”

“I have finished my scans here,” says Salera, stepping up to join them. “I will accompany the security team. There are some anomalous readings here consistent with the residual traces of Klingon cloaking technology, but they are well within the bounds of margin of error; a larger dataset would do much to clarify their nature.”

“Do so,” says J’etris. Salera nods and steps out of the room.

“They’ve taken our captain and our chief engineer,” says J’etris to Fult, one Tactical Officer to another. “What do you make of that, Lieutenant?”

“Nothing I like. Recommend we go to red alert, sir.” The abduction of two of the officers with the greatest access and understanding of the ship’s systems imply an interest in the ship itself; J’etris suspects this isn’t even an opening gambit, but information-gathering.

“It’s blatant for mere intelligence-gathering,” says Fult, clearly thinking along the same lines as J’etris. “I expect they’ll make another move soon, and it will be for the ship. We’re sitting on a lot of new technology, and a lot of firepower, sir. Pirates aren’t the only ones to find that attractive, and I bet the mirror universe isn’t the stablest place out there after that last encounter.”

“I concur. It’s going to get messier before it gets better.”

Fult smiles. J’etris likes Fult’s smile. It’s an expression that promises murder. Bloody, messy murder, if what J’etris has seen of the other woman sparring is any indication. “We’ll make sure it’ll be messier for *them*, sir.”

J’etris finds herself grinning back. “Damn right, Lieutenant.”

It won’t be that simple. The warp drive is still down, and now they’re missing their chief engineer, further complicating their repairs. J’etris will give Engineering a few more hours to get the cores sorted out, and then she’s asking them to power up at least one. Their worst fears are being realized; there is someone out there trying to jump them, and they no longer have the luxury of waiting for best practices to be followed. Not under these circumstances.

Not when someone’s abducted her captain and her friend.

J’etris thinks about how that previous incident with Sisko concluded. From the sound of it, the mirror universe was pretty glad to see the back of him by the end of the whole mess. Having known Chester for a significant portion of their careers, J’etris suspects a similar outcome.

Wherever you are, she thinks, give them hell, Diane.

“Fuck, *fuck*, fucking FUCK,” someone is saying, and Chester inwardly groans. So they’ve got Hawthorne.

She turns over. She can remember a little—mostly transporter hum, and then shoving the Intendant away from her, someone else grabbing her from behind, driving an elbow into their gut, and the flash of a weapon.

She lifts her head from where her cheek presses into carpet, still blinking hard. Her vision fuzzes and sways, as the pounding of a headache from a heavy stun beats against the inside of her skull. Her hands are cuffed behind her. That’s bad. She’s been kidnapped. That’s also bad. By the Intendant, which is fucking embarrassing.

Hawthorne is here, and he’s pretty low on her list of crew she’d prefer to be kidnapped with, which abruptly makes her feel badly she *has* such

a list. But trust makes escape a hell of a lot easier. Also, him being here at all is bad.

All in all, it's a lot of bad.

She squints, as her vision slowly resolves. They are on a bridge. Or in a throne room. She can't tell.

Hawthorne's face swims into view. "Glad you could join us, Captain."

"Ouch dammit," slurs Chester, and means it.

"You're the one who picked an argument with the guys with guns," says Hawthorne. "Didn't we have a whole course on deescalation in the Academy?"

"Time and a place, Hawthorne," says Chester, and flops herself onto her side, then, with effort, to her knees. "Where are we?"

"I was hoping you'd know."

"I've got a guess," says Chester, scanning their surroundings. It's almost definitely a bridge, but a beautifully appointed one that makes the *Interpreter's* look like a cheap office building. The carpet is dark red and opulent; there's wood detailing on the edges of consoles and the tactical arch, and carvings and gold trim—pretty much everywhere it can be fit. There are just two seats in the center of the bridge, a grand throne, now empty, and a smaller but far more comfortable one just at the elbow of that throne. The stations are manned by crew in dark uniforms. They're almost entirely human, with one or two Vulcans and a single Andorian at the back of the room. None of them are making eye contact.

Next to them is the Intendant. It's not entirely clear if she's another one of the guards, or a fellow prisoner. She's uncharacteristically silent, her eyes fixed on the door at the side of the room, her expression drawn.

There are decorations on the walls. Swords and axes and broken bat'leths, and in the center of the back of the bridge, a massive symbol right out of the history books; Earth, impaled by a knife. The old Terran Empire described by Kirk in his logs—and more recently, by the Intendant.

Chester looks to the side of that symbol and frowns. There is an anatomical model there, a humanoid. More is difficult to tell; it's been carefully dissected, skin cleaned away and muscle groups splayed out, veins and arteries and nerves and organs carefully displayed and gleaming with a concerningly realistic slickness in the low ship's light—

—That's not a model, she realizes, and her stomach lurches.

"Can't," says Hawthorne, his voice forced, "can't say much for the decor, sir."

It's the friendliest she's ever heard him be. She swallows hard. "It's not what I would have gone with, no," she says, keeping her voice light. The person pinned to the wall over there must be in a stasis field; all of it looks terribly fresh.

It's an overt threat, and she'll take it seriously, even though she refuses to be intimidated by it. She *really* hopes they're dead.

"Mirror universe, then," she says as casually as she can.

"Ah yes. That pesky mirrorverse," says Hawthorne. He's very pale. Scared shitless and trying to put a good face on it. She finds herself liking him a lot more than ever. "Always up to their...mirrorverse things."

"Well, time to find out what those are." She settles herself as comfortably as she can, and glances up at one of the unmoving black-clad guards standing over them. "You wouldn't know, would you?"

She's ignored, as she expected to be. Someone who chooses that kind of wall decor isn't exactly going to encourage chattiness in their muscle. The Intendant's remaining eye flicks toward her, fear in every line of her face. Clearly, she doesn't think idle conversation is a good idea.

Chester just raises her eyebrows at her, before her attention is dragged away by the sound of turbolift doors opening. She turns her head to see who the new arrival is, and her breath stops in her chest. There's no question about the identity of the white-clad figure who strides in.

It's her.

There's something intensely uncanny about seeing yourself from the outside, and it's a lot worse because of the *differences*. It's not a mirror image of Chester who steps onto the bridge and looks around with arrogant assurance. It's a version of her that's not right—her body language, her expression, every movement. The doors close behind her and she stands there very straight for a moment, hands clasped behind her back, sweeping the bridge with a cold, inimical gaze. Her eyes glitter under long dark lashes, her mouth a precisely painted disapproving curve.

I wonder if that's what Mom means when she pesters me to do something nicer with my hair, thinks Chester, and has to repress the urge to laugh, which would definitely get them killed.

Her alternate self is standing still, like a perfect figure of a tyrant. The uniform she's wearing is white, beautifully snowy and clean; there's a lot of gold around the edges, heavy epaulettes, and a series of decorations across the breast. Her hair is whorled elaborately around a smaller version of the Terran Empire's impaled Earth.

After a long pause, she starts down to her command chair, her glossy boots soundless on the plush carpet. She's looking mostly at Hawthorne; she glances briefly at Chester, a vicious evaluating gaze that turns quickly to dismissal. She's got a sword at her side, a swept hilt rapier of quite good make. Chester's willing to bet it hasn't got a practice tip. There's a dagger on her other side.

Chester remembers the frequency with which assassination aided promotion in the old Terran Empire, and wonders just how much use that

dagger gets.

Given the body hanging on the wall, it's probably a lot.

Her alternate comes to a halt in front of them, and looking at her, Chester suddenly can understand why the Intendant described her as 'frumpy'. She'd be the first to admit that she isn't precisely the most elegant captain in Starfleet—she has always foregone the more complex regulation-permitted hairstyles, never opted for any of the more elegant tailoring of her uniform some officers experiment with, she has never had any skill in applying makeup, and has never bothered to improve that. Damned if she'll go out where her crew can see her looking like a teenager who's just discovered eyeliner—which has always been the effect she's achieved when she's tried.

But her alternate *has*. Chester, who's also always told herself that she just is one of those people who doesn't look good with those things, is forced to confront that she *is*. The woman in front of her does not look silly, or like an incompetent teenager. She looks like a sculpture, an ideal—and horribly dangerous.

"Lieutenant Commander Piper Hawthorne," says her alternate. "I've been watching you."

Hawthorne blanches several degrees paler under his freckles. Chester wonders briefly if he's about to pass out right there.

Her counterpart draws her sword, long and glittering. No practice tip. "You are," she says, contemplating the length of the blade, "potentially of use to me. If you wish to survive, and if you wish your Captain to survive, you will *ensure* that you are of use to me."

Hawthorne glares, while still looking like he's about to pass out.

"Admiral," starts Chester, not wanting to see what he'll do while scared out of his mind and running on pure bravado, but her counterpart's attention flashes to her. So does the sword, coming to a halt at her throat and then pressing under her jaw, forcing her to lift her chin.

"Your input," her alternate says, "will not be required, *Captain*."

It's an insult. So the Intendant wasn't lying about how annoyed her alternate is that she is 'only' a captain. Chester stays very still.

"Commander Hawthorne," she says. "I'll give you a very simple choice. You will help me seize control of your ship. Or," and Chester can't help the involuntary sharp breath as the sword digs in against the soft skin of her neck, and a maddening tickle of blood slides down the side of her throat, "I will kill your captain right here, right now, in front of you."

Chester is going to end up stabbed if she says anything, but she flicks a determined look at Hawthorne anyway. He doesn't even glance at her. "I'd give you name rank and serial number, but frankly you're not worth the trouble," he says, his voice sharp with fear and anger. "So fuck you for asking."

Which is exactly what she would have ordered him to do. Chester can't help but feel a little disturbed that he didn't even *look* at her for confirmation, though.

This is not the reaction her counterpart seems to have expected. "Our records seem to indicate your universe values your bonds in the chain of command very highly," she says.

Hawthorne snorts. "Not me. Clearly your records missed that I value not rolling over for fascists."

He's playing it perfectly. Either he genuinely hates her that much, or he's using it to cover both of them. Whichever it is, she's glad of it. It is *probably* their best route out of here—unless her counterpart decides to call his bluff.

She really hopes her counterpart doesn't call his bluff. Dying because of her Chief Engineer's big mouth would be...

Well. It would be embarrassing. *All* of this has been acutely embarrassing.

"Then we'll have to find another way," her counterpart says. She circles Hawthorne, looking him over. "Those cybernetics of yours, perhaps. Yes." She snaps her fingers. "Hawthorne, take our guest down to the lab. Get a look at those cybernetics, see if we can use them to compel a little more cooperation."

One of the dark-clothed crew detaches himself from his station and comes over. Incredible. He's got Hawthorne's exact surly expression, only he has no cybernetics at all and looks overall rather healthier. Someone missed the horror of Hawthorne's accident in this universe, it seems. But it's a pretty good question which of them looks more scared.

Her Hawthorne swallows hard, his eyes very wide. The Dominion *installed* those cybernetics to try and control him, Chester remembers, and she can only imagine the sheer terror of having that old ghost dredged up like this.

"Leave him alone," she snaps. "I'm the one you want—I'm the one with the command codes. Commander Hawthorne isn't—"

A butt of a rifle slams into the back of her shoulder, flattening her. She grunts, and a boot sinks into her stomach, sending the breath whooping out of her. She lies there, and sees the Admiral's expression change.

Chester's counterpart has barely looked at her until now, dismissal in her voice and bearing. Her attention has been on Hawthorne as she tries to pressure him into helping her. But at that involuntary noise Chester makes, her alternate stops and *actually* looks at her like a cat alerting to a bird, her eyes suddenly very wide and intent.

Her gut and shoulder throbbing, Chester stares back. It's hard to look away from someone so completely focused on her, even as dread balls in her stomach. The Admiral's lips are slightly parted, her head tilted a little in fascination, and there's a hungry look in her eyes. Chester gets the feeling her usefulness is being reevaluated—and most certainly not in a good way.

She's going to have to work with that. She *can* work with that.

"Maybe I'll have a use for you after all," her counterpart says, slowly. "*He* doesn't seem to like you very much, so you're wasted as a hostage. And you'll start lying about your command codes long before you actually break, won't you? It's what I would do in your place."

Chester tips her head in acknowledgement.

Her counterpart takes a deliberate step forward, then another, still looking at her. *Watching* her. Chester decides to throw her a bone, and flicks her gaze at the horror on the opposite wall, swallowing hard.

She's not sure it works. Her counterpart follows her gaze, then looks back at her with amusement. "I see. Mr. Tanek, escort the Captain to my ready room. It seems we have a lot to talk about."

Hawthorne darts her a confused and faintly concerned look, more than he showed earlier. It would be touching if it weren't also deeply suspicious. But Chester has other things to worry about. Namely, this universe's Tanek, who's slipped out of her alternate's shadow and is coming toward her. Like the rest of the crew, he's all in black. Very. Form fitting. Black.

Chester keeps her eyes on his face. There's something off about his expression. She can't put a finger on it, but he doesn't look like *Tanek*. Maybe, this being the alternate universe, his alternate is slightly less of a bastard. Maybe, she's imagining things.

He kneels and puts a hand under her elbow. She expects to be roughly dragged to her feet—their universe's version of Tanek is seldom gentle even when he's being helpful. But instead, he steadies her, helping her to stand.

It is strangely courteous, and she does not trust it one bit. She can feel him watching her, and realizes what the thing off about his expression is. He's looking at her with genuine interest and admiration.

She does *not* want to know what the hell kind of relationship he and her alternate have. No. Not at all. She really hopes that it's because he's curious about their universe—from her understanding, the Romulans have yet to cross over—but given that he darts a very similar look at her alternate, she's worried that's not the case.

"I am not leaving my Chief Engineer," she says, as firmly as she can. "Admiral, we should talk. There's a way to work this out without anyone needing to be interrogated, or anyone's cybernetics used."

"Don't resist," says Tanek softly in her ear. "I will carry you if I must."

Chester stops where she is and digs in her heels. Fine. Then he'll have to carry her. "You'll get much better results with our willing cooperation, Admiral. I think I know a way to offer it. We want to see the Alliance in charge of your universe as little as you do."

That's not entirely true. But it'll have to be convincing, at least for now. She projects earnestness in her expression, in the way she leans against Tanek's hold.

It's like a solid steel bar. She's dropped her own Tanek on his posterior before. She really hopes this doesn't mean he *let* her do that.

"Very well, Captain," says her counterpart with an amused little smile. "We will talk. You will tell me how to avoid cracking your engineer open like an egg, and I will see if I agree. In the meantime—Hawthorne, why don't you work on your counterpart? Emotionally. Don't get overenthusiastic on me."

"Yes sir," says the alternate Hawthorne, sullen and subdued. "Come on. I can't haul you around like our resident giant."

Hawthorne looks at his alternate, then glances at her again; Chester gives him a little nod. *Go on*, she thinks. *Please pretend to cooperate. Please don't do anything that makes them crack open your skull and turn you against us. Please don't give them a reason to finish what the Dominion started with you.*

Thank anything that's listening, he goes.

Then her alternate's attention shifts. The Intendant's eyes go wide, and she lurches a little under that regard. "I—I brought you the Captain," she says. "It went perfectly. They have no defenses against the phasic field modulator or our transporters, and I placed the pattern enhancer, just as you asked."

"Yes," says the Admiral. "You did. Congratulations, you performed adequately, Intendant. You had better hope you continue to do so."

"So you'll let me go?"

"I'll let you live," the Admiral assures her with a small smile. "After all, it's as much as you did for me."

Chapter 8

Hawthorne wants *nothing* to do with whatever's going on between the Captain and her murderous shit of a counterpart—that poor bastard she's got as wall decoration makes it pretty clear what she's like—but he can't say he's thrilled about his, either. Working with the fascists in the mirror universe, great. He'd like to think he'd be better than that, but apparently not.

At least his alternate seemed... unenthusiastic. And he was pretty sure he had a better chance working with his unenthusiastic alternate than whatever was going on with his Captain's alternate.

His counterpart leads him into the turbolift. "Engineering," he says, and then stands there and frowns at Hawthorne as the lift hums.

Hawthorne is perfectly willing to let him marinate in his own juices. He leans against the wall and glares back.

"Hold," says his counterpart. Then he looks hard at Hawthorne. "You don't like your captain very much," he says.

"Doesn't matter whether or not I like her. We have some pretty strong policies against helping fascists in our universe," says Hawthorne, glaring.

Whatever he was expecting, it's not for his alternate to deflate, looking down. "Yeah," he says. "So did we."

That... sounded more like him. That ... was a start. "What happened?"

His counterpart lifts and drops a shoulder. "The emperor returned."

"Yes, and?"

"And Admiral Chester," there's an inflection of disgust, ever so slight, in his alternate's voice, "decided she wanted to be on the winning side."

"So you don't like your Admiral," says Hawthorne. "From over here, it still looks like you're working with her just fine."

"Do I look like I have a choice?"

Hawthorne doesn't dignify that with an answer.

"Look, I don't know what your captain there did to you, but if she's *anything* like the Admiral..." He trails off, like he doesn't know what to say, then, more quietly, "I wouldn't cry over her, either."

There's a cold dread in the back of Hawthorne's mind now, but he asks anyway. "So what did your 'Admiral' do to you?"

"She killed everyone I ever cared about." It's a flat statement, despair, and the confirmation of everything Hawthorne's feared from his own Captain Chester.

Two years ago, he woke up from a catastrophic explosion that never should have happened with his team dead and unknown technology in his skull. They told him it was Dominion. But his best friend, Marbog—a Choblik and one of the Federation's foremost cybernetics experts—knew better.

Marbog knew it was *Federation* tech, not Dominion. And Hawthorne knew for damn sure that the new faces around the station, the ones pushing to accelerate the timeline right before everything went to hell, were also Starfleet.

Those cybernetics? The original version was supposed to be for mind control. Someone killed his team and tried to turn him into their own personal puppet. It wasn't the Dominion. It was someone using Federation tech and Starfleet officers, and Hawthorne only had one conclusion he could draw from that. That there's something rotten in the core of an institution he used to believe in.

And that if they interfered in his project, they most certainly *will* interfere with the new, state-of-the-art warship headed to the Gamma Quadrant to stabilize it. And what better agent to have aboard than the captain?

The captain's young for her position. Oh, sure, they've cooked up a fantastical story about the crash of the *Bedivere*. It might even have happened. Maybe it was what recruited her to work for them. The thing is, she's *too* young for her position. She's got too many weird gaps in her records. And if Hawthorne were Secret Police, and if he were picking out people to lead his totally-not-a-conquest venture into the Gamma Quadrant, he'd absolutely make sure the Captain was someone he could trust.

That she pretends to be such a perfect Starfleet officer, all morals and conscience and saying exactly the right things at exactly the right times, is adding insult to injury.

That she could turn around and kill everyone Hawthorne cares about, doing exactly what he's afraid she might do to *Interpreter* and its crew...
...well it's what keeps him awake at night.

Very literally.

He takes a deep breath. "Your version. You trusted her?"

His counterpart gives him a bitter look. "Yeah. Like the idiot I am."

Hawthorne swallows hard. "Mine... I think she's up to something. I don't trust her."

His counterpart nods, a sharp pained gesture. “Good for you. Keep it that way. Or get trapped into this.” He gestures. “She killed her *entire crew* except for me and her grandmother. She kept me because she thought I was useful.” His mouth twists, bitterly. “Every last one of them, because she saw the chance to get the Emperor’s favor, and she went for it. Then she went after everyone else. Smiley never had a chance—he never saw it coming from one of his own people. She’d always *believed* in our freedom, too. Or she said she did. Turned out what she believed in was getting to be one of the people doing the oppressing, and the instant she thought she could have it, she did anything and everything to get it. Whatever else you can say about her, she’s decisive.”

Hawthorne thinks of his own Chester, even in the last few minutes when she was being hauled away by Tanek’s alternate. “Yeah, you can say that again.”

They look at each other across the turbolift, and Hawthorne realizes just how much his nightmare the man across from him is. He’s not got any trace of the cybernetics that the fascists tried to control Piper himself with, but he’s being controlled all the same. Hawthorne really doesn’t want to think he would have made the same decisions in his alternate’s place... but at the end of the day, that’s what having an alternate *means*, isn’t it? That if things had been a little different, it could be him standing there. The chief engineer and lackey to a murderous fascist.

He thinks about the Captain, and wishes that he was a little less certain that *she* is a murderous fascist.

“So,” he says, all too aware his alternate is supposed to be here, turning him against Starfleet, the decent parts of it, “how do we *not* help the murderous fascists out?”

His alternate stares at him, and then tries something like a smile. It’s pretty horrible, but Hawthorne forces himself to return it. “I have a few ideas.”

J’etris looks down the table of assembled senior officers and keeps her disappointment hidden. They’re in the first few months of their first cruise, she reminds herself. It’s only to be expected that people are still settling in. Coherence in a starship crew takes time to develop. Trust, even longer. These are all people accustomed to other ships, other crews, and it will take time.

But the briefing room feels like a bunch of strangers, not a team. Everyone still has their guard up. Exhausted from the war, hammered on by a malfunctioning ship, now stranded until the cores come back online... The circumstances are bad, and the sudden pall cast by the Captain’s absence makes J’etris realize just how much Diane’s been holding them all together by sheer force of personality.

No wonder she was so damn stupid on the station. J’etris resolves to do more, so Diane’s not the only one working on crew coherence, and there’s no time like the present.

“Captain Chester and Lt. Commander Hawthorne were abducted by what we have gathered was a force in the mirror universe,” she says. “Details of previous encounters are in your briefing materials. Lieutenant Fult and I,” she nods at the Tellarite woman, “have come to the conclusion that this is very likely the opening movement of an attack on the *Interpreter*. Our engine trouble is very likely related.

“To that end: Engineering, while the restoration of our warp drives is a delicate process, we will need to expedite it. The alternative is getting caught without power when our friends on the other side move to the next stage of their plans. Additionally,” she folds her arms, “*someone* out there has decided that they can take our officers at will. I intend to discourage them.”

She looks up and down the length of the table, and is pleased to see a similar determination on the faces of her fellow officers.

“We have little historical data on the mirror universe, only secondhand accounts from what little previous officers have been able to glean in their time there,” she says. “Our temporary guest’s debriefing indicated the balance of power has shifted once again, back to a ‘Terran Empire’ similar to the one encountered by the original *Enterprise*. The logs from the officers involved in that crossover indicate an authoritarian regime that functioned on cruelty and intimidation.”

“Such a regime would find our ship very interesting,” Fult puts in. “Which is very likely why this initial attack targeted the two officers most of use in a plot to capture it.”

Both officers’ access codes have already been changed, and Diane’s command codes placed in abeyance. Those orders were no easier to give now than they were during the war, and it’s the smoldering anger of that which spurs J’etris to add, “However they are used to doing things in their galaxy, I intend to give them a rude welcome.” She looks down the table, catching people’s eyes as she does; Dr. Tyrell looks back at her steadily, Counselor Rala meets her gaze briefly before his attention goes back to his padd. Commander Salera is the picture of Vulcan control, but there is a slight tenseness to her shoulders and the set of her jaw that speaks to concern. Fult is visibly enraged. “This is a new ship,” she says, “and a new crew. We’re still finding our feet with one another—which way our colleagues will jump, how they’ll fight when we’re in a tight place. And out here, we’re facing situations that would challenge an experienced crew, one that had worked together for years, one with a ship they knew as well as they knew one another. But right now, our lack of familiarity with one another doesn’t matter. These people have come onto our ship, into our home, however new it is, and taken our people.

“Captain Chester is fond of quoting the words of another Starfleet captain in circumstances like this. That Starfleet is a promise. That you will not be left behind.” She stops, lets the words sink in. “We will be making good on that promise today, gentlebeings. We’re going after our people. And be damned to anyone who stands in our way.”

“Good speech, sir,” says Fult as the rest of them trickle out. “I just wish it could get the engines back online. And get us a sample of their technology so we can actually track them down.”

J’etris huffs a quiet laugh. “That’s on the to-do list.”

Fult stands. “You’ve known the Captain longer than I have,” she says. “Is there a possibility she’ll extract herself?”

J’etris thinks about this for a moment. “Lieutenant, if we don’t get a call from the mirror universe in the next few hours begging us to come

take her back, I will be *very* surprised.”

The other Tanek deposits her on the ready room couch. He's careful about it, too, as if he thinks she's something immensely fragile and valuable.

Given that her alternate's not been interested in anything but her discomfort, Chester finds this unsettling. She looks around the room, noting differences, and trying to ignore the way this Tanek has taken up guard over her, watching her intently like a dog waiting for a promised treat.

That's not a thought that goes anywhere comforting or good.

The ready room is certainly not like her own. Hers is comfortable, but still sparing. She's got some pictures—the restaurant again—and a good luck knot, and that old one of her and Captain Steenburg, after her promotion, and one of the little bao decorations from the restaurant pinned up near her desk. It's the one with the crossed eyes, and there are three others still in the window of their bakery back home, now much faded. Her dad drew the originals on a corner of his lecture notes when she was twelve, and it made her giggle so much he had them printed for the window, and she's taken a copy of that one with her from the Academy to the *Bedivere*. The one on *Interpreter* is new; the old one burned in the crash.

This is...

...it's like someone's been reading about her Chinese heritage, but hasn't really understood it. It's a clutter of artifacts, the cheap next to the genuine, with no real grouping or apparent recognition of which is which. It's trying too hard, without knowing what it's trying to do.

Chester's own family is a blend of cultures, but it's a far more comfortable one than she's seeing here.

But in this universe, the Terrans were conquered. This mess in front of her, this aspirational packrat horde—it's probably all her alternate's got of her heritage. For a moment, Chester might almost feel bad for her, but the shattered corpse (hopefully corpse) on the wall out there tends to put a dampener on it.

The door opens. Her alternate comes in, the spare elegance of her white coat in garish contrast to her surroundings. “Tanek,” she says, and Tanek straightens, his attention abruptly fixed on her, “be a darling and go over there and wrap up the loose end we talked about?”

“He'd better not harm any of my crew,” Chester says. “If so, I won't have a reason to cooperate.”

It's a risk, and her skin prickles as they both look at her. Tanek appears genuinely startled. Her alternate, faintly disappointed.

After a long moment, where Chester wonders if she's torn it, her alternate waves a dismissive hand. “Humor her, dear one. Don't harm a hair on his head.”

Tanek glances at Chester again, then at her alternate. Then he gives her a bow several degrees more respectful than anything Chester's ever had from *her* Tanek, and slips silently from the room.

“Charming fellow,” Chester says.

“Isn't he though,” says her alternate, clearly pleased. “The Romulans sent him to spy on me. I decided to keep him. He's good at his job.”

The types of jobs Tanek is good at, as a Tal Shiar agent, are not pleasant ones. Chester keeps silent, in favor of examining her alternate.

Up close, the resemblance is even more uncanny. Chester wishes there was something more alien to the face in front of her. Something that she could point to and say, *no, that's not me*. But there isn't. Not even that dissected corpse on the wall of the bridge. She knows the vicious desire to maim, to hurt, and she knows that if she were to give into it, she'd want to make sure it was a *really* effective demonstration that people wouldn't forget in a hurry. She'd want to keep the reminder around.

And she'd want to do it with her own hands in front of everyone, with minimal assistance, to make everyone realize they're in danger of the same thing, and that should she need to deal with them personally, she's not going to need any bodyguards for it.

So she is absolutely certain that her alternate did that herself. And she wishes she could say this makes them completely different.

But it does not, and pretending it does not is leading herself into a trap. A certainty that she has the moral high ground, that she is inherently better than her alternate. And that, ironically, is the best possible way to ensure that she'll turn out just as bad.

Her counterpart stalks up to her, considering. “Start talking, Captain. I look forward to what you have to say.”

Chester shrugs a little. “Can I have the cuffs off, first? It's not the easiest way to have a conversation.”

Her alternate smiles a little, and reaches out to take her chin in her hand. Chester lets her head be tilted this way and that.

She needs her counterpart to trust her. To see just enough of herself to be interested, and just enough difference to underestimate her. It's a fine line to walk. If she decides Chester is too much like her, she'll kill her out of hand. Too high a threat. If she decides Chester is totally different

—Well, if she's lucky, she'll end up as the newest wall decor.

Her counterpart is interested in her pain. And if the way the Admiral is examining her right now is platonic, Chester will eat her figurative hat.

That gives her leverage.

It probably won't be very pleasant leverage, but if it means getting herself and Hawthorne out of here and warning her crew, she's using it. The question is whether her counterpart will be stupid enough to *give* her that leverage. *She* wouldn't.

"Normally," her counterpart purrs, "I'd make you prove you could be trusted. But I don't think I need to do that. Captain." The title is whiskers off an insult. She circles around behind Chester, one of her hands closing around Chester's wrist, and does something to the lock on the cuffs. They chirp open.

Chester spends a moment deciding whether to attack. Call it quits right here and now, take her alternate hostage, and demand an end to this mess. Or simply fight her, and see if she can't get her alternate distracted that way. She has a feeling that might just count as flirtatious here.

She decides not to push it. She also decides she's given the Admiral enough flirtatious advances; if her counterpart wants things to go that way, she's going to have to work for it. Too much eagerness on her part, and her alternate will suspect a trap. So she simply rubs her wrists when the cuffs are released and sits down on the very comfortable ready room couch as if she's perfectly at ease. "So," she says. "I take it you want my ship. I'm not giving it to you."

"I don't see you having much of a choice in the matter." Her alternate leans against her desk and smiles. Chester *really* doesn't like that smile.

"You'd be surprised," she says. "However, I think there's more than enough room for us to come to an agreement. The Intendant, assuming she wasn't lying—"

"—As she so often is—"

"—indicated that you're still cleaning up from the Alliance, and that you could use some help with that." She watches her alternate closely. Can she negotiate her way out of this? Or will her alternate assume weakness and nothing else?

"And you're offering it, is that it? I was under the impression that your people had non-interference regulations."

"We do," says Chester, "but I have a certain amount of wiggle room where my ship and crew and their safety are concerned. Furthermore, I think it's much more in our interests to have you and yours in control over here, *not* the Alliance. Previous reports of their activities were *quite* illuminating. Command will look the other way."

"Mercenary of you," her counterpart remarks.

"Besides," says Chester, "when else will I get to work with someone who can keep up with me?"

Her alternate lets out a breath of a laugh. "You really think you're charming, don't you," she says. "And clever. Able to get yourself out of anything just by talking. We have some information on Starfleet captains, you know. Always the diplomatic option. Always the soft option. Remarkable that your civilization has even survived, when it destroyed ours."

Chester meets her eyes, steady. *Gotcha*. "We have found it effective in our own universe."

Her alternate smiles, mocking. "Yes. Your universe. Your kind, soft universe, where Terrans are somehow the top of the heap."

"You seem to have been making some progress toward changing that here."

"Progress, yes. But not enough to trust readily. Tell me, *Captain*, what would you have me do?"

"I can offer help," she says. "Within certain limits, of course. But it'll go much better for you and your people, not having to figure out our technology from what wiped computers and the smoldering hulk of my ship will tell you—because if you take my ship, my crew and I will make damn sure you're going to have as hard a time as possible getting anything useful from it." She lifts and drops a shoulder. "I'm fairly certain you don't intend any of us to survive this little exercise."

"You make a compelling argument, Captain," says her alternate.

"So talk to me. Tell me about your plan. Let me see if we can cooperate."

Her counterpart favors her with an arch look. "And exactly how much would you have me tell you about my plan, Captain?"

"More than none of it." Chester leans back in her chair and crosses her legs, a facade of ease just as artificial as her counterpart's unimpressed expression. She has tried the carrot, now for the stick. "I take it you did something in order to force the *Interpreter* out of warp. And I take it there was a reason other than me that you sent your errand girl aboard. What I don't understand is how exactly you were intending to secure my ship without my cooperation." She rests an elbow on the couch arm and props her chin on her hand, raising her eyebrows. "I don't count on people's cooperation. I rather doubt you do, either."

Her alternate snorts, turning away.

"Trust me or don't," says Chester. "But understand this; *any* of my crew will blow the *Interpreter* to hell before handing it over to you. You get *nothing* without my help. Cooperate, or we die...and you get to tell your superiors about your failure."

Her alternate snarls and rounds on her, and Chester has half a moment to brace herself, before there's a dagger at her eye, a cold line resting along her cheek, and her alternate leaning in close. "I'm perfectly capable of giving you reasons to cooperate, Captain."

Chester spends a moment feeling very, very glad that her alternate's gone for her artificial eye, the one that still doesn't quite feel like *hers*. She keeps it open, even with the knife right there, because the biopolymer doing duty as a cornea doesn't have pain sensors. Her reward is the deep unease that flits across her alternate's face. She squashes the impulse to say, *Sorry, someone else already beat you to that one*. She doesn't need her alternate going for her remaining good eye. Instead, she just smiles.

“You don’t want to know,” she says gently, “just how much trouble I *can* make for you if you decide to go with threats. We can keep this civil, Admiral, or you can find out whether I’m as soft and sheltered as you so obviously believe I am. Personally, I can’t say it’s a gamble I’d care to make.”

The Admiral glances at the knife, at her total lack of reaction, and then slowly lowers the blade. There’s an assessing look in her gaze again.

“You’re not giving me a lot of reason not to kill you,” she says, jumping the way Chester expected her to, escalating first and escalating faster. It works with Klingons, and Chester has no doubt that’s how she learned it. It’s her deepest gut instinct, too. But she’s good at not listening to it. It’s too easy to get in over your head, fast.

Chester also knows it’s not a bluff. Chester herself doesn’t believe in bluffing; never say anything you’re not completely willing to follow through on. She suspects her alternate is even worse. Besides, there’s the practical aspect. If her alternate does decide there’s not a lot of reason to kill her, she’ll follow through in a heartbeat. But, as they’re having this conversation in this first place. Chester suspects she’s not quite at that point yet.

She’s getting there, though. Time to pull her back a little. “You’ll have a great deal of trouble getting what you want without my assistance.”

“I don’t need you.” Damn, wrong steer; her alternate is bristling now. “I don’t need you any more than I’ve needed *anyone*. And I think you’re lying to me right now. I got your file, Captain, long before we disabled your engines.”

Oh shit, Chester thinks, bracing for another attack, but her alternate props a hip against the desk across from her with a friendly deliberation that raises the hairs on the back of her neck. “And that...that’s not the woman you’re pretending to be right now. How many times did someone lodge a complaint about you doing the right thing against orders, or against best practices? Very few actual reprimands, though. That was interesting. You’re good at talking your way out of the problems your conscience makes for you. But that strong moral center, that stubborn streak of stupidity—that’s *completely* out of character with your current actions. Offering to cooperate with me? Please.” The smile again, cold and slow, and even in the depths of the war it has never occurred to Chester to be afraid of herself. She knows about her own vicious streak, and her pride and her ambition. But now comes a cold creeping feeling that perhaps she’s underestimated their depth. “You see, you’re not the only one here good with people, Captain.”

This scares her and she lets it out onto her face, because she also knows her alternate isn’t going to believe her if she’s not scared. She takes a breath to steady herself, her mind racing through options. A sudden lunge for the knife; her hands are untied now. But that’s relying on the coin toss of which of them wins the ensuing wrestling match, a high risk of leaving Hawthorne to fend for himself in Engineering. Chester doesn’t know him well enough to know if she can count on him for that. No. She can’t abandon him.

She can double down on her cover as a selfish self-centered glory hound. But if her alternate calls her on that, she’s probably dead.

So what *did* her alternate see in her service jacket? What *would* a woman like her see?

A fool. Someone so sentimental, it will hamstring her at every turn. Someone who’s been lucky enough to follow her conscience this whole time. Conscience, in this world, is a luxury. A pampered, condescending twit.

Who’s just had it all kicked out of her.

Time to grovel.

She slowly raises her gaze to meet the Admiral’s. “If you read my file, you know about the *Bedivere*,” she says softly. “It went down over Cardassia. My crew *died*.”

The woman across the table just watches her.

“I will do *anything*,” she says, “to stop the same thing from happening to *this* ship and this crew. *Anything at all*. So what if that means I’m bluffing with an empty hand?”

It’s true. It’s just her *anything* and her counterpart’s *anything* are definitely totally different things.

Her counterpart leans forward. “Then *start acting like it*,” she hisses. “Stow that arrogance of yours and *stop trying to play games with me*. Do what I tell you, and you and your crew might come out of this alive, *especially* if you don’t *piss me off any further*.”

Chester looks around, like she’s desperate for a way out. Then her shoulders slump, and she looks down. “What do you want me to do?” she asks, this time resigned. Resigned enough? She’s not sure.

Her alternate leans back and smiles. “Your engineer is helping mine determine how to stage a remote takeover of your ship’s systems from here. With your cooperation, that might not even be necessary—but I think we’ll be able to trust each other just a little more if I have some... contingency plans in place.”

That will put her in an ugly bind. If her alternate *does* by some miracle let her return to her ship, she’ll have to keep cooperating, or her alternate will take over the ship’s systems—intruder control among them—and do as she pleases anyway. She’ll be able to warn her crew, and hopefully they’ll engineer a workaround... but she’s not sure how feasible that will be even if her alternate *doesn’t* install some kind of monitoring software at the same time.

It’s clearly designed to give her no choice at all. But she’s had it with no win scenarios.

She forces herself to look up, clearly unhappy, to nod, as if she knows she has no choice.

“Go down to engineering and encourage your Mr. Hawthorne to do his best. I know he’s not too concerned about your neck being on the line,”

and her alternate smiles, slow and satisfied, “but from what I’ve seen, *you* certainly are.”

Oh, you asshole, thinks Chester. She reconsiders her position. Clearly, her alternate wants her to prove her trustworthiness. Equally clearly, the reasoned approach is going to earn her nothing but disrespect. If she goes down to Engineering now, it’ll be with an armed escort, watching her every move. She won’t be able to do shit that way, and that means more delay before contacting J’etris and warning the *Interpreter* about whatever the hell’s going on here. That’s unacceptable.

As is the smug look her alternate is giving her now.

Chester takes a deep breath and stands. She acknowledges that this is a very stupid idea, an awful plan, and is probably going to get her killed. But it seems like the only language her alternate self is willing to understand is that of violence, and if that is the case, Chester is certainly happy to provide.

So she pauses as she passes by her alternate, looking into her face. She’s an inch or so shorter, and a glance down shows her counterpart’s boots have a heel to them. The detail annoys her disproportionately. She is, she realizes, *really* tired of feeling smaller and shabbier right now.

So she suckerpunches the First Admiral of the Terran Empire in the stomach.

It feels *really* good.

If she wins this scuffle, she’ll have a hostage and maybe a way off this ship. If she loses—well, maybe she can twist that into a seduction. She suspects her counterpart will be into the whole conquest thing. At the worst, she’ll go down putting a finger in *someone’s* eye, and that’s a lot better than passively trotting off into the hands of the guards outside, unable to do much about the plans Hawthorne is being roped into right now.

But she doubts it’ll come to that. If her counterpart is as intelligent as she thinks she is, she’ll see this attack as the calculation it is, not desperation. This willingness to pick a fight—it should show her counterpart she’s not the cowed, careful officer she was expecting. She’s someone who she’ll have to deal with on equal footing.

Her counterpart has folded over, whooping for breath, and Chester grabs her by the back of the jacket and hurls her into the couch. “That’s quite enough of *that*,” she says. “If your disrespect is all I get for diplomacy, fine. I’ll try something else.”

Her counterpart rolls back to her feet and jabs a punch at Chester’s midsection. Chester blocks, blocks the next blow, moves in to kick her alternate’s feet out from under her, only to get headbutted in the nose for her pains. She reels back against the desk, grabs one of the heavier stupid knickknacks, and smashes it over her counterpart’s head.

Her counterpart roars with rage and drives a shoulder into her, sending her over the desk in a crash of ornaments. She rolls and scrambles to her feet, rounding the desk in time to meet her alternate’s kick coming the other way. She pivots to take it on the meat of her thigh, grunting with the impact, and punches her alternate in the nose for her pains. She keeps moving forward, driving her alternate back toward the couch and the windows.

And finds herself abruptly flat on her back as her counterpart drops her with a foot hooked around the back of her ankle and then follows her, pinning her.

Insultingly, she’s not even breathing hard. Chester struggles, finding her wrists have been pinned level with her shoulders, and her alternate’s full weight has come down across her thighs. She has no leverage, but when her counterpart leans close, Chester rears up and headbutts her in the nose. Her counterpart grunts, jerking upward—a glancing blow and a bloody nose rather than the break Chester was going for. She glares up at the other woman, who looks down at her and then grins, wide and feral and then dives in at Chester’s face, claiming her mouth in a rough, biting kiss.

God I hope I don’t secretly have this much of a narcissistic streak, thinks Chester, with a flare of vindication. Her alternate is offering her a path to her confidence, and soon as Chester has her confidence, she can actually start *doing* things instead of trying not to end up as wall art.

Her counterpart is going to hate those things, but she doesn’t need to know that right now.

Chester pushes up into the kiss and bites back, a lot harder than polite. The Admiral grunts with surprise, but doesn’t release her grip. Dammit.

It’s her counterpart who breaks the kiss, bloodied and gasping and grinning with delight. “So there *is* something of me in there,” she says. “A little spirit.”

Chester, too, is breathing hard. She bares her teeth, tasting blood—hers or her alternate’s, she’s not sure. “Just because I live in a reality where I can’t kill whoever I want to doesn’t mean I’m *nice*, sweetheart.”

Her counterpart laughs and settles herself a little more firmly across Chester’s legs. The weight pinning her arms doesn’t lighten an iota. *Not* what she was hoping for. “Clearly, we have things to discuss.”

“Like you getting off of me?”

“I’d be an idiot to trust you that far,” her alternate purrs, and leans in again. This kiss isn’t biting, but confidently dominating. Chester isn’t having it; she pushes back, nipping in warning at her counterpart’s mouth and pressing up into it.

“Defiance,” says her counterpart, breaking away. “Be careful with that, *Captain*. I’ve only so much patience.”

Chester snorts. “I’m *you*,” she says. “You think I’m just going to lie here and take it? You haven’t let anyone treat you like a toy. Why would

I?"

Her counterpart looks her over, then pulls her arms over her head to pin them in place one handed, freeing up her other hand to caress Chester's throat. "A very good question," she says.

Chester, well aware of the threat in the gesture, smirks and presses into it. Not a time to act like the intimidation worked; let her counterpart think her previous fear was an act, see something as ferocious as herself under the gilding of a proper Starfleet captain. "Whatever you say, I don't see a good reason."

"Maybe because I could kill you right now?"

"Would that work on you?" asks Chester, keeping her tone to genuine curiosity.

Her counterpart smiles a little. "No. No, it would not."

"Enough with the games, then," says Chester. "I'm not here to be your lackey. Admiral, think about it. In all the universe—if I'm not your equal," she smirks, tilts her head to expose *more* of her throat, like she's not worried about what her counterpart will do with it, even every nerve screams in protest at the vulnerability, "who is?"

She can't see her counterpart well at this angle, but she stays there, hoping she hasn't made a monumental mistake. But after a very long moment, fingers trail up her throat and seize her chin, tilting her face back to meet an evaluating gaze. "That is a very good question," her alternate says softly. "A very good question indeed."

"Maybe we could answer it," purrs Chester, and the moment her alternate's grip on her hands slackens she worms out of the grasp and rolls them. The Admiral hits the floor with a startled grunt. "I'm not one of your little pets, Admiral. I'm not here to suck up to you. I'm not here because I'm scared of you, for damned sure. I'm here because you brought me here—and because you made me curious."

Her counterpart snarls and yanks her down again. There's a brief struggle, but Chester stays where she is. Her counterpart pauses, now finally ruffled. "Curious how, Captain?" she asks. "How you could actually get power?"

"I can't say I don't have a taste for it," pants Chester. "I can't say, seeing you on that throne, I didn't wonder what the hell I was doing with myself. I spend my days in the most powerful warship we've ever built running *errands* for Command. Distributing supplies, chasing off pirates, breaking up fights at weddings. Power? They don't like captains who think about power."

"Their loss," purrs her alternate. She leans in close, looking up at Chester with no little interest. "So. You think I can give you power?"

She's getting to something here. "Are you kidding? You're the First Admiral of an entire *empire*. Of course you can. I'm smarter than most of your people and you know it. I know how my ship works. And I *know* how to control *my* crew. That's a lot more going for me than most of your captains. And," she moves deliberately against her alternate, an invitation, "I'm *you*, you know how I think. If I start getting too ambitious, you'll see it coming a mile away."

"I think I see it now," says her alternate, with the same wry sound in her voice as Chester's heard in her own many times. She tugs at a wrist; Chester loosens her grip with a brief silent hope it's not going to get her killed. But her counterpart doesn't go for her throat, instead tangling her fingers in Chester's hair and urging her in close. "Clever. Too clever. I've always been too clever... and you're no exception, are you?"

Chester leans in, well aware of the vulnerable position it puts her in, as she lifts her weight from pinning her alternate's hips. "Maybe you could do something about that," she says, and her alternate moves in with her eyes glittering, her fingers wrapping into Chester's hair like she can't bear the idea of letting go. Her mouth presses over Chester's again. Chester uses her free hand to cup her alternate's face, daring a tender gesture. Her alternate leans into it.

Then the world tilts crazily as her alternate bucks, rolling both of them. Chester is braced for it, wriggles her way out of the hold and props herself up on her arms as they come to a lurching halt with her alternate all but in her lap. "Think we can come to an agreement?" she asks.

"Yes," breathes her alternate, and leans in, her eyes low lidded and fixed on Chester's. "Show me you can be useful," she says. "Show me we can work together. I could always use someone else competent."

That, Chester doesn't doubt. Her alternate is warm and solid, powerful muscle and a promise of violence, and it is, as embarrassing as it is to admit it, very hot. She'll examine that later, but right now, it's getting her what she needs. She caresses her alternate, cupping her cheek in her hand and sliding a hand into her rigidly coiled hair. "Just don't forget," she says, steel in her voice, and feels her counterpart shudder, "I am your *equal*, your ally, and the second you forget that, the *second* you decide that I'm like one of your idiots out there, is the second I stick a knife in your back. Got it?"

A hand twists in her hair and pulls her in close. "I'll hold you to it," says her alternate. "Captain."

"You've already got my word on it, Admiral," says Chester, and brings their mouths together once more.

Chapter 9

Tanek sees the frantically hurrying security team rush past him, turning to watch them go with a raised eyebrow. Clearly Starfleet's incompetence is on display once again.

Not that he's in a position to pass judgment. The last few days have been thoroughly bruising to his ego.

He steps into the turbolift and directs it to the bridge, and as he folds his arms to wait for the absurdly plushly appointed thing to make its journey, there is a growing hum with him.

"Hold lift," he says, and then turns to look at the part of the air that is now shimmering with transporter effect. It occurs to him this is very likely the source of the intruder alert. It also occurs to him that a Starfleet officer would find it prudent to call security. He is not, however, a Starfleet officer. He is a Romulan whose pride has been stung thoroughly, and he's damned if he'll give the Captain another excuse to meddle in his affairs. So he waits for the intruder to materialize, and as he watches, he realizes it's him.

The Romulan Empire has not had any encounters with the mirror universe. It has watched with interest and a certain degree of amusement Starfleet's blunders, but Romulan engineers and transporter technicians do not tend to be incompetent enough to send themselves or their superiors to an alternate reality on a regular basis. This, Tanek feels, is a baseline of intelligence, or ought to be.

He should have expected some kind of absurdity involving an alternate reality when he accepted an assignment to a Starfleet ship. Whatever the reason for this, he has no patience for it. The moment the impostor is solid enough, Tanek shoves him into the turbolift wall and jams the disruptor under his chin. "I believe you owe me an explanation."

His alternate is stupid enough to look startled.

"I am not Starfleet," he tells his alternate. "I am not stupid. You will tell me why you are here."

"To retrieve you," his alternate says, and makes a gesture like he's reaching for something.

Tanek breaks that wrist for him. "You will not be doing that. Why are you retrieving me?"

At least his alternate isn't groaning about his injury. Tanek doesn't know if he could have stomached the discovery his alternate was that weak. "If you are not dealt with, you will attempt a rescue of your Captain."

"And why would I do that?" Tanek keeps his voice level with an effort, but his own anxiety flares; do they somehow know about the debacle on the station? It's bad enough that it happened. It's bad enough that he himself is still sorting through what it means to him, personally, and whether it does convey any obligations. He doesn't want to deal with the alternate universe making tactical decisions about it.

His alternate is looking at him like he's said something incredibly stupid. "Because she's your Captain?" he offers, and at Tanek's continued nonplussed expression, adds, "Because she's *Diane*?"

Tanek just stares flatly at him.

"Are you two *not*..." his alternate pauses, still staring, and then sweeps an assessing look over him. "You're still with the Tal Shiar?"

"Still?" says Tanek.

"My alternate is an imbecile," says his counterpart, to the universe in general.

"Says a man clad in skintight spangles," says Tanek. "Perhaps you should start in a coherent fashion. And perhaps I will refrain from breaking your other wrist before I call security?"

He offers it pleasantly enough, but his alternate gives him an annoyed and faintly scandalized look. He just stares blandly back, the thing that so certainly annoys the Captain.

"So. You aren't planning on rescuing the Captain."

"The Captain is an unfortunately resourceful woman," says Tanek. "Her tendency to get herself into fanciful and foolish conundrums is unfortunately matched by her ability to get herself *out* of such situations. I see no reason to undertake a rescue under most circumstances, even if I were aware of such circumstances." He leans in. "Are there circumstances that I ought to be aware of?"

"Yes," says his alternate, with an expression of faint disgust at his lack of knowledge. "My Admiral will be taking this ship for the Terran Empire. Your Captain," another faintly disbelieving look that Tanek can't quite decipher, "is her prisoner. If you value her life, you will come with me."

"I do not," says Tanek, and shoots him.

It's only a stun, as the Captain was vociferous in her objection to anything more effective, but Tanek has to admit that it's satisfying that the man doesn't even have the time to look surprised as he slumps to the floor. He holsters the disruptor and searches the man thoroughly. For something so formfitting, there is a surprising amount. He finds what he takes to be a communicator and several weapons, and then a few devices he's not immediately familiar with. He takes a moment to examine them. One appears to be a compact field stabilizer for a transporter; another a homing beacon, a field depolarizer, and a few other highly useful gadgets. The sort of things, in fact, that would be highly useful in staging a rescue of a certain starship Captain with a propensity for getting in over her head.

He gives the slumped body a contemptuous look, and secrets the various devices on his person. Only then does he tap his commbadge. "Subcommander Tanek to Bridge. I believe you were looking for an intruder."

They have two Taneks aboard. Wonderful.

J'tris looks down at the second Tanek, who she's had cuffed and who will be *staying* in the cuffs while they make sure he can't pull what the Intendant did. Or what was presumably done to Hawthorne—all they've found of him are transporter traces.

The ship is still eerily silent, the engines shut down.

"All right," she says. "Explain yourself."

He just stares back at her, which is roughly what she expected. He *is* Tanek's alternate. "Where is the Captain?"

"She's safe, if you cooperate," he says, and the tone in his voice is disturbingly earnest. As if he actually cares. J'tris darts a look over at their Tanek, who doesn't bother even glancing back.

"Cooperate with what?"

"You'll see."

"Usually," J'tris says, "hostage demands involve...concrete demands."

"It is not my place to make those demands." He looks back at Tanek, seemingly split between fascination and disgust. "When the Admiral sees fit, she will contact you. My assignment was to capture him."

"Why?"

"He seemed the most likely to attempt a rescue."

J'tris draws in a breath, almost laughs, decides that would not improve the situation at all. She turns to look at their Tanek instead.

As usual, he just looks faintly bored.

Do they somehow know about the debacle on the station? If they do, why are they ascribing any importance at all to it? "You must be close with your Captain, then," she says instead.

"Admiral," he corrects and looks—fond? Right. Mirror universe. Mirror universe and its tendency toward questionable interpersonal relationships.

"I see," she says. "Close enough to be privy to her plans?"

"She will have this ship," he says. "That is all you need know."

"No. I will need to know more than that."

Another level, noncommittal stare. It's a twin of their Tanek's own. J'tris just waits for him to blink; that doesn't work on her anymore. "What does your Admiral want with our Captain?"

That seems to do it. The alternate Tanek's face lights up. "She wants an ally," he says, almost eager. "She wants someone who understands her. Who can stand by her side as an equal, not a lackey."

"Isn't that your role?" asks their Tanek, snide.

Incredibly, the alternate Tanek shakes his head. He doesn't seem to be at all bothered by this. Their Tanek catches J'tris's eye and tilts his head. They step aside. Lieutenant Fult, still bristling about the Intendant's earlier escape, remains where she is, bristling down at their prisoner.

"I believe," says Tanek, folding his arms and looking deeply uncomfortable, "that he is deeply in love with the Captain's alternate self."

"I had the same impression," says J'tris. She glances over her shoulder. "That makes it very unlikely we will get any information whatsoever about the enemy's plans."

"The enemy?" Tanek's voice is bland, which means he's being deliberately annoying. "Shouldn't Starfleet protocol dictate you try to make friends with them first?"

"That has not worked in our previous encounters," says J'tris, a growl to her voice, "and they have taken our Captain. I, for one, do not find myself in a friendly mood." She eyes Tanek critically. "Any information he seems inclined to give us will be of use, Subcommander. And I suspect he'll welcome the opportunity to talk you around to his way of seeing things."

"Seeing things," repeats Tanek. "Elaborate."

"Seeing the Captain, specifically," J'tris says. "Perhaps you could let him expound on his Admiral's virtues. Personal information about the enemy commander could prove useful, and I think he wishes to be *very* persuasive in that regard."

The look of artless horror Tanek gives her does her mood a very great deal of good. "He's not going to tell me," she goes on. "Clearly, I'm the competition. Or my counterpart is."

The horror deepens. “I have no desire,” starts Tanek, swallows, and then says, “I have no desire to listen to someone sing the Captain’s praises. There is very little material there. It will become repetitive.”

That would make her angry if she didn’t already know that Tanek resorts to insults when he’s backed into a corner. “Nice try, Subcommander, but your job on this ship isn’t just looking pretty. Go on. Talk to him. Get me some actionable intelligence. Or are your people so reliant on pliers and mind probes you’ve lost the art of persuasion?”

The look Tanek gives her promises retribution at some future date. She’s unimpressed. “We have no information at all on the current situation there,” she tells him. “Thanks to you, we’ve got him. Go make something of it.” She pauses. “Legally,” she adds. “No pliers or mind probes or any other duress, understood? We *are* Starfleet, after all.”

He snorts. “Your prejudices are showing, Commander.”

She opts not to rise to that bait. They turn back.

Tanek’s alternate focuses back on him as soon as they approach. “I understand you can’t tell us more of your Admiral’s plans,” J’etris starts, “but we know so little of your universe.”

“I, for one, am curious as to how and why you became involved with this Admiral Chester,” says Tanek, folding his arms and looking forbidding as he can, which is extremely. “Her counterpart in our universe is hardly inspiring.”

J’etris grits her teeth. She’s not sure what else she should have expected.

It seems to enrage Tanek’s alternate even more, at least. “That says more about you than *her*,” he says. Tanek lifts an eyebrow in cool contempt, and his counterpart draws a breath, ready to launch into a speech, then catches J’etris’s eye and settles sullenly back into his chair. “I’ll talk to him,” he says. “Alone.”

“We’re not falling for that one twice,” says Fult, folding her arms.

“It’s personal,” says Tanek’s alternate. J’etris folds her arms, inwardly delighted. This was exactly what she was hoping for.

“Sir, may I remind you that leaving a Tal Shiar agent alone with a prisoner is a very bad idea?” says Fult, as J’etris pretends to consider it. “May I also remind you that the *last* prisoner we allowed a senior officer to interrogate subsequently *kidnapped* that officer?”

J’etris sympathizes. She does not trust Tanek, and that goes double for Tanek’s alternate, but pitting them against one another is the best opportunity she’s had so far to find out at least a little about what the enemy is up to. And they’re running out of time; she’s heard nothing from Diane yet, which means that the Captain has yet to extract herself from her current predicament on her own. Given the things that J’etris has seen Diane climb out of entirely unaided, that is very bad news.

And if they kidnap Tanek, she’s pretty sure he’ll cause chaos over there, too.

The aim, however, is not to let them kidnap Tanek, as much of a pain in the ass as he is, and as much as he has made Diane look a fool over the last week. So she looks at Tanek’s counterpart. He’s...different. She’s no expert in Romulan body language—aside from the body language that means they’re about to attack you—but there’s differences there. She’d almost describe this one as more nervous.

And then there’s what he’s wearing. All black and formfitting isn’t *their* Tanek’s style. He’s right there in his uniform, looking downright dowdy by comparison.

“I stay in the room,” she decides, as if it’s a difficult decision. “So does Lieutenant Fult. We’ll give you some space, but if we see anything funny, you’re taking a nap. And we’re searching you first. That acceptable?”

Alternate Tanek hesitates, then nods. “That is acceptable.”

“Why *don’t* you do something better with your hair?” the Admiral asks. It’s much later, in the Admiral’s quarters, which are a little less packratty than her ready room, but not by much.

Chester makes a noncommittal noise, leaning into the gloved fingers running through her hair. “I don’t know. Ponytail keeps it out of my face. I don’t want to fuss with it, and I look like a cadet with it short.”

Her counterpart laughs softly. “Grandmother always says not to neglect your weapons. Any of them. And that’s a weapon too.”

Chester lifts her head to frown at her. “Grandmama’s here?”

“Of course she is,” says her alternate. “I wasn’t going to let her out of my sight. Especially now.”

“I’m glad,” Chester says. At least it’s a point of connection.

“Yours?”

“Back home, with my parents.”

Her counterpart alerts now, pushing up onto her elbows and going still and intent, her eyes very wide. “They’re alive?”

Chester nods, seeing the avid look in her counterpart’s eyes. “Dad is an entomologist at UC Berkeley. Mom runs a bakery. Grandmama retired from Starfleet a little before I was born, teaches a few courses at the Academy, and tinkers with the ovens when she gets bored.”

“On Earth,” says her alternate, a little wondering, and then gets up like she can’t help but move. “You don’t understand. You couldn’t understand. Grandmother is all I have left.”

Chester watches her. She’s only a little disheveled, righting her uniform with the ease of practice, then reaching for her jacket to pull it over her shoulders. “The Intendant told me our parents were dead here,” she said. “Was she actually telling the truth?”

Her counterpart snorts. “Yes. She probably left out the part where she killed them, though.”

Chester’s gut turns over. “She did.” The Intendant’s words, the wistful statement about how she wishes she could have saved Chester’s alternate, become newly sinister.

If something were to happen to her parents...

Chester would have a very hard time *not* burning the world.

It’s clear her alternate, raised in the darkness of an ore processing center, didn’t bother to try to resist the urge. Chester can’t say she can find fault with that.

“She killed them,” her counterpart says. “In one of her random executions to increase productivity in the ore processing center. It didn’t matter much to her. I doubt she even checked who she killed. But my world *ended* that day.”

“Why is she still alive, then?”

Her counterpart turns back to her and gives her a mildly disappointed look. “Do I really have to explain?”

“Ah,” says Chester. “She’s useful.”

“She’s useful. I’ve taken everything from her. Her power, her looks, her connection to her home,” her counterpart makes a little gesture at her ear, like an earring. “And now she’s mine, and she does my work for me.”

“And how are you keeping control of her?”

“I haven’t burned Bajor. Yet.” Her counterpart smiles. “Turns out there’s a shred of patriotism in that shriveled thing she calls a heart.”

“Impressive.” The sick feeling settles back into Chester’s stomach. Killing the Intendant is one thing, something she can sympathize with. Killing an entire planet in revenge...

“I’m glad you think so. I’m very much looking forward to when she gives me an excuse.”

“And then you’ll dispose of her.”

“If I’m feeling merciful that day. People aren’t sorry when they’re dead.”

Chester thinks uncomfortably of that piece of wall decor outside. “No,” she says. “They don’t tend to be.”

“Growing up where I did, when I did, I learned that death is a friend,” says her counterpart. She goes to the replicator on the wall and enters a code. There’s a shimmer, and she comes back with a tray with a pitcher and cups; when she pours, the aroma of Bajoran spring wine reaches Chester’s nose. She wonders if this is because her counterpart associates it with opulence, or doesn’t know her own Terran food and drinks. Does she see this as another symbol of her victory?

If only this could be so easily resolved as packing her off with a passel of replicator recipes.

“The dead don’t feel pain,” her counterpart says. “The living and the dying certainly do. But when you’re dead, there’s nothing more anyone can do to you. Whatever happens, whatever superstitions you subscribe to, it stops mattering. So why be afraid of it?”

Chester hums a noncommittal noise and takes a sip of the wine. It is indeed very good.

“Your universe is soft. Ours isn’t. Life is cheap here.” Her counterpart swirls the wine again, sniffs it. “Death doesn’t have much weight when life is cheap. So, I try not to kill when I can avoid it.”

She smiles. It’s not anywhere in the neighborhood of a nice smile.

“I see,” says Chester softly. “I had only read reports of what it’s like here. I didn’t realize.”

“I know. Most people from your universe don’t.” Her counterpart sets the wine down, untouched. “The Alliance is still out there. I’ve driven them off for now. But I cannot do it alone, and I need your ship.”

“And my help.”

“It will be easier, yes. Pulling the people necessary to crew it from other parts of my fleet would leave us critically shortstaffed.”

To crew it after killing Chester’s entire crew. Chester sets her wine down as well, and looks directly into her alternate’s eyes. “It would be a mistake for other reasons, too,” she tells her alternate. “You would find me a very bad enemy to make, Admiral, and it sounds like you already have enough.”

Her alternate gives her a little smile. “Yes, so it would seem.”

“So what would you need from me? A certain number of Alliance starbases destroyed? A last drive to reclaim Earth?”

Her counterpart tips her head back, looking at her. “Earth was destroyed.”

It hits hard. Chester puts her wine down so her alternate won't see the tremor of her hands reflected in the liquid's surface. It hits hard, stirring up as it does the Breen attack on San Francisco.

Her parents and the restaurant had survived. But there had been several hours where she had not known that. “They destroyed Earth,” she says, and for a moment feels a reflection of the killing rage that her alternate so eagerly embraces, even though it is not her Earth. It still feels like a grave wound.

“There can be no peace,” says her alternate softly, “after something destroys your home. There can be no peace, after your people have been enslaved as we have. And there can be no peace when your attackers have so completely defined your life for as long as they have ours. So, will you help me?”

But the Empire she's seeking to revive did those very same things to others. Is doing the very same thing. This isn't about rebuilding. This is about rearranging the table. Taking power for herself. Indulging that glee in cruelty.

All the same, it's hard not to find compelling.

“I've seen you looking at my quarters,” her alternate says, soft and persuasive. “Grandmother has told me about our culture back on Earth, but she only remembers scraps of Mandarin, a handful of tales told by her own mother, before the ‘reforms’. I've found what I can. I've read what few surviving books we have. But I can see in your face I'm not getting it right.”

The last sentence is raw pain, as quiet and flat as her delivery is. Chester looks around at the quarters that are about half the sort of cheap shit that gift shops sell to credulous tourists back home, and she gets up and goes to her alternate and folds her into a hug. “I am so sorry,” she says softly.

She too, has felt that disconnect—half-Chinese with an English name, there is always the fear of anything less than perfection, the need for her speech to be exact and perfect, to remember all her older relatives names and relations to her, for her manners to be nothing less than perfect. Her heritage is a deep part of who she is, but there are far too many times she feels as if she's holding onto a tenuous thread to have it be hers—and not simply being an outsider *playing* at it. Grandmama has always been an anchor, the one to laugh at those fears. “No one gets to tell you who you are,” she'd said after one of Chester's aunts had made a particularly cutting remark. “Your aunt is a bigot whose son failed to get into the Academy for the third time.”

To be so completely divorced from even the *memory* of Earth...

To *not* have Grandmama as that anchor...

“Don't pity me,” her alternate growls, pushing her away.

“We have resources, our histories in the library databanks—”

“It's bad enough learning from books. To have to go looking in an *alternate universe's* historical records?” Her counterpart snorts. “No. No. We don't even know if they'd be accurate to our history.”

It is a fair enough point, but Chester can't help but feel sad as she sits back down on the bed. “It matters a lot to me,” she says quietly. “I'm sorry it was taken from you.”

Her alternate shakes her head. “Don't pity me,” she repeats. “I have much more important things to do than mourn over what was taken from me.”

Like mass murder. Her alternate is talking about dragging her and the *Interpreter* into a war. Chester very, very much doubts she'll be inclined to let them go. Not when they're so useful.

She's right. Chester can't afford to pity her. Pitying her means enabling what she's planning to do.

But the horrible tragedy shared by every Terran here—because it's not unique to her, it's *everyone* who lost their history and their culture to the Alliance—stagger her for a moment. And then hot on its heels comes the realization it's not just them. It's what the Empire and the Alliance have been doing to every world in their paths, an entire universe defined by brutal imperial struggle and entire civilizations left blasted and silent in their wake, piecing identity together from scraps and cheap tourist novelties. For a moment the scale of it strikes her silent. Then she blinks it away and reaches for her uniform jacket, turning it right-side out and shrugging it on.

“All right,” she says. “We have a job to do. But you still need to tell me what it is.”

Her alternate turns to look at her quizzically.

“I don't like the idea of the Alliance encroaching on your space. Or of them encroaching on ours,” she says, though she knows the Alliance had an active interest in no contact with their universe. The Alliance never reached across and tried to steal a starship or crew. “To them, I'm willing to bet a Terran is a Terran, no matter the universe we come from, and frankly I'd prefer they not come sniffing around mine. How long would you need us?”

Her alternate pauses, looking at her. “I do not want you going back,” she says softly.

There it is, sooner than she expected and a hell of a lot more honest. “You would ask me to leave my parents.”

A longer pause.

“Threats aren’t going to work,” says Chester, to head off what will surely be the other woman’s first impulse. “Would they work on you?” She flicks her gaze up to her alternate. “I *am* you. Another, kinder universe, but we’re a constant, aren’t we? We have the same drive and ambition...and the same priorities. You would have me leave Grandmother.”

Her alternate sighs and looks away.

“What are your priorities?” asks Chester. “What must you have, now? Tell me. I can help.”

Her alternate looks back at her. “How can I trust you with this? You might be me—but don’t forget your universe’s first encounter with us *destroyed* us.”

Chester raises her eyebrows and tips her head at the mess behind them. “Give me something I *can* do, Admiral. I have two thousand people I’ll have to persuade once I get back over there. Make it something reasonable, something they’ll find normal, and it will go far more smoothly.”

“I need the *Interpreter*. The real thing or a copy, one of them.”

“I could have my engineer leave plans,” she says. “I can come be the muscle on at least one mission.” Like hell. Even if she was sincere, even if her alternate hadn’t just kidnapped her, she wouldn’t trust her to point them at a real problem. There’s no telling what she’d be aimed at, what her alternate might use her ship to do.

The goal, no matter how sympathetic she is to her counterpart’s situation, or to her loss, is to get herself, her crew, and her ship out of this. Ideally, she’ll do it while leaving a foul enough taste in her alternate’s mouth to discourage this kind of shit in the future. The very last thing Starfleet needs is this woman getting grabby about their ships, their crews, their senior officers. They’re depleted enough from the war.

“I want you to help me,” her alternate says. “My crew need to see that you’ve been turned. Do what you like with yours. But when we do go confront the Alliance... I want it clear that you,” she leans in close, and Chester stays still as her fingers close around her chin, tipping it up. Reasserting control. Chester permits it, but gives her alternate a deeply unamused look from under her lashes. *I’ll allow it*, her expression says, *but do not forget that you only were able to do that because I permitted you to do it*. “I want it clear,” her alternate repeats, “that you are *mine*.”

“Go to hell,” says Chester, pleasant, and her alternate’s grip tightens to the point of pain, her grip strangely strong. There’s something running along her fingers under the gloves, ridges where there shouldn’t be, digging into the soft skin of Chester’s jaw. “I’m not yours. I’ll never be yours. And I’m not playing your stupid little power games.” She reaches for the dagger at her alternate’s waist; her alternate catches her wrist in a grip like steel and drags her to her feet. Chester goes with her, swallowing hard against the pressure against her throat.

“I think you need a reminder, *Captain*, of who’s in charge.”

“And it’s not you,” Chester says. “As equals, remember, Admiral? I don’t like people throwing their weight around any more than you do. And you do *not* get my ship or my crew without my full and willing cooperation. Oh, certainly, you could execute whatever clever little plan you’ve got cooking. I’m sure it would have worked against the Alliance. But Starfleet isn’t the Alliance.”

“You’re softer. We’ve seen you before. You’re afraid of crossing lines. Of doing what’s necessary. You’d lie down and die before getting your hands dirty.”

Chester tsks as best as she can, with her alternate’s hand on her throat. “You said you read my record, Admiral. Tell me, did you think much of the war?”

“Your war was laughable. We fought back an empire with mining equipment and pirate ships.”

“I beg to differ,” says Chester, softly. “Let me be completely honest with you, Admiral Chester. You’re just not very scary.”

Her alternate’s face spasms with rage.

“We just fought our war,” says Chester. “We just won. And whatever you are, you’re certainly not the Dominion. You haven’t got their resources. You’ve got what, a few dozen ships and a bunch of conscripts terrified they’re going to end up as wall art? I have a state of the art warship and a dedicated, combat-experienced crew, who I *don’t* have to worry about sticking a knife in my kidneys if they get ambitious. And I have an entire fleet backing me up. Oh, you’ve got me outdone in low-grade nastiness, I’ll cheerfully admit that. But I’ll repeat, you’re just not very scary, and threatening me isn’t going to get you what you want. You certainly can kill me and you can kill Hawthorne, but I’d give you even odds at *best* at taking the *Interpreter* even with her engines down, and it’s a damn good question if you could even operate her.” She snorts. “You’ll find state of the art warships are delicate beasts. You don’t have the materials in this universe for her upkeep, and without me or Hawthorne, you won’t know all her little tricks.” She grins. “Command codes are the *least* of your worries. You need me, Admiral Chester, and you need me in a mood to help you.”

Her counterpart finally, finally lets her go. Chester reaches up and massages her jaw. “As I said,” she says. “Equals, or not at all.”

“You think a very great deal of yourself,” her counterpart hisses.

“I could say the same of you,” she says, and tips her a smile. “But one thing, Admiral. I might be from a softer universe, but don’t think I’m softer than you are. I just had to learn to hide my claws better.”

Her counterpart looks down, then back at her face, an icy mask sliding behind her eyes. “So it would seem,” she says. “But watch your arrogance, Captain. My patience is not unlimited.”

Chester gives her a toothy smile back. “Neither is mine,” she says. “We work together, or we kill each other. And by work together, I mean I expect you to cut the domineering crap. You can’t intimidate me, and frankly I’m sick of your posturing.”

Her alternate takes in a deep breath, her nostrils flaring. “I’ve killed people for less,” she says. “A lot less.”

“But you need me,” says Chester. “And you understand me, and you *know* that doesn’t work on me.”

Of course, she reflects grimly, if she pushes too hard the first sign she’ll get of it is the knife going into her belly. And her alternate isn’t exactly likely to kill her nicely.

Unfortunately, her alternate is now looking at her with an evaluating gleam. “What *would* work, I wonder?” she says quietly. “You spoke of the *Bedivere*. You spoke of the value you have for your crew.”

“All you’ve got is my engineer,” says Chester, “and to say the man is a bit of a shit is to put it mildly.”

The speculative look doesn’t fade. And then her alternate looks away and turns back to the closet and drawers against the wall. “Equal we might be,” she says, “but you will need to look the part. My crew have expectations.”

“And what expectations would those be?” Chester asks, sitting back on the bed and then curling her legs under her to show that she is not even in the least unsettled by this exchange.

“They won’t trust you if it’s not clear that you’re mine,” says her counterpart. She smiles over her shoulder, long and slow like a pleased cat. “I like my people to look a certain way.”

Said with no apparent awareness how vilely creepy that is. Chester frowns at her.

“I know you have no patience for my ‘posturing’, but this is anything but. If my power seems to waver, if you seem anything less than completely dedicated, we’re both dead. It’s the look of the thing, you see. Absolute control over all my people. If I slacken it for a moment... well. We follow the proud traditions of the old Terran Empire here. And I have no desire to end up with a knife in my back.”

“Is that what happened to that charming bit of wall decor on your bridge?” Chester asks.

“He made an attempt, yes,” says her counterpart, and smiles as if the memory is a good one. Chester has no doubt that it is.

“It seems it wasn’t a good idea.”

“It wasn’t.” Her alternate slides open a panel on the wall and ruffles through the contents. She seems like she’s already got something in mind.

Chester straightens her shoulders, sighs, and then starts to shrug out of her uniform jacket again. She’s sure she’ll much prefer that to whatever her counterpart picks out. “I’m going to need to change back before you send me to my ship,” she says. “They’re not about to trust me if I show up looking like you.”

“Of course,” says her counterpart, selecting something. “I trust your judgment.”

Chester does not frown, not outwardly. There’s something in that tone, an implication...

Somehow, she doubts her alternate intends to send her back to *Interpreter*.

It would put her in a position of power, put her usual resources at her command, and give the *Interpreter* and its crew a leader. Hawthorne is important, too, and her alternate might see him as a possible hostage. But given Hawthorne’s unwillingness to cooperate even with a blade to his commander’s throat, Chester suspects that her alternate has dismissed his usefulness in that role. Were her alternate in her place, she would see this as a way to get rid of a crewmember whose loyalty was questionable at best without bearing the blame.

Besides, Chester has made it very clear she values her autonomy and will not hesitate to defy her even with her alternate’s hand around her throat. In command of her own ship, her alternate loses the last vestiges of control over her. And her counterpart has already told her far, far more than Chester suspects she wants anyone to know.

No. Her alternate will not send her back if she can help it, and this little pantomime of appropriate attire is the opening gambit.

“Here,” the Admiral says, bringing over her selection. Chester glances down at it and feels her eyebrows rise.

“Not your usual tastes?” says the Admiral, amused. Chester lifts the top, which looks very much like a black leather corset with a sweetheart neckline, held up by a set of straps running diagonally from one cup to the shoulder, glances down at the... she’s calling those leggings, not trousers, and looks back at her counterpart. “I’m not dressing like Tanek, thanks.”

Her alternate sighs.

“It needs a shirt under it,” Chester tells her. “Otherwise it’s going to chafe like hell. Or, you know, get me something actually practical.” She glances at the bottom of the corset. “Something I can bend down in without eviscerating myself, damn. A nice black leather jacket, or something. You realize your crew will see whatever you put me in, and imagine you in it, right?”

Her alternate huffs and pulls it out of her hands, going back to her closet. “You know,” she says, almost conversationally, “when we broke out of Terok Nor, and when I swore my allegiance to the Emperor, I also made a promise to myself. That no one would ever get to say no to me, ever again.” She glances over her shoulder, a threat in it. “And yet, here you are.”

“And yet, here I am.” Chester smiles to herself. Until her counterpart decides to trust her or kill her, she can be a distracting pain in the ass.

Hopefully Hawthorne is up to something more useful.

Chapter 10

"This is the transporter technology we're using," Hawthorne's alternate says, handing Hawthorne a small device. Hawthorne turns it over. "And here's what let the Intendant kidnap your captain through the cell forcefield." He hands over a second device. "You might find those useful. I make extras of everything the Admiral asks me to."

"Why?" He suspects he already knows. To stop the murderous fascist.

He wasn't the only one of... well, himself, who was waiting for a chance to get in the way of the fascists' plans.

His alternate smiles again. It doesn't get any better with repetition. "Because I'm not the only one who's tired of all of this."

They're in a small lab off Engineering. Hawthorne's alternate came in, shouted at everyone in Engineering for a while, and then stormed into the lab, dragging Hawthorne himself with him. But as soon as the doors closed, his demeanor changed completely. He's almost cheerful, showing Hawthorne his inventions like a first year at the Academy.

Hawthorne thinks he's an idiot for this instant trust, but frankly, he's not cut out for subterfuge, either. "All right, what does that mean?"

His alternate turns around, another thing in his hands. "There's a secret group," he says. "They want to restore the Empire to what it was, what it should be—you know, go back to Spock's reforms. And after the Admiral...did what she did...they contacted me."

A secret group. Hawthorne's stomach drops, and then falls a few more steps.

His alternate is working with this universe's version of Starfleet Secret Police.

"They already know about this," his alternate is saying. "They want her to succeed as little as you do, trust me, and they're willing to help out."

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because you're *me*!" says his alternate. "Look, I know you and your captain don't get along, and you don't trust her—you shouldn't—but you don't understand. It's been *me*, just *me*, all this time, ever since she burned the *Bedivere*, with no one to talk to and no one to trust," and there he can hear the echoes of things he's thought more than once, tugging at his gut.

"And now you're here, and you've got to hate her, too. Even though you weren't there with me, you've got to hate her, because she wants to do the same thing to *Interpreter*, to *your* crew. And if her alternate's anything like her, she's not going to stand in her way. She's not going to stop her. It's *you* between them and the rest of your people. I'm *not* going to let that happen, and I'm not going to let her do this to another crew, and if you betray me and I end up like Commander Beauford on the wall—well," he stands up straight and looks pure bantam defiance at Hawthorne, "I've been a dead man walking for long enough, it'll *probably* come as a relief."

Now that, Hawthorne can also relate to. "All right. So, what's the plan? Her plan, and then your plan."

"She's not shared a lot of it," says his alternate. "I think she wanted to squeeze the access codes out of you and your captain, but she's pretty confident about getting into your ship's systems even if that doesn't succeed. She wasn't clear about why, but it can't be a device—she hasn't asked me to make anything that would. I *think* it might be Tanek."

"Yeah, I was hoping the alternate nature of the universe meant that asshole wouldn't be here."

"The Romulans made the mistake of sending over a liaison," says his alternate. "She decided to keep him. And the second she got her claws into him, he decided to stay." He makes a face. "She's good with people."

"The Captain's much the same," says Hawthorne, thinking it's an understatement. "Only she and Tanek hate each other's guts."

"That's *got* to be an improvement," says his alternate.

"Yeah. It probably is," says Hawthorne. The ship's two resident fascists, working together. Yeah, that's a nightmare. "So what is she trying to do with my ship?"

"Well, she's interfered with its engines," says his alternate.

"She fucked with my *engines*?" snarls Hawthorne, all decorum forgotten; his alternate gestures frantically for him to calm down. "She *fucked* with my engines!"

"It's a subspace signal that desynchronized the cores. They'll need a full reboot cycle before they're ready again."

At least that's underway. "She fucked with my engines - she fucked with *'Pret*," he mutters. "That is *it*. This stops *here*. What the hell kind of ship are we on, anyway?" Whatever it is, it's certainly not Federation. He thinks he's seen some Cardassian and Klingon elements, a little Vulcan, and something that almost looked *Borg*.

Mirrorverse Borg. What a horrible idea.

"The *Ascendant* was one of the old Empire's ships," says his alternate. "The Emperor had it upgraded for Admiral Chester specially."

"Hm," says Hawthorne. "Give me an access terminal."

“What are you planning to do?” his alternate asks.

“You’ll see.”

“Hawthorne—stop,” says his alternate, getting between him and the terminal. “This isn’t a game,” he says earnestly. “Look, I don’t know what *your* Chester did to you to make you get those prosthetics, but the one here? She’s a lot worse. And if they start working together—and I’m *sure* they’re going to start working together—they’ll catch you. And you’re going to have a lot worse than some cybernetics then.”

“My Chester didn’t do this,” says Hawthorne, grudging. “This was before I met her.” Not that he doesn’t think she wasn’t involved with the same fuckers who *did* do it, but that’s neither here nor there. Also, he’s not telling his alternate. His alternate might just have spilled his guts to Hawthorne, but Hawthorne would prefer to not *actually* spill his guts. He is not going to talk about Starfleet’s Secret Police, or how he suspects the captain is one of them. He’s not risking it.

He’s been quiet this long, and if his alternate has the relief of telling him, well, good for him. Hawthorne has more than his own neck to look out for; he’s got Marbog, and the entire crew of the Interpreter, and he’s not pulling stupid shit with that.

His alternate blanches. “What happened, then?”

“There was a war. I don’t want to talk about it.” That should be enough, right? “Look, in my universe, I don’t trust her. But she’s not taken over like this. I only met her two months ago.”

As far as he knows. The thought sends a chill down his cybernetics and his spine. For all he knows, she was one of the officers supervising all this being put into him. That cold blank calculating look she gets sometimes, he can see it in his mind, watching a new experiment take form. She’s said she wanted him, specifically, as her Chief Engineer. Maybe she was always intended to be his handler. Sure, her record indicates she was light years away when this happened, but if nothing else, he’s learned that official records can be malleable things.

“Lucky you,” says his counterpart, and clearly means it.

Hawthorne pushes past him and starts accessing the terminal. He’s tempted to use Gull—his drone is still docked with the back of his head—but decides against it. If everything goes further to hell, he’ll need them. “How can we shut down the interference without her noticing?”

“It won’t be hard,” his alternate says. “You saw her take your Captain away. She’s plenty distracted right now.”

Well, that’s something Hawthorne is much, much happier not contemplating. “Yeah, I’m not in the mood to take chances. How do we keep her from noticing?”

“We can do this,” says his counterpart, and sneaks an arm under his to adjust a few settings. “It will take time, but it’ll look like a minor destabilization in power levels from our side, which will automatically abort the function of the interference generators.”

“Good,” says Hawthorne. He hesitates. He does not, as a rule, like sabotaging technology. But he’s had it up to here with this universe of fascists, and as little as he likes the Captain, she probably deserves better than getting ditched here with her (debatably) worst self. He takes a deep breath and steadies himself. “We’re going to need some distractions.”

Tanek’s counterpart stares at him in a way that Tanek knows is calculated to be unsettling. He’s made himself comfortable, sitting on the bunk of the detention cell, looking as if he’s a lord of old entertaining requests from his vassals.

Tanek knows that expression from having worn it too many times himself. It is, as is so much about him, a lie.

“You wished to speak with me,” says Tanek.

“You’re worried about her,” says his counterpart.

“Worried about whom?”

“Diane,” says his counterpart, as if it’s obvious. The name throws Tanek for a moment; it takes him a breath to remember that’s the Captain’s given name, and then he gives his counterpart a look of flat disbelief.

“We knew you’d come looking for her,” says his counterpart. “My Admiral sent me to ensure you didn’t. What I don’t understand is why you don’t seem interested in doing so. Are you really such a coward here?”

Tanek tilts his head. “And why would I be so concerned about the Captain’s wellbeing?”

Now it’s his alternate’s turn to give him a look of disbelief.

Tanek just keeps watching him, in a way deliberately calculated to be unsettling. “As I have said, the woman is more than capable of looking after her own interests.”

“Her competence isn’t in question here,” says his counterpart. He says it slowly, as if explaining it to someone he thinks is very stupid. “It’s natural to feel concern for someone you care about.”

“I *do not* —” Tanek cuts himself off, seeing the instant attention it draws from J’etris and the security officers. “There is no such connection between us. She is the commanding officer of this ship, and I can do nothing about it. That is all.”

“Do you really believe that?” His counterpart’s voice is insinuating. “Perhaps you’re simply envious.”

Tanek stares at him. “You are confused that the Captain and I do not share an intimate relationship,” he says, favoring the other man with the flat cold look that’s served him well in many interrogations. “I would suggest that it is none of your concern, and encourage you to say something of use before I run out of patience.”

His counterpart’s expression doesn’t change, but Tanek gets the impression of amusement, as if his alternate think he’s stumbled upon something funny. “What would be of use, then? I won’t tell you how to rescue her.”

“As if I would need to,” he says. “Very well. How did you fall into this Admiral’s orbit? I rather doubt that any counterpart of the Captain’s might be so enchanting.” He adds a sneer to the end; it has the desired effect. He can see the angry flush rise to his alternate’s cheeks. “Perhaps a little more morally bankrupt, but that isn’t saying much.” He leans in with a small smile. “Starfleet officers are so rarely the moral paragons they like to pretend to be.”

His alternate’s face works a moment, then slides into vindictiveness. “You can give your absolute loyalty and your life to the Romulan Empire,” he says softly, “but it will *never* give you anything in return. You know that too, don’t you.”

Cold creeps into Tanek’s bones, and for a moment the memory of the stink of unwashed bodies fills his nose. Exhaustion and black bleak despair—the ever-present companions in a Dominion internment camp.

He flattens it away behind his best mask of impassivity. The Empire’s care of its citizens is just as conditional as it is capricious. This is not news to him. It does not affect his own loyalty. He isn’t such a sad weak thing to demand approval or care where there is none to be had.

His alternate is smiling, very faintly. It’s mocking and pitying and it galls Tanek in a way he didn’t think he could be goaded again. “Yes, you know that,” he says. “So consider this, for all your contempt. Mock my loyalty all you like, but at least I have something to show for it. My loyalty is to someone who returns it. Someone with more than the bare modicum of intelligence and political connection that has buoyed so many of my former superiors through the ranks of our society. Someone who would bother to come looking for me, rather than leaving me to be rescued by the *Klingons* .”

Tanek has far too much discipline to allow his hands to pull into fists or for his face to change, but inwardly he rages. “I see,” he says. “You have accessed our personnel files. Am I to find this bit of basic subterfuge impressive?”

“No,” says his alternate. “Not at all.” He settles back smugly. “Does that answer your question?”

“I suppose it does,” Tanek says. “And I’m sure it’s a very great comfort to you. It does sound better than admitting you betrayed your people in order to gratify yourself.”

That wipes the smugness off his counterpart’s face. It seems he’s never learned the discipline that is second-nature to Tanek. Tanek gives him a cold smile. “I remain unimpressed,” he says. “Perhaps you could tell me of the Captain’s current condition, and why your Admiral has decided to take her.”

His alternate lets out a long sigh. “The Admiral wants this ship,” he explains, as if it’s perfectly reasonable, and Tanek very stupid. “The Intendant was sent to bring her the Captain, and I, to bring her the far more important Chief Engineer.”

“Of course,” says Tanek. He has seen the interrogation logs leading to the Captain’s kidnapping. They were more amusing than concerning; the Captain has no idea of how to properly conduct an interrogation. Neither does any other Starfleet officer. He slips one of the devices he took off his alternate out of his sleeve. “Perhaps you could tell me what this is?”

Commander J’etris’s request be damned, he has had enough of talking about the Captain. Sooner or later, his alternate will learn about the debacle back on the station, and Tanek would very much like to be off of the ship before that happens. Sentimental, self-centered fool the man might be, but he has the same trick Tanek has cultivated of using an observation like a knife between the ribs, and Tanek has no desire to hear what smug things he might say about that.

Given a choice between the two, he would much rather go to rescue the Captain. The sooner he can put an end to this farce, the better.

His counterpart, evidently feeling he has won, is just forthcoming enough. Tanek gets the strong sense that the man expects him to defect to the Admiral’s side immediately once he meets her.

The idea is laughable, but it gets him what he wants. Afterward, with his counterpart safely ensconced in a cell, he sits down with J’etris and Fult. “Send me over there,” he says.

Fult laughs. J’etris just looks at him.

“They’ll be expecting him back,” he says. “And I have the requisite training for an operation of this sort.”

“Nice idea,” J’etris says. “How?”

Tanek slips what he thinks is the program for the transporter out of a pocket and shows it to her. “Our guest provided me with this. Allow me to use it. Alone of this ship’s complement, I have the necessary skills and experience to undertake a mission of this sort.”

J’etris stares at it, then at him. “Mr. Tanek,” she says, slowly, “these are generally things I’d encourage you to report immediately.”

“Not sure what you expected,” Fult mutters. “Tanek, every time you leave a holding cell, I’m turning you upside down and shaking you until

everything falls out of your pockets.”

Tanek shrugs. “I had to have confirmation from our guest.”

“Still,” says J’etris. “I could have had Salera looking at this during the interrogation. You know, to keep you from getting pasted against a wall when you beamed in.”

“My counterpart was not ‘pasted against a wall’ when he first arrived. I believe it should have no ill effects on me.”

“You’re not an engineer.”

“Yes. Our engineer is currently being held prisoner with the Captain. Will you allow your habitual Starfleet timidity to lead the way on this decision, Commander, or will you allow the one experienced member of your crew to do something about it?”

J’etris just looks at him, and he is, for a moment, glad that she is so atypical for her species. He has neither the inclination nor the patience to deal with the response that such an insult would usually provoke from a Klingon. The way Fult is looking at him promises nothing good, either, and if Tanek is entirely honest with himself, he does not like his chances against the Tellarite, either. He’s seen the Tal Shiar file on her, too.

“Diplomacy has never been your strong suit, has it, Subcommander,” J’etris says at last, in a tone he knows she’s picked up from the Captain. “Very well. But get those looked at before you go; if you do end up dead over there, I want to make sure we can use that technology.”

“Brutally practical as always, Commander,” he says dryly, and rises. Fult rises as well. “I’ll help you prepare, Subcommander,” she says, with a false cheer that promises nothing at all good.

Once they’re well out of earshot, she says, “I won’t question the Commander’s decision, but I will add this.” She pauses and smiles up at him. Or just bares her tusks. It’s difficult to tell which, with her, and she’s certainly not making it easy for him. “I have no doubts of your skills, Subcommander,” she says. “I have every doubt of your motives. And I’ve seen how many stupid little games you like to play with this ship and its officers. Maybe it’s just keeping your hand in as an untrustworthy bastard. But might I suggest that you refrain from any such little games while you’re over there?”

There is not a hint of a threat in her voice, or in her actual words, but Tanek, looking down at her and her very unfriendly smile, for once in his career, decides against further provocation. He jerks his head in a nod, and reflects that he will be very glad to get off this ship, no matter the reason.

Chapter 11

Chester takes a deep breath before entering the alternate Engineering. She feels she won the costuming debate, but it's a relative thing; she's dressed in a close copy of her alternate's snowy uniform, minus some of the gold braid. The difference between a Captain and an Admiral, she guesses, but the designer of this uniform had flattery and style on their mind. It's tight and tailored and glittering, enough structure in the jacket and the waistcoat under it to add a reluctant sway to her walk. She sparkles, and she knows it, and she hates it.

She feels like a cat in a Halloween costume. She's on the cusp of tearing the whole damned thing to shreds and stamping on the ornaments in her hair, and she considers it a minor miracle that she hasn't done this already. Her mood when she reaches Engineering is not good at *all*.

She knows her Hawthorne instantly, because he looks at her and says, "What the hell," in a flat, disappointed voice as she comes in the door.

"Commander," she says. "I'm glad you're already here. The Admiral and I have reached an agreement."

He eyes her. "Yeah. I can see that." The other Hawthorne waves at him to shut up, but that doesn't lessen his expression of disapproval one little bit.

"I want to know about the specifics you have planned," she says. "What's your progress?"

Hawthorne looks like he's going to protest for a moment, then subsides with a glance at his alternate. The look they exchange is not lost on her.

Good. Her Hawthorne is angry and defiant, and already working with his alternate. He may not trust her, but he's not going to cooperate with the Admiral, either. That's the result she was hoping for.

"Their shields are proving more difficult than expected," his alternate says, covering for him. Chester likes him already.

"Give me something to take back to her," she says, looming in close to them, and hating the way the other Hawthorne shrinks back. "It'll go better for you."

"It'll happen when it happens," says her Hawthorne, with a casualness that makes his alternate visibly shudder.

"She's not a very patient woman," says Chester.

"Yeah. Evidently," says Hawthorne, giving her a dirty look.

All right, she's going to have to find a way to explain this to him. Either he's a very good actor—which goes dead against everything else she knows about him—or he genuinely thinks that she jumped aboard with her alternate at the first chance she got. Admittedly, her current attire doesn't exactly discourage that impression. She moves in close to him and then, trying not to let her reluctance show, reaches out to heft him off his feet by the front of his uniform. It's easier than she expected—it's like there's not hing *to* him.

He yelps, she really hopes she can explain this to him later and apologize, and she hauls him in close. "I said I want *results*, Hawthorne, not your smart remarks. I don't have Starfleet regulations keeping me from kicking your sorry insolent ass. So how about you *shut up* and *do your damn job*."

Then she adds in the barest breath of a whisper, hoping his cybernetics really are that good, "I want the contents of this ship's computers, and I want to know what the hell they've been doing to our engines. Also, get me the comms frequencies they're using to keep in contact with the people on our ship."

His head jerks in a nod, and although she can still feel him all but vibrating with rage in her hands, he doesn't quite disguise a hint of relief - he's a terrible actor.

He hisses, "She killed - the *Bedivere* - for this."

Chester almost drops him.

She wants to say, *she did what?* She wants to shake him until something more useful comes out. Instead she stares at him with what she knows is naked horror, and they're fucked if his alternate's seen it. Even so, it takes a long moment for her to wrestle her face back under control.

Chester gives him a shake, for the look of the thing and to pull him in close again and hiss, "Then *wreck her shit*."

Something slides into her pocket.

She drops him. "Get me results, Hawthorne. I'm not feeling patient, either."

"That's about what I expected from her," mutters Hawthorne's alternate as the doors slide shut behind the captain. Hawthorne shoots a sidelong glare at where the captain's back was a moment ago.

"Let's get back to the lab," he says. "Seems the *Captain* wants results." He makes a face, one his alternate mimics, and they retreat to the lab.

His misgivings about the captain have shifted. All right, she's not working with her evil fascist self, but she is a *terrifying* actress. If she's won her alternate's trust, what's to say she's not pulling a similar act on Hawthorne himself?

She hasn't betrayed him yet, and she hasn't betrayed the *Interpreter* yet, but what's to say she won't?

"She seems like a piece of work," his alternate offers, as Hawthorne settles in to try and retrieve the data. He makes a face. Maybe he should tell his alternate. But he still doesn't fully trust the man, who is, after all, working for Admiral Murder.

Besides, his alternate already spilled everything to Hawthorne, which indicates to Hawthorne his alternate will probably tell his boss everything at the first hint of pressure. So he's keeping his mouth shut.

He distrusts Chester, that hasn't changed. He'll keep waiting to see what she's planning to do for her fascist Secret Police bosses.

But he's not going to risk handing her over to that absolute psychopath of a counterpart.

Chester is shaken as hell and she doesn't mind admitting it, at least in the privacy of her own mind.

She killed the Bedivere.

There's a lot that keeps her awake at night. There's a lot that keeps any captain awake at night, especially any captain who lived through the Dominion War. But the *Bedivere* sits right at the top of Chester's list, where she assumes and sincerely hopes it will never have any competition.

Losing a starship is one of the very worst things an officer can live through, and the *Bedivere*... the *Bedivere* died ugly.

She can still smell it. Sometimes, when she's just falling asleep, she can *feel* it again, the moment the inertial dampeners gave up the ghost and they were falling, really falling, her stomach swooping. It'll jolt her awake, sweating. At least it doesn't make her puke anymore.

She can feel her Captain's blood on her hands and her arms and blotching across her stomach. She can smell the thick iron of it and the ozone of electrical fires and the roasting meat stink of burned flesh.

The *Bedivere* died about as ugly as a crashing starship can. Most of the escape pods were rendered inoperable. Most of the rest were inaccessible due to the gash the Jem'Hadar phasers had torn through her hull. And with Captain Steenburg dead, Chester was the one to tell her crew to stay in place. That only a handful of them would be able to evacuate.

Chester hauled too many of their bodies out of the wreckage, before the Jem'Hadar reached their position.

Her alternate killed the *Bedivere*.

It's a simple statement Hawthorne made. Not much to go on. But it doesn't need to be.

Chester cannot imagine killing the *Bedivere*. A self-destruct to keep it out of enemy hands would be one thing; foolish decisions in battle another.

She remembers the Intendant's words.

Killing the *Bedivere*, she's certain, wasn't either of those two things. Killing the *Bedivere* was her alternate murdering her crew for her own personal gain, and that is something Chester knows, for all the dark places in her soul, she would never be able to do.

And that means—

—She's miscalculated.

She's been assuming her alternate is basically her—one more inclined to violence and cruelty than she herself is, but in ways easily attributable to the horrors she was raised around.

This is not correct.

Her counterpart is enough like her to be in some ways predictable. And in other ways, wildly, horrifyingly, not.

She can no longer count on being able to tell which is which, and all she can do is be glad that Hawthorne told her before she had to find it out for herself.

She draws a deep breath and squares her shoulders. This is not a time or a place to show weakness.

A hand grabs her arm and pulls her into a repair access alcove. Chester spins, ready to fight, and feels her shoulder slump with relief as she recognizes the person there. It's Tanek. It's *her* Tanek. The other one doesn't have this level of resting bitch face. "Mr. Tanek," she says. "Good to see you. Status report on the ship?"

"Repairs are progressing well," he says. "We have a prisoner—my alternate. It sounds as if he was the one behind the kidnapping of Mr. Hawthorne. He has been... surprisingly cooperative."

"Seems out of character for both of you," she says.

"He seems to have a certain regard for you."

Chester makes a face. "You could say that." She looks Tanek over; he's dressed in his alternate's form-fitting clothing. "I appreciate your

commitment to the bit, Mr. Tanek, but your alternate—”

“Is adept at projecting a friendly demeanor, which I have not the patience to mimic. I know. I assure you that I will rise to the occasion should it become necessary.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” she says. “As will my alternate. She has a tendency to decorate her walls with people who disappoint her.”

“So I have been informed. I am still determining how this reflects on you.”

“You do that.” Chester glances out of their hiding place. It’s such a relief to see him. She’s embarrassed by how much a relief it is. “I’m playing her game for now—”

“As is evident by your attire.”

“Glad you can tell. I’m playing her game for now. Hawthorne is trying, but he doesn’t trust me and he’s a dreadful liar. I need you to get all the information you can out of the computers of this beast, get Hawthorne, and get the hell out of here. I’ll figure out my own way back.”

“Leaving the Captain in enemy hands is tactically unsound.”

“Is that concern I hear in your voice, Mr. Tanek?”

“It is generally accepted that an individual is responsible for their fiancée’s wellbeing.”

Chester tilts her head at him, biting back the initial profane response. “You know, I’m not sure I can tell when you’re joking.”

He’s laughing at her, the way he really laughs, silent with the corners of his eyes crinkling up and a sly smile on his lips. On someone without his personality, it might even be attractive. She gives him an exhausted look, her annoyance ratcheting higher.

This is not the time, but she can’t resist. “Tell me,” she says, “did *you* notice Nivaan approaching?”

“Yes, and you as well. You are not as subtle as you think you are, Captain.”

“And you didn’t think to warn me to stay out of it?!”

“Allowing Nivaan to properly end our relationship was a great deal more important than protecting your fragile dignity. I actually esteem her.”

“Incredible. What the hell were you expecting me to do?”

“Respect my ability to defend myself.”

Chester turns to really stare at him now, indignant. “I had to pull a ten kilo rat off your face last week, mister. I respect nothing about you, let alone your ability to defend yourself.”

That snaps his expression right back into a glare, which is far more comfortable territory. “Very well. I will retrieve Mr. Hawthorne and the relevant data. Do not expect me to return for you; it is unlikely to be possible.”

“I wasn’t counting on it,” she says. “My alternate finds me highly distracting, and I intend to use that advantage as fully as possible.”

“Yes, as I am sure you already have.”

Dick. “As if you haven’t done worse.”

That brings him up short. Briefly, he looks angry, and then it slips out of his expression. What replaces it is his usual professional mask. “Subterfuge is seldom a dignified undertaking,” he acknowledges. “I will retrieve Mr. Hawthorne. Do attempt not to end up her latest wall decoration. It would be a disappointing end to a mediocre career.”

“Acknowledged,” she says. She frees her arm from his grasp, and steps back into the corridor. There’s an impulse to look back, but she ignores it.

He’ll do fine. He’s a big bad Tal Shiar agent, after all.

Chapter 12

Hawthorne almost misses her when she first comes in. She's a tiny little old human lady, beautifully dressed, and he's already so used to seeing the officers' bodyguards around here that he doesn't register the hulking presence of the four Vulcans with her.

He's got the tricorder with the data dump on it, and he and his alternate have just finished some, if he says so himself, very clever, careful sabotage. Hawthorne isn't a big fan of sabotage, for the obvious reason, and what little hair remains on the back of his neck has been standing to attention ever since he's started the process, but even he can recognize that there are some times when you simply have to completely wreck the engines of your local fascists.

And then the voice cuts across the room, high and sharp. "Whose station is this?"

Next to him, Hawthorne's counterpart goes very still.

"Lock down Engineering," says the voice. "Someone has been sabotaging my ship."

"Oh shit," says Hawthorne's counterpart, and there's a sudden flurry of movement. Hawthorne looks down just in time to see his counterpart slip the rest of the way into a Jeffries tube and pull the cover shut behind him. There's a lock on it, too—it blinks red as soon as it's in place. "Hey!"

Suddenly, there's a hulking Vulcan standing over him with a very functional phaser pointed at him.

And a tiny elderly human lady dressed in brilliant jewel tones peering up at him—no mean feat, given his diminutive stature—with a frown on her face. "You aren't familiar."

"Yeah," he says, well aware he sounds scared shitless. "Your Admiral there kidnapped me to help her out."

"And you sabotaged my ship instead," says the tiny old woman. "Clever. Unfortunately, I don't like *our* Hawthorne enough to be impressed. Security! Bring this man to the Admiral. Tell her that I was right, and that she might want to round up her counterpart as well."

A pair of massive security officers loom up and take Hawthorne by the elbows. It's either let them or be dragged. Resentfully, he lets them. Being annoyed in the moment is a whole lot better than being as scared as he ought to be.

"And someone scare Hawthorne out of wherever he's hiding this week and tell him he'll end up in one of my labs if he doesn't fix the damage he did in the next hour," the old woman says. "Why she keeps the backstabbing little beast around, I'll never know."

"Find her. Now."

Chester hears her alternate's voice and yanks the access hatch off the nearest Jeffries tube, climbing in and hauling it shut behind her. She's heard that edge in her own voice. She knows it's bad.

She's not going to hang around and find out *how* bad.

She killed the *Bedivere*, she reminds herself, and is glad she doesn't need to hang around and play nice.

She can only hope Tanek is making himself useful. She can only hope he's gotten Hawthorne out already.

But she can't count on that.

Sitting in the crawlspace, she realizes just how angry she is. It was not as if she was having a good week to start with. Now, this woman has barged in, helped herself to Chester's ship and her engineer, because she has the absolute unmitigated gall to think that she deserves it more than Chester herself does. A fairly routine mission has been completely upended, her ship and crew put in danger, and not for the usual reasons of Gamma Quadrant politics, or subspace anomalies, or even *Q*, but because she's just met herself and it turns out her alternate self is an even bigger raging asshole than she ever imagined. Who's decided that anything she wants she should get. And this includes *Chester's fucking ship*.

And well. Chester herself. So much for the efficacy of the oldest trick in the book.

Chester sits in the crawlspace, and lets herself get properly angry. No more artifice. No more diplomacy. It's all out in the open now, and it's time to start fighting, for real this time.

"You know what," she mutters aloud, more to relieve her own feelings than anything else, "Fuck this. Fuck you. Fuck your ship. And fuck your Empire."

She reaches up to the nearest access panel, toggles it open, and gets to work breaking everything.

Embarrassingly, that idiot Hawthorne gets himself caught about five minutes before Tanek manages to navigate the maze of service crawlspaces to reach Engineering. Equally unfortunate, though not for him, is the way he finds out; running into Hawthorne's alternate self.

The confines of the service crawlways is not conducive to having an effective fight, but it is still fairly easy to pin Hawthorne's squirming alternate up against the side of the conduit and glare at him.

"Oh," says the human. "Wrong Tanek."

"Where's your alternate?"

The small human slumps. "Dr. Zhao got him. I'm sorry if he was your friend. There was nothing I could do."

"Hm," says Tanek, instead of the fervent denial the other man was his friend he wants to voice. "So you ran away."

"I had to!"

"I am sure that makes you feel better," says Tanek. "Will you make yourself useful, or should I stun you and leave you for someone else to find?"

Hawthorne's alternate gulps. "I can...give you schematics of the service systems?"

"Do it," says Tanek. He receives the offered padd silently and looks through it. "If you have misled me, be assured I will indeed hold a grudge," he tells the small human.

If this was the Hawthorne to whom Tanek is accustomed, the comment would have earned him enraged shouting at the least and perhaps a lost finger otherwise. This Hawthorne just shrinks back, with the expression of a cornered vole. Tanek gives him a look of profound contempt, and goes on his way.

A brief study of the schematic, and he's narrowed down the best way to transport a prisoner to the bridge; he assumes that people do not spend very long in the brig here, and from what he's gleaned from his alternate, this version of the Captain likes to deal with these things personally. He hurries, and is quickly rewarded with a glance through a grating of Hawthorne getting more or less carried by several hulking security personnel, all human.

Tanek smiles a little in the privacy of the crawlspace. It is a very unpleasant smile. Then he slides carefully along to where he sees a sharp turn by the turbolifts.

The yells when he drops out on top of them are very satisfying, especially Hawthorne's yelp. He dispatches the security guards easily, not bothering to be careful—it's not as if Hawthorne is on good enough speaking terms with the Captain to tattle on him for accidentally killing one or another of these inexperienced fools. "Into the vents," he tells Hawthorne afterward. "The Captain instructed me to return you as soon as you had completed your sabotage. She is completing her own part of our mission."

"Yeah," says Hawthorne, blanched pale under his freckles. He looks ghastly, even for a human. "Problem with that. Pretty sure they're undoing our sabotage as we speak."

Tanek considers this. He looks up at the conduits. "I will admit I am disinclined to leave the Captain here unsupervised. She may do something unwise. There may be an opportunity to address all of these concerns at once."

"Yeah, but address quickly. Pretty sure someone's gonna notice when I don't show up to my execution."

"Very true," says Tanek, and lifts him bodily into the vent, ignoring the startled squawk. "Still, I believe we can find them a very great deal with which to occupy their time."

"I'm going to check on Engineering's progress," J'teris announces to the bridge, after a long time of glaring at a PADD. "Commander Salera, you have the conn."

She stalks out. The Captain is not back yet. The Captain is very good at extracting herself from circumstances much worse than an alternate universe incursion. But she should be back now.

And Tanek hasn't reported in either. She's losing people to the other side, and she does not like it. What's next, an away team? She's got the transporter settings for it, but she appreciated Tanek's argument that a single operative would be far more useful—they are unlikely to have numbers on their side, and subterfuge seemed like their best bet.

Of course, there might have been an issue in sending a Romulan to do the job, she thinks. He's a Tal Shiar agent; he's in all of this for his government, not to save anyone else's skin. Though it's a pretty safe assumption that the Romulans aren't exactly thrilled at the idea of being overrun by the mirror universe.

No, the issue is she's got no idea what's going on over there, and a very limited set of options to find out.

In the privacy of the turbolift, she makes a face. She wishes Chester were here. She's at her best working with the other woman. Chester thinks about things sideways, J'teris follows the rules. Together...

She looks up sharply as the turbolift slows and stops. That's too soon, and the doors aren't opening. She draws her phaser—she's ordered everyone to carry one—and mentally kicks herself as she taps her commbadge. *Shouldn't be letting senior officers go anywhere alone right now.* "J'teris to Security."

Dead air is the answer. Someone's jamming comms. Someone learned their lesson from jumping Tanek in one of these.

She's trapped here, which means extracting herself is the first order of business. It's trivial to access the upper hatch of the turbolift, easier still to hoist herself out. She glances around the dark shaft; the anti-collision programs on the turbolifts should keep her from being struck by another car within a five-meter radius of the disabled lift, and there's an exit hatch just above her. Grumbling a curse at herself for her stupidity, she checks the shaft again and reaches for the ladder.

Metal moves on metal. J'teris has time to turn, note that the cover of a Jeffries tube has moved, before the stun blast hits her and drops her on the top of the car.

The woman somewhat poetically known as the Admiral's Dagger, and to those more realistically inclined, J'teris, is not at all pleased by the uniform she's pulling on. It's plain and drab and stuffy and has very little armor. Being the First Admiral's personal assassin teaches one to prioritize some armor.

She expected better from her alternate, too. She takes the time to stuff the woman's unconscious body back in the Jeffries tube, reverses the sabotage to the turbolift, and slips down into it, hauling the hatch into place behind her. She has been on the ship for almost a week now. To say she is not impressed is an understatement. They're soft and careless, casual, completely without discipline.

It may be unusual for a Klingon warrior to work so avidly for a Terran, but J'teris has been a reject all her life. Her family has never cared for her; her species accords her no standing if she has no family; the Alliance uses eager young warriors whose people don't care about them as cannonfodder if they're lucky and hard labor if they're not. So when she found the vicious young Terran captain, J'teris saw opportunity. A promise of living up to her ambition instead of dying for someone else's.

And if Diane has claws like a *grishna* cat, and is about as careful with them as any other feral little animal, well. J'teris isn't from a people that value *gentleness* in their close relationships. Not here. Not anywhere.

It pleases her to succeed where Diane's new Romulan toy has failed. She looks forward to rubbing it in his face when she extracts him from the brig. He will not last long; Diane likes things that bite back, not his frantic eager acceptance, and this little debacle, him so eagerly helping his counterpart cross over, will do him no good.

She straightens the tunic and leaves it alone, allowing herself one last sneer at the soft child's uniform. This will be simple. Release Tanek from the brig, and use the remote in her pocket to trigger the final programming cascade in the impulse drive to bring them all home.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Warnings in this one for medical horror.

Chester finds the tertiary comms maintenance switchboard about an hour into her stint as a fugitive. It makes her grin, already feeling more cheerful now she's shed the stupid coat and most of the hair ornaments—most of the hair ornaments turned out to be delightfully conductive and are now aiding various little bits of sabotage throughout the ship. She's been *very* productive this afternoon.

She settles in front of it with delight, and starts fiddling. It's some guesswork but... "This is Chester. *Interpreter*, please respond. Chester to *Interpreter*."

She's not got much time until someone picks up on the transmission and realizes it's her, but at least she's got a good shot at it—thanks to the device her Hawthorne slipped under cover of her threatening him. At least he trusted her that much. It might just save their lives.

"*Interpreter here*," says a voice, and Chester frowns. That is not J'teris. "*Commander Salera speaking. Captain, what is your condition?*"

"Stable for now," says Chester. "Listen carefully. I may not have much time. The warp cores desynchronized as the result of a subspace signal, which we are trying to disable. A reboot cycle should do the trick. In the meantime, the source of that signal is a ship in the mirror universe. This ship. Be at high alert for intruders, including ones that look like senior officers."

"*Understood. We have already detained Subcommander Tanek's alternate.*"

"Well done." She settles herself better in the conduit. "I believe they intend to bring the *Interpreter* through to this universe, then use a signal to remotely take over the computers."

"*Understood. We will take precautions. Do you require assistance?*"

"Prioritize the safety of the ship," she says. "We all have more work to do over here."

"*Acknowledged.*"

"And Salera—we cannot allow the *Interpreter* to fall into enemy hands." Even just contemplating the possibility makes something lurch sickly in her chest, but her voice is rock steady. "Take the appropriate precautions, including to scuttle the ship if necessary."

There is a pause, short but significant. Before the war, Salera was an agricultural scientist. Chester isn't certain of her reasons for joining Starfleet, but even command training can't prepare you for an order like that. Not for actually following through on it.

"*Understood, sir,*" says Salera.

"Good. We'll make sure it doesn't come to that. I'll contact you again when I can. Chester out."

Under her, the ship shivers. It's minute, but it makes her smile. Most of her sabotage is timed. And most of it should start kicking in now.

"It won't come to that," she says to herself. She's done what she can. Now to make other kinds of chaos.

She slides out of the service conduit carefully and, unfortunately, backwards. The damn thing isn't designed to let you do anything else—and as her feet hit the floor, she finds out why. A weapon nudges into the small of her back.

"I knew I could find you here," says a familiar voice that does not belong here one little bit, and Chester slowly turns around to face her grandmother.

Her grandmother far more nicely dressed than she's ever seen her, surrounded by Vulcan bodyguards. She's better dressed than Chester's ever seen her in the brilliant brocades her own grandmother would only bring out for major holidays—and get smeared or rumped as soon as soon as her attention wandered and she went to go tinker with something.

There is an inimical glitter in this version of her grandmother's dark eyes, and the weapons her bodyguards are pointing at Chester look non-standard and terribly effective.

Chester slowly raises her hands. "How can I help you?" she asks, as courteous as she can, under the circumstances. One of the bodyguards performs a scan, then relieves her of her knife and phaser with a businesslike efficiency.

Grandmother snorts. "Oh, you two *are* alike, aren't you. More so than my granddaughter would like to acknowledge."

"More so than I would like to acknowledge," says Chester, very dry. "I did gather that I'd worn out my welcome."

"You sabotaged my ship, young lady." The tone makes it very clear that this version of her grandmother views that the same way as her own does. Chester wonders if she's going to survive long enough to end up on a wall somewhere.

"You sabotaged mine first, madam." Hopefully this version of her grandmother also likes clever answers as much as her own does.

She does. She smiles. “Relax,” she says, “I’m not out for revenge. Not on you, at least.”

Shit, Chester thinks. *Did Hawthorne get caught?*

“I have no family left, except my granddaughter,” Grandmother says. “You must indulge my curiosity. I have read your files,” and where the hell and how the hell she got *that*, Chester would like to know! “and it seems you are anything but the fool my granddaughter thinks you are. She has given you far too much leeway, thinking that she knows you. She thinks you’re as ambitious as she is, and as easily swayed by power.” She smiles, a little tucked-away expression. “As I taught her to be. But you’re not, are you. You have a great many things other than power you want, and like her, you will do most anything to get them.”

“Like what?” asks Chester, as evenly as she can.

“The lives of your crew.”

That hits where it hurts. Chester inclines her head. “With all respect, madam, I do not see you benefitting much from this conversation. My understanding is your granddaughter very much wants me dead.”

That tucked-away little smile again. “She is not wasteful,” she says. “Though she is very angry just now. Try not to annoy her further, and you may yet survive this. Allow me to help you.” She eyes Chester a little longer, then nods. “Yes. Walk with me.”

The bodyguards have yet to lower their weapons. This is not a request. Chester gives them all a suspicious look and then falls into step as she would with her own grandmother.

“Allow me to tell you the story that might have been yours, had you been a little unluckier,” Grandmother says. Chester looks at her all attentiveness and dutifulness, and she reaches out and thumps her forearm with a small hard hand like a gnarled treeroot. “Stop that. I know it’s an act when my own granddaughter puts it on; don’t think I can’t see through it on you. Before Spock’s idiotic reforms, our family was very powerful in the Empire. We were the Emperor’s closest ministers and advisors; every so often one of our stupider offshoots might make a general or admiral. The Emperor ruled the Terran Empire, but we *ran* it, and its might was founded on thousands of years of our service, our loyalty, and our brilliance.

“And then Spock’s reforms happened, and our enemies scented blood. One of them sold the entire Empire to the Alliance to bring us down. I should have died then with your great grandparents, but the head of that family—our Emperor has stripped their name from history—decided her revenge would be far more complete if she took their heir and made me hers, raised me as a traitor to the Empire and to my own species.”

Her mouth twists bitterly. “And as I was a small child, for a while, she was successful. I was safe, I was cared for, I had the best education available to a Terran, I was a renowned scientist, and I had nothing of myself. But political currents shift. I was betrayed. The ones who stole me did not lift a finger, and your mother and I were sent to Terok Nor.

“I had thirty years of sorrow before the rebellion began, before my granddaughter rose to reclaim her birthright at the right hand of the Emperor. We have what was always meant to be ours. And we will not be surrendering it again.” Her sharp dark eyes turn to Chester. “This could have been you,” she says. “You’ve had a comfortable life, unlike us, but do not think that the Alliance will forget who helped secure our victory.”

Oh no, thinks Chester. *What did Quark and Rom do when they were over here?!*

“You will either deal with us, or you will deal with them, and they will never accord a Terran the slightest shred of respect. Your Federation is soft and comfortable, and it will have no chance at all before them.”

“If that’s the case,” says Chester, as blandly as she can, “then why do you and the Admiral want my ship so very badly?”

This time, the blow from Grandmother’s small gnarled hand *hurts*.

“That was a stupid question,” says Grandmother. “And you knew it.”

Chester just ducks her head. She suspects this means it *wasn’t* a stupid question.

“Do not be so stupid,” says Grandmother. “My granddaughter is not wasteful, but she will not hesitate to dispose of you if you’re too much trouble.”

“Doctor,” says someone, hurrying up, and Grandmother pauses to look at him, a young human man, lanky, dark-haired, and quite handsome, clutching a datapad and wearing a labcoat, “We have the results from the latest trials, would you like to see examine the results?”

Grandmother darts a narrow look at Chester. “Yes,” she says, after some thought. “Yes I would. Come along. This will be good for you.”

Somehow, Chester doubts that, too. She glances at the bodyguards. Unfortunately, she’s not going to have a choice here.

“I fell behind in my time in exile,” Grandmother is saying as they follow the young man down the corridor. “But I’m finally regaining my touch. The plentiful resources the Emperor gives my work certainly helps.”

They reach a door, and Chester with a lurch recognizes a biohazard symbol by the control panel. One of the bodyguards keys in a sequence, then stands aside as the doors slide open. “Don’t worry,” Grandmother says. “It’s all safe for humans. I made very, very sure of that.”

Worse and worse. They pass through several labs, filled with innocuous equipment, then down a corridor to a doubled pair of doors. Here, Grandmother pauses to don a lab coat of her own, carefully buttoning it up, and gloves. Then they enter the room. The smell hits first, old blood and something faintly sulfurous, enough like cheese and broccoli soup to be nauseating, disinfectants and preservatives. Chester has to gulp back nausea as she realizes the source.

It's a morgue. That may be giving it far too much dignity. It's a horrorshow. There are corpses on the gurneys. They appear to all be Cardassian, but Chester will admit to some guesswork there, because they're missing certain things that would make identifying their species easier. Like large patches of skin.

"We have the results from the chemical test and the pathogen test today," the young man announces proudly. "The tweak to the surface preference for the necrotizing fasciitis was successful in aerosolizing it—that one infected the rest of its test group before succumbing." This with a gesture to one of the Cardassian bodies, one missing half a face. Chester can see bone in the bloody horror left behind. "We're waiting on fatality rates there and should know in the next twenty-six hours. I'm anticipating 95% to 100%, however."

Grandmother relieves one of the bustling lab techs of a probe and goes to look herself. Chester stays back, feeling her hands go clammy with sweat.

"What's the incubation period? Any asymptomatic transmission?"

The eager young man deflates. "That's the problem," he says, as Grandmother delicately lifts what remains of the man's lip to examine the inside of his mouth. "No asymptomatic transmission, and the incubation period is short."

"Keep working," says Grandmother, now opening the corpse's mouth. There is a dark hole where the hard palate should be. Chester looks away, but finds the chemical test group instead. She drops her eyes to the incongruously clean floor. Unfortunately, not looking doesn't do anything about the smell. "We want them to bring it back home, after all."

Grandmama back home is a warp systems engineer. She has little patience for fools, a streak of efficient ruthlessness just like the one Chester knows she herself possesses, but nothing, *nothing* like this.

Chester is not too proud to admit that this scares the shit out of her, has thrown her in a way she can't hide or recover from. Facing her own counterpart was far better. She *knows* that she's an asshole, and it's not unsettling to see that reflected back at her—the shock there is just an issue of magnitude.

This woman, who acts so very much like her own grandmother in so many ways, carrying out horrific experiments on prisoners with the intent of unleashing bioweapons on a civilian populace, with the same pleasant lecturing demeanor with her coconspirators that Chester's own grandmother has toward the small army of hopeful postdocs that trail after her at the Academy—*this* skates very close to being more than she can handle.

She's not even sure there's a way *to* handle this.

Please take me out of here, Doctor, and let me go get nicely tortured to death by my alternate; it'll be a lot less upsetting.

She clears her throat. She doesn't mind that this is going to sound more like a scared kid than a starship captain. "You're *very* sure that won't infect humans?"

"Oh absolutely," says Grandmother. "The bacteria find certain of the enzymes we produce completely toxic. Don't worry, I tested it very thoroughly."

Chester wonders how much of that testing took place on the remaining family of the woman who had 'adopted' her.

"In any case, all the biological materials from the housing facility are sterilized before they're brought here. Useful settings on the transporter." She looks up, sees Chester. "Oh dear, you've turned green, haven't you. Don't worry, my granddaughter is just as squeamish; it was probably too much to hope for that you'd be much better. Sotek, T'Rall, take her out of here and get her something to drink. You'll feel better for that."

What would make Chester feel better would be pulling the pins on a string of plasma grenades and closing the door on grenades, corpses and doctors alike, but getting out of here will have to do. She nods, shakily, and lets herself be led out of the room.

Chester is so shaken, in fact, it takes a moment for her to realize the identity of one of the two bodyguards who's escorted her out. And she should have, much earlier. Sotek has only been one of her best friends since the Academy.

But there's something rigid and closed down behind his eyes, in a way nothing like Sotek's Vulcan discipline, and the long, jagged scar that bisects his face distorts his mouth on one side in a constant sneer. His presence by her shoulder is nothing like that of her friend.

She knows it's hopeless, and part of her doesn't even want to try, because she *knows* it's just setting herself up for more horror. "Sotek?" she says. "We're friends, back home."

Sotek dips his head to look down at her. Gone is his owlish demeanor—unless it's the last glimpse of an owl a small rodent gets before talons break its back. "That is not the case here."

Chester is too deflated to argue with him. "Pity," she mutters, and leans her head back against the wall. It's very obviously the lab break room. There's the Earth with a dagger through it on one wall, huge and garish, a replicator with dishes scattered around it, what appears to be a plush of a tribble with fangs, and a calendar entitled *Hello From Risa!!*, though this version has a lot more chains than most of the tasteless pinup calendars Chester's seen. She stares blankly at the unnatural endowments of the array of different genders on this month's page, and reflects that the dashes of personality do a lot more to make her feel a *lot* worse about the whole thing.

She thought that finding out about her alternate's murder of her entire crew aboard the *Bedivere* would be the low point of her day. Boy, was she wrong.

Her glass of water sits untouched, and her guards stand unmoving over here, and she swallows a few more times, willing back the nausea. If she's going to vomit, she reflects vindictively, she's aiming for Sotek's boots.

Grandmother's alternate bustles in, without lab coat or gloves, and goes to wash her hands, giving the fanged tribble a pat as she finishes. "You'll be pleased to know we've got a way around the asymptomatic transmission issue," she says cheerily.

I'm really not, Chester thinks. She really needs to get past this and start planning a way to burn the whole place down on her way out, but right now she would really like to spend a few more hours staring in blank horror.

Grandmother's alternate's comm chirps. She taps it. "Yes?"

"*Grandmama, stop playing with your food,*" says the Admiral's voice, with the same fond exasperation Chester's heard in her own when her grandmother was destroying an oven or fussing over a new recipe. "*Bring the Captain to the bridge; we're almost ready.*"

Chester is not looking forward to finding out what, exactly, her alternate is ready *for*. She stands, eyeing the door. Maybe if she bolts, she'll surprise them.

Sotek's hand clamps down on her shoulder, T'Rall's on the other side. Chester slumps. Apparently not.

"I think you'll find this impressive," Grandmother says. "Don't worry. You're of a lot more use alive, and I'll suggest she not kill you." She pauses, gives Chester a sidelong glance that's deeply critical and the most honest thing Chester thinks she's had from this woman in any interaction this afternoon. "At least not yet."

Chapter 14

“You know, I expected this of you,” says her alternate, as Chester is herded onto the Bridge. “But I expected you to be a little better at it.”

“I’m very sorry to disappoint,” says Chester, and means it. She looks around. No sign of Hawthorne, which is a good sign, and no sign of Tanek or J’etris. She hopes that’s good as well.

The fewer of them in range of her alternate’s rage, the better. She at least has a hope of weathering it.

Her alternate stalks up to her, slow and predatory. Her face is calm, and there is a coldness behind her eyes that Chester knows far too well. She’s seen it a handful of times in her own. It is merciless, a deliberate not-caring that’s the herald of the worst of what she can be. “I had hoped for someone extraordinary. An equal match at the very least.” She stops, laughs a little. It’s a profoundly condescending sound. “You are a sadly predictable disappointment.”

Chester tips her head in mock apology. Tanek and Hawthorne are still loose, or even better, back on the ship with the full contents of this ship’s computers in hand. After doing an unknown amount of damage, too.

And then there’s her own handiwork. She’s pretty sure they couldn’t have found all of it yet. If Tanek is still hanging around, things are about to get a lot worse.

The idea of a Tal Shiar agent in the Jeffries tubes is a remarkably comforting one. It would not be under any other circumstances, she thinks, and finds herself suppressing a smile. “How are the repairs going, then?”

Her alternate gives her a look of contempt. “Almost completed, though I do not need this ship fully functional to get what I want.”

“You don’t, do you? And how exactly were you planning on doing that?” Chester asks. Her counterpart glares at her.

“Oh come on,” she says, trying a smile; it only makes the other woman angrier. “It’s not like I can do anything about it from here.”

“Maybe I should kill you right here,” says her counterpart. “After all, you’ve made it perfectly clear you intend to continue to be an impediment. And I have no patience for any of your...distractions.”

“Your loss,” says Chester, with a cheerful smile. Her counterpart keeps looking at her, a terrible coldness in her eyes that she knows damn well should scare her. But she’s too busy to be scared. “You’ll never actually find out what I did to your ship if you kill me, though. Some of the delays I programmed in?” She shakes her head. “Months. Good luck. It’ll give you an idea of what it’s like handling the *Interpreter* without our help.”

Her counterpart snorts. “At this point, it’s clear to me that you will say anything at all to keep yourself alive a few minutes longer.”

At that moment, the whole ship shudders. The lights flicker and go down, leaving them in complete darkness.

Chester waits a beat, then chuckles as unsettlingly as she can. “Looks like your engineers didn’t get *that* one,” she says. “Want to take bets on what *else* they missed?”

“Sir? Sir!”

J’etris wakes up in a Jeffries tube with Ensign Nask leaning over her and starts moving before her jumbled memories align. The fuzzy letters on the access hatch behind her are for a turbolift shaft. “What happened?”

“We’ve been looking for you,” says Nask. “You said you were headed to Engineering, but you never arrived. And then—”

The ship shakes, slamming them up against the wall. J’etris braces herself. It’s not like anything she’s felt the *Interpreter* do.

“We’ve lost helm control and internal comms,” Nask says. “Someone’s engaged some kind of override.”

J’etris looks down at herself. There is a conspicuous lack of uniform. “Someone who looks a lot like me,” she says. “Any idea how hard it’ll be to get comms up again? Even a little bit?”

Nask hesitates. Another shudder thumps their shoulders against the wall.

“Couldn’t say, sir,” she says. “I’d need a look at it first. Nearest comms panel is that way.”

“Let’s go. I’ll need an access hatch,” says J’etris. “I’ll try to get up to the Bridge, see what I can do there.” She is for a moment glad of the relatively dignified nature of standard issue underwear. “Soon as you have comms up, warn them we’ve got an impostor. She’ll look like me and chances are, she’s got my uniform.”

“Yes sir,” says Nask, and slides along behind her. “You know, I thought I’d left this kind of thing behind in the Resistance.”

J’etris snorts. “Being posted to one of the Federation’s state of the art new warships? What reason would you have to think that, Ensign?”

Nask giggles, a small cheerful sound at odds with her general demeanor. “Well, sir, let me just note I appreciate the opportunity. Look out for the vole droppings.”

J'tris wonders for a moment if the mirror universe would be so intent on stealing the *Interpreter* if they knew what state it was in. "Updates on warp capability?"

"Commander Salera and our team has figured out how to block the subspace signal and reboot the cores," says Nask. "Should be up in fifteen minutes, give or take five. Other systems may take longer."

"About time for some good news." J'tris finds the access hatch and pauses by it, reading the deck and section. "All right, Ensign. Let's give them hell."

"Yes, sir," says Nask, and J'tris slides out and into the hallway. Three levels up to the Bridge.

It's also senior officer quarters. She hesitates a moment, then turns and keys open her quarters. Better to be armed, just in case.

A few moments later, mek'leth in hand, she heads for the turbolift.

As a general rule of thumb, most people do not expect a senior officer to appear on the Bridge in underwear, brandishing a sword. The moment of absolute stunned silence that greets J'tris is probably what saves her, because in the next moment, all attention is turning to the identical woman sitting in the command chair, wearing her uniform.

"Arrest her," says J'tris. "She's an impostor."

Her alternate almost denies it, almost accuses her of being the impostor, then visibly thinks better of it. No actual impostor is going to show up on the Bridge in her underwear.

Instead, her counterpart takes several steps back. "Whatever you think you're doing," she says, "You're making a mistake." She reaches into her uniform sleeve and pulls out a device, activating it.

Absolutely nothing happens.

J'tris has the surreal experience of seeing herself look utterly bewildered. Her alternate presses the button again, and again, there's a complete lack of result.

With a snarl, she tosses the device aside and lunges for J'tris herself.

Which means turning her back on Fult.

The stun beam catches her between the shoulders before she can get three paces and drops her on the deck. "Belay whatever she just told you," J'tris announces to the world in general. Another shudder from the ship almost knocks her off her feet. "Status report?"

"We've got an anomaly in the deflector array," says Lieutenant Kotan from the helm. His hands fly over his console. "She ordered it powered up as soon as we got the starboard warp core online."

The *Interpreter* bucks violently, and J'tris has to steady herself against the tactical arch as she makes her way down to the center seat.

"I believe I know what is happening," says Salera. "As I reported to the impostor when she relieved me, the Captain made contact a few hours ago. Our opponents seek to draw us into the mirror universe and there stage a remote takeover of the ship. The Captain requested precautions be taken, including preparations to destroy the ship rather than allow capture."

Orders that she probably wouldn't have even needed to give J'tris, they would have been enough in alignment. The frustration of allowing herself to get jumped in a turbolift makes J'tris bare her teeth. "Did you take countermeasures to a remote takeover?"

"Yes," says Fult. "Incoming transmissions are buffered from the computer core until they can be manually checked. But we have no way of knowing how long your counterpart was aboard or whether she or one of our other infiltrators has already installed a device that can link the ships regardless of these precautions. And Subcommander Tanek's duplicate has escaped custody.."

"Are our internal scanners still functional?" asks J'tris.

"Yes," says Fult, "but unlikely to be accurate. I suspect that all our intruders have been using some outgrowth of Klingon cloaking technology to mask their life signs. I have security teams doing sweeps of the ship, but frankly sir, it's very likely to be even less effective against Tanek than it is about the voles. There's a lot of empty space on this ship."

The ship shudders again. "And we're about to have much bigger problems," says J'tris grimly, and settles firmly into her seat. "At least they're taking us where we want to go. Lieutenant Kotan, have we got weapons?"

Kotan tries, but he shakes his head. "No. No sir. They're still rebooting."

"Dammit," says J'tris. "Fult, will a remote takeover of a starship work if that starship is dead in space?"

There's a significant pause over her shoulder. She looks up. Fult is staring down at her with an expression that suggests she's more of an idiot than usual. "It will," she says. "But that doesn't make it a good idea."

"Let's keep that under consideration," says J'tris. "For now, I want to come in firing. Concentrate on getting weapons systems online, shields too. Have we got comms yet?"

“Coming up now,” says Lieutenant Iverat. The Horta’s synthesized voice sounds particularly cheerful even for her. “Intruder alert for Tanek’s double,” says J’etris. “Then get me Engineering. We have some preparations to make.” The ship shudders again, and she grins. “Let’s make them *really* regret inviting us over...” She pauses, looks them over. “And let’s go get the Captain.”

Crouched in a crawlspace most definitely too small for him, hoping his alternate’s signal dampener is covering both their life signs and not just his, and with Hawthorne leaning over his shoulder, trying to peer past him at the tiny video feed on his padd that they’ve hooked into the enemy Bridge security monitors, Tanek keeps seeing the fanatic faith in his alternate’s eyes, when he spoke of his loyalty to this Admiral. It was disturbing; for his part, he believes that his ability to believe in anything, much less *anyone*, has been irredeemably compromised. Nevertheless, he’s been on his guard, in case this Admiral is in fact as enchanting as his alternate seems to believe.

Now Tanek is seeing the woman in question, and he is most certainly not impressed. What is sitting in the command chair is most certainly not a conquering queen, but stubborn, resentful, and petty. Brutality makes up for none of those things, though from what he’s seen of the ship, she seems to think the ample quantity of that brutality might count for something. Tanek fails to find this convincing.

The Captain, fool though she is, makes a much more inspiring picture as she glowers at the guards around her. However, his opinion may be influenced by the damage he has noticed during the time he’s spent in the ship’s systems. It was all done rather hastily, but it showed a becoming competence that he is pleasantly surprised by. It has been a long time since he was last pleasantly surprised. So much so, in fact, that he added a few little flourishes of his own.

This ship will *not* be going anywhere. Nor will it be firing any weapons. Tanek is looking forward to the results of the first shot with the open glee of a child at a military parade.

Then the power goes down.

“Was that one of ours?” Hawthorne whispers. “I don’t remember doing that.”

“I believe it very likely it was the Captain,” says Tanek. “Though I provided some assistance, of course.”

“Of course,” deadpans Hawthorne. He shifts his weight uncomfortably—humans, Tanek is realizing, need to move around a lot—and adds, “Shouldn’t we be doing something?”

“I do not think the outage will be long enough to be useful to us,” says Tanek, and glances at the padd again, though it isn’t much good. “We will emerge in a relatively unoccupied part of the enemy Bridge, and should power be restored too quickly, we will simply provide the enemy with further hostages.”

There is muffled shouting outside their hiding spot, the Admiral berating her subordinates. “I really hate that woman,” mutters Hawthorne.

“That much is evident.”

A few moments more, and power comes back just as Tanek suspected. He allows himself to feel briefly smug about this before turning his attention back to the security feed.

The Captain is not where she is supposed to be. She has eluded the attention of her guards and has armed herself from one of the melodramatic displays of weaponry with what appears to be an archaic Earth sword. She is also, as far as he can tell from the low quality image, smiling.

“Are you kidding me right now,” mutters Hawthorne.

Chapter 15

Eluding a bunch of Vulcans in the dark isn't for the faint-hearted. Chester manages it by stamping on the nearest convenient foot and lunging in the opposite direction while the other three turn on the darkness where an attacker logically should be. She blunders as quietly as she can until her hands hit the hard edge of one of the consoles against the wall. Time to turn her alternate's awful taste in interior decor against her. There's a sword here somewhere. The trick will be not getting her fingers cut off in the process.

Or getting grabbed, but by the sounds of it, a few other security personnel have joined in the fight and no one's noticed she's not actually there anymore. Her hand bumps something rounded and metal.

The lights come back up, and Chester recognized the hilt under her hand—something damn near a museum piece, an old Earth design of rapier a lot like her usual preference. She guesses it's there because it so resembles that of her alternate. She pushes herself up on the console with a foot and closes her hand around the blade, using her body weight to rip it free of the wall as she leaps down, slashing back at the sense of movement she gets from behind her.

The blade is just as sharp as she hoped, and one of her erstwhile guards doubles over with a cry. She backs against the console and takes stock of her situation.

There's a tangle of guards in the corner sorting themselves out—a lot of bruised faces and broken noses, and someone isn't getting back up at all. There's the dying bodyguard at her feet, her alternate drawing her sword, pushing her grandmother behind her, and a lot of disruptors aimed at her.

Something, something, sword to a phaser fight, thinks Chester, resigned. She'll need to bluff her way through or end up dead.

Or surrender, and end up dead eventually. It's the *eventually* that actually worries her.

Her alternate raises a hand, forestalling the barrels of weapons that have leveled on Chester. It earns an approving look from Grandmother. Chester *really* doesn't like the idea that the woman wants her alive. It's unlikely to be for any good reason. She levels her sword at her alternate.

A shudder runs through the fabric of the ship, and she presses a hand against the console behind her to steady herself. "It's working!" someone shouts, excited. Chester looks at the viewscreen, where space is writhing and distorting.

And between one moment and another, the *Interpreter* appears.

"Right on time," says her alternate, turning to look at it. "I don't have time for this anymore. Kill her."

Fuck. There's nothing she can do, but she lunges for her alternate anyway, more of a show of defiance before the massed phaser fire kills her—and then nothing happens. Her alternate realizes at the last moment, pulls her dagger and parries Chester's blow at the last moment and they stare at each other wide-eyed for a moment.

Chester recovers herself first. "I didn't just make the lights go out," she says, which is true, but whatever's dampened energy weapons certainly wasn't one of her tricks. "You still sure you want to pick this fight with a sabotaged ship?"

Her alternate snarls and draws her sword. Chester has to sidestep to avoid being eviscerated. "Get a tractor beam on that ship, and reactivate the dampening field. We'll do this the old fashioned way with the *shuttles* if we have to!"

The *Interpreter* lurches as she's snagged with the tractor beam, and all her lights go out in a long wave. Chester's mouth goes dry. She's distracting the Admiral again—but is it really doing any good?

Hang on, J'etris, Salera, she thinks. *I'll get you as much time as I can.*

J'etris stays in the center seat by sheer force of will as the Bridge goes dark. "Status report!"

"So far we're still in control of ship's systems," says Fult. "The subspace jamming is doing the trick. But they've got some sort of dampening field, similar to what they used to disable the warp drive. We're down to emergency power and that's going to go fast."

J'etris grits her teeth. "Reroute power from all nonessential systems to life support and shields. Fult, remember how we talked about playing dead?" She draws in a breath, resenting it. She's not a very good Klingon at the best of times, but this still galls her. "It's time to play dead. And to prepare for boarding parties."

At least they have the advantage of the terrain.

"Wait, sir," says Lieutenant Kotan at the helm. "I have an idea. Remember how that malfunction in the phaser conduits last week caused the helm to stop answering commands from the main computer? What if we recreated that? That way, even if they take the ship, they're not going to be able to take it anywhere."

"Engineering," says J'etris, "are you getting this? Will it work?"

"It should work!" says Ensign Nask, before anyone else can get a word in edgewise. *"It'll take out phasers, too."*

J'etris feels herself start to smile. "All right. Fult, I seem to recall the intruder defense systems going offline a bit ago. Think we can recreate that, too?"

Fult says nothing, just starts working with a jerking nod. J'etris settles into the center chair more firmly, raking her memory for all the worst malfunctions the *Interpreter* has produced in the last six weeks. The enemy wants their ship? Well, they'd better be prepared for the *real* ship, not the one in the Starfleet schematics, or the recruitment pamphlets. They'd better be prepared for the malfunctions, the voles, and the endless game of 'what the hell's going to break this time'.

"Get my ship working," snarls the Admiral at the Bridge in general, slashing at Chester, who steps out of the way again with a smile, "or *die*."

"Such an inspiration to your crew," says Chester, and parries the next lunge. "You know, threats of murder do not effective leadership make."

"I," spits her alternate, "am going to take you to *pieces*, Captain. *Slowly*."

"I wish you luck," Chester says, flicking her blade away again. She doesn't bother following that with a full lunge. "I believe you may need it."

She's being enraging on purpose, fencing like an instructor teaching someone how to get past a guard, and it's dangerous. But the angrier her opponent is, the more distracted she will be. The more likely she'll be to make mistakes, here, or when dealing with the *Interpreter*.

"I said," snarls her alternate, "get me that *ship!*"

"We can't! There's cascading malfunctions in the ship's system and it's locking us out faster than we can counter them," The frantic technician looks up at them. "I've never seen so many errors! Systems are going offline, parts of the main computer are refusing to talk to each other. Sir, I don't think this is an intruder defense mechanism, I think these are genuine malfunctions. That thing's too *broken* to take over!"

"I thought you said you didn't need a working ship to carry out your plans, Admiral," says Chester, cheerfully taunting. "I did warn you, the *Interpreter* is a little temperamental. What a pity you didn't give me a good reason to help you."

"Damn you!" Her counterpart lunges forward again.

"What the hell did you bastards do to 'Pret?'" moans Hawthorne, but he does it quietly.

"Evidently, what was necessary," says Tanek, who has no patience for human histrionics just now. "Not that it seems to have needed help."

"The malfunctions," says Hawthorne, in a voice very near despair. "They're breaking all the shit we spent the last six weeks *fixing*. Poor 'Pret."

Chester disengages and comes in on the inside line with a fast thrust. Her alternate's blade shifts in a parry, flicks out of the way and Chester steps back.

"Capture that ship or destroy it!" her alternate yells. "If you can't get into the systems, force a surrender the old fashioned way!"

The officer at tactical scrambles to obey. Chester's attention momentarily goes to him, and she almost loses her other eye for her troubles, getting her blade up just in time. She hopes J'etris managed to get shields working again, and the sound of the weapons console beeping acknowledgement is like a punch in the gut.

The ship bucks under her feet, throwing her against a wall. She hits, slides down, hears her alternate cursing. Power goes down again, flickers back on in emergency lighting to the tune of screaming alarms.

All right, thinks Chester. I know I didn't do that.

"What the *hell* did you do to my ship?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," says Chester. She grins in the dimness, and has to scabble to her feet as her alternate throws herself at her, only just ducking as her opponent's blade draws sparks down the side of the bulkhead. More alarms add their voices to the chorus. If the alarms here are anything like the ones at home, that sounds like the warp core's compromised, impulse is going down, and a dozen things are overheating. "Sir," someone's yelling, "we've lost forward phasers, coolant leaks on decks twelve and thirteen and the weapons room is filling with corrosive gas!"

"Well, there you go," says Chester, more than a little meanly. "You know, Admiral, I'm perfectly happy to accept your unconditional surrender."

The ship shudders again. Chester drives her alternate back. They're both good. Her alternate has clearly fought other people, just as Chester has. There were a few battles during the war when she fought with what she had to hand, and that just happened to be her sword. And she's in the top tenth percentile of competitive historical martial arts practitioners in the Federation, and there she has remained.

Her alternate's toyed with amateurs, taking them to bits piece by piece—that bit of handiwork on the wall behind her was very likely the product of a fight like this. And she's fought people who knew what they were doing, with a wide variety of weapons. She's only just realizing that Chester's slipshod form and shortcuts aren't a product of inexperience; it's just that Chester's never fought with fairness or elegance in her *life*. With her ship in the balance, she will not be starting now.

That goes for both of them.

But there's one other thing, one mistake her alternate's made, and that's her choice of hilt.

Chester doesn't use a rapier like this, either. Hers is a cup hilt, a cast-metal seashell that covers her hand. Her counterpart favors a swept hilt,

an elegant lattice of metal protecting her hand.

But not enough. On most swept hilts, there is a ring at the base of the blade, small, but not small enough to exclude the point of a sword. Many competitors in Chester's circles cover it with a sewn piece of boiled leather; she can tell her counterpart's never fought anyone seriously, at least, not someone with a rapier, because she hasn't.

So Chester goes in for the lunge, and aims for the center of the ring. It's called *hand sniping*, and back home, she has rather a reputation for it. It's all perfectly legal, of course, but no one likes it.

Her blade slips in, stripping a line of leather away from skin from forefinger to arm, but there is no blood. Instead, as the glove falls open, she sees something that actually makes her pause.

It's metal and dead white flesh, dull and flat and horribly familiar.

It looks like Borg. It looks like her alternate has Borg implants under there. Chester looks up in horror at her alternate's rage-filled eyes and says, "You complete fucking idiot."

Then she drives a powerful backhand blow that has nothing to do with actual historical fencing at the other woman's face and retreats. Her counterpart comes after her with a snarl, and she has her hands full repelling a very angry and very technically accomplished opponent—but she too is good, she's good at this, and it's such a relief to find at least one thing in which she can hold her own. They fight up and down the edge of the bridge, across in front of the chairs for the senior officers; so far the only injury is her alternate's glove. Chester is going to have to find a way to break the stalemate and soon.

With a snarl, her alternate switches hands, shaking off the tattered glove. Now, Chester can see her hand is withered and distorted around the implants, like melting wax. Burns, and severe ones. "You thought you could fuck around with the Borg?" she demands. "I thought you were supposed to be smart!"

"This was a gift from the Emperor!" shouts her alternate, and rains blows down at her head that have no style at all; Chester counters them, and while her opponent's sword is raised, kicks her hard in the belly, sending her staggering back.

"Then your Emperor is a fucking idiot!" she shouts. Her alternate comes back at her like a springball, and she pivots and sticks out a foot. The Admiral goes flying, pops back to her feet. "You do NOT fuck around with the Borg!"

"The Emperor gave me back my hands!"

"The Emperor left you wide open to the Borg Queen!" Chester parries the increasingly wild blows with a sort of distant satisfaction. She wasn't exactly aiming to make her alternate stupidly furious, but she'll take what she can get. "Or, if you're incredibly lucky, wide open to becoming the Emperor's puppet. You're *fucked*, Chester."

Now it's her turn to be technically correct, elegant, while her alternate fights dirty. She grins into the other woman's face as they close again. "You know, I almost bought your act, Admiral. I almost believed you were better, smarter, more accomplished than I am. But if there's one thing I know about myself," she twists, catching the Admiral's sword on the quillions of her own with a twist and yanking her in close, "it's that I can be a *real* idiot sometimes. Good to know you're the same."

The Admiral headbutts her, sending them both reeling out of measure. Chester staggers, her ears ringing, and steadies herself against a console.

"Admiral!" calls one of the technicians. "I've got it! We're in their systems; the remote worm is transferring control now!"

The rage in her alternate's eyes ebbs, and she begins to smile. "Nice try, Captain." She raises her sword to Chester's neck; Chester counters, leveling her own at the Admiral. "Your ship is about to become mine. I would think very carefully about my next actions, if I were you."

Chester looks around the Bridge for a way out, seeing none. Her eyes go to the viewscreen, where the *Interpreter* hangs. Home, and her crew; her bleak barren quarters and the uncomfortable air of a briefing filled with strangers, and the idea of losing either fills her with a despairing rage. "And yet," she says, her sword still steady, "I have a blade at your throat, Admiral."

The malfunctions have only bought them so much time, systems redundancies and the ship's own automated repair programs now working against them. The enemy virus is on the move again. Hawthorne's done his job far too well.

"Slow them down," says J'etris, working frantically at an Engineering console shoulder-to-shoulder with one of the ensigns. Self-destruct is now out of the question. At the rate the virus is progressing, it'll cut their command access long before the sequence is complete.

"We have to do something," hisses Hawthorne. He worms his way down the Jeffries tube, looking for an access panel. Tanek catches him by the collar of his uniform and holds him back. "If you stray more than two meters from me, the sensor dampner will no longer function, and you will get us caught."

"We have to *do something*," Hawthorne snarls. "That's *my ship* over there."

"And we will," says Tanek. He drags Hawthorne toward him. "But it is clear that Starfleet ingenuity will not save the day today. It is time for a different approach."

"Hey—hey! What the *fuck* are you doing?"

"Bringing the Admiral a fugitive," says Tanek, "like the good, devoted servant I am."

The sneer in his voice on the last sentence is not nearly as reassuring as he probably thinks it is. “Tanek,” says Hawthorne. “Tanek, I’m not exactly the best actor.”

“You won’t need to be,” says Tanek, and kicks open the Jeffries tube, dragging them into the middle of the attention of an astonished Bridge.

“I have found the saboteur,” Tanek tells the Bridge, hauling a disheveled Hawthorne by the scruff of the neck like an indignant kitten. Chester has a moment of lurching uncertainty about which Tanek she’s looking at. The obsequious, almost pleading look he casts at her alternate is alarmingly true to life. It’s the look of a dog begging for scraps.

But she knows that the alternate Tanek can’t be here. She told this Tanek to find Hawthorne and escape. Evidently, they have been unable to do that—but that explains the sabotage, the systems failing that Chester knows she didn’t access.

Hawthorne struggles, for the look of the thing because there’s no way in hell he’s getting away from Tanek but to his shock Tanek lets himself be thrown off balance, lurching them both toward the tactical arch at the back of the Bridge. Hawthorne lands splayed against it, and Tanek bounces off it to turn and deck the officer manipulating the connection to *Interpreter*.

To his credit, Piper only needs a glance at the console before he’s working, his fingers flying over the surface. Tanek takes up a position at his back, batting aside one of the black-clad officers like it’s no effort at all.

The Admiral is for once completely lost for words. It takes her a long moment to put two and two together, and she glances at Chester with a startled, shocked outrage in her face.

“Yes, that would be my Tanek,” says Chester, and grins. “How’s it feel being on the other side of that little trick for once?”

“Kill them!” shouts her alternate. “And as for you, Captain—” She slashes against Chester’s sword, slapping it out of line and moving in. Chester parries, taking a step back and away.

“I’ve almost broken their link to our systems, Captain!” yells Hawthorne from Tactical, and ducks as someone slashes at him. That someone meets a sudden and conclusive end at Tanek’s hands a moment later; somehow the man’s gotten hold of a knife. It’s a slightly alarming sight, and Chester is briefly very glad to have him on her side.

But she’s got problems of her own.

Her alternate presses her attack, face a mask of rage. She clearly thinks that killing Chester will solve her problem, collapse Hawthorne and Tanek’s resistance. Chester, already tired, finds herself fighting for her life, and her alternate is driving her slowly down toward the command chairs and the center of the Bridge, and if her grandmother’s isn’t waiting there with a knife to finish the job, Chester is very, very wrong in her assessment of both versions of her grandmother. She pivots to put her back to the wall.

Her best hope is to make her alternate even angrier. Make her make stupid mistakes.

“You’ve talked a lot about how we’re different. The only real difference between us,” she says, “is that you’re a hell of a lot more interested in your own survival.”

“You don’t get to call me a coward and *live!*” howls her counterpart, and charges.

Chester sidesteps, pivots again, and brings her pommel down hard on the back of her alternate’s head. The First Admiral of the Terran Empire goes down flat. “Hawthorne!” yells Chester, “Get us a channel to the Interpreter. Tell them to beam us back, then get the hell out of here!”

“On it!” says Hawthorne. “Channel open!”

“*Interpreter*, this is Chester! J’etris, there’s three of us to beam out. Please tell me the damn systems are working!”

“*Barely!*” There’s a tight note in J’etris’s voice. “*Going to need to know it’s really you, Diane!*”

“I want a rematch for that rapier vs bat’leth fight we did because you *definitely* cheated!”

“*One pickup as ordered. We’ve got some guests we need to send back, too.*”

“Proceed!” Chester lurches over to Tanek and Hawthorne. A moment later, the blue of the *Interpreter*’s transporters whisks them away. Chester doesn’t get a last glimpse of her grandmother’s double, and she’s glad of it.

The transporter room of the *Interpreter* has never been a more welcome sight. Chester sags a little as soon as it registers.

Tanek is looking at the sword in her hand. “I wasn’t aware Starfleet was in the habit of taking trophies,” he says.

Chester lifts the sword, examines it. “It’s a shoddy bit of work anyway,” she says, then shrugs. “If she didn’t want me to take it, she shouldn’t have cornered me.”

Then she taps her commbadge. “Chester to Bridge, get us out of here!”

The ship bucks, throwing her against the transporter console. Hawthorne almost goes flying; Tanek stays right where he is with insulting ease. “*Working on it!*” says J’etris.

Chester heads for the Bridge, sword still in hand and very, very glad to be back aboard.

“It is so nice to be on a bridge without any disembowelled corpses on the walls,” she tells J’etris once she arrives.

“That’s strangely specific.”

“What’s the situation?”

“We’re outrunning them. Warp cores are functional and operating normally, so we’ve got some lead. We’re working on recreating the modifications to the deflector dish in hopes of replicating the transition between universes; estimated time to completion is fifteen minutes. T’ivesk,” she names one of Hawthorne’s deputies, an equally dour, steady Andorian, “is pushing as fast as he dares.”

“Good. If we have weapons, feel free to start shooting at them. I want her as discouraged as possible.”

“Her, Captain?” asks J’etris, her eyebrows rising. Chester realizes J’etris hasn’t had the opportunity to meet her alternate, and makes a face. “Let’s just say I make a slightly more dedicated villain than I’d like to.”

“Ah,” says J’etris, with a glance at her attire. “I see. Mr. Kotan, you heard the Captain. Have yourself a little target practice.”

“Aye aye, sir,” says Kotan, grinning. “Maximum discouragement initiated.”

“I want them embarrassed,” says Chester, “not dead. Dead isn’t going to make the lesson stick.” She hears an echo of her own counterpart there and grimaces. At least she’s fairly sure she’s bumped herself into the category of people her alternate wants dead, and that is genuinely reassuring. “I want her to know it’s far more expensive to grab ships from our universe than we’re worth. And I’d like her to stop chasing us.”

“Torpedoes away,” says Mr. Kotan, cheerfully. “A full spread of quantums, that should give them something to chew on.”

“Ten minutes until we can make a try to get home,” says J’etris.

“Sir, they’re hailing us!”

Chester hesitates. Then she nods. “Put them on.”

It’s not her alternate who greets them. It’s her grandmother’s alternate, sitting in the center seat, her face very cold and grim. Behind her, the Bridge does not look good; several consoles are smoking, and the bodies of crew litter the floor.

“*Captain Chester,*” she says, and the tone is one Chester has only ever heard from her own grandmother a handful of times. It’s the tone that convinced her as a little kid that if her grandmother ever got truly angry, the world would end. “*You’ve made a mistake today.*”

“I beg to differ,” she says. “You and the Admiral made a mistake today. You abducted me, my ship, and my crew from our universe. You attempted to murder the crew of a Federation starship, and use it to pursue your own war. I cannot allow that.”

“*And you turned against your fellow Terrans. You turned against them, and you turned against yourself, and you did it by gaining our trust. I will not forget that. And though you may escape today, be assured that when I have the time to properly deal with you, you will regret it.*”

The transmission terminates. There’s a brief silence. The aft view of the pursuing ship shows it dropping off, streaming atmosphere and plasma fire from the wounds left by the quantum torpedoes.

“All right,” says Chester. “Let’s get home.”

Chapter 16

"I can't say I'm looking forward to sending this report," says Chester, leaning back and rubbing her eyes. "It doesn't exactly make us look good, getting jumped by our mirrorverse counterparts."

"That might be your bruised pride speaking," J'etris suggests. They're in the ready room, and Chester can't help but appreciate just how mercifully uncluttered it is. The memory of her alternate's ready room makes the back of her brain itch. "Though I can't say either Fult or I aren't licking similar wounds. Having the Captain kidnapped out of the brig by a prisoner doesn't make us look good, either."

"And all this after the debacle with Tanek," says Chester. "We're going to seem like the comic relief of the fleet."

"Don't forget the voles."

"Ah, yes, this is what I need your keen skills as executive officer for. I was in danger of forgetting our vole infestation." Chester scrubs her palms down her face. "Well, we still have our ship, our crew, and our lives, which is some compensation for a thoroughly discouraging week."

"And your alternate self vowing revenge on you," says J'etris. "Let's look at it another way, Diane. We were attacked with a hitherto unknown method, one specifically adapted for the *Interpreter*, by a power that hasn't shown up on anyone's threat assessment lists—or not any serious ones, at least. We conducted a successful if unplanned reconnaissance of the enemy and their capabilities, including key personnel details. And then we got out with our skins intact and the ship only marginally more broken," she pauses as Chester reflexively pats a bulkhead in apology, "than it usually is. We have an updated assessment of the mirror universe, its current political situation, and the likelihood it will try something like this again. Frankly, if it weren't for this thing about Tanek, this wouldn't be out of the ordinary, and I think we all handled it rather well. Especially Hawthorne and Tanek."

Chester thinks about those last few minutes on the Bridge. "Yes. Especially Hawthorne and Tanek." The two crewmembers with whom she has the most trouble, and the two who pulled their fat out of the fire. It seems their irascibility doesn't impede their ability to work together. They may even be getting better at it.

"It's still early days," says J'etris. "Only a few months into our commission. Any ship would still be struggling to form a cohesive whole, even if we weren't freshly out of wartime, even if the ship worked perfectly. We're getting there, and this incident was significant progress."

She's right. Chester smiles. It'll be much easier to write the report with that in mind. "Thank you, J'etris."

It's much later that evening, and Chester is just settling down on the too-big couch with a book when her door chimes. She unfolds herself, wincing a little as she jolts a muscle sore from all the adventures of the last few days, and keys it open. Then she blinks at her visitor, startled.

"Captain."

It's Tanek standing outside her door, and he has a bottle and two glasses in hand, and a carefully bland expression on his face. She eyes him, the bottle, the glasses, and decides a poisoning this obvious would be really out of character for him. "What's the occasion, Mr. Tanek?"

"It is... an old remedy, I believe humans would say. We," and she's guessing he means the Tal Shiar rather than Romulans in general, "recommend it to clear a bad taste from the mouth."

That's... one way to put it. Sympathy drinks for the embarrassment of everything that went on with her alternate, including her own only quasi-successful attempt at seduction? A strange thing for him to pick, but she'll be the first to admit her pride is bruised.

Sotek's words ring in her ears, a warning not to trust him, but Chester steps back to invite him in after only a moment of consideration. He's never made a gesture like this before, and besides, she's curious.

Also, they do need to talk about their accidental engagement, as embarrassing as it is.

He makes his way to the couch and coffee table under the window, the ones that still gleam with newness. She's not exactly spent a lot of time in here, or had a lot of guests sitting on them. He glances around as he does—not like someone familiarizing themselves with new surroundings, but like someone checking nothing's changed. Then he places the glasses on the coffee table and pours, as adroit as a professional bartender, and looks up at him.

If that's not an expectant expression, it's a good imitation of one. She crosses to the table, settles on the couch and waits for him to do the same, then leans forward to take a glass.

It smells like professional-grade solvent. "So," she says, "Subcommander. What's the occasion?"

He stiffens slightly, a very faint flush appearing on his cheeks. She just looks at him with her eyebrows raised. He is a big man, built almost entirely for intimidation, and to see him this close to flustered is a strange experience. "I am glad you returned from your sojourn in the alternate universe unharmed. Having now had an encounter with it, I can say I have little desire to repeat the experience."

"Unfortunately, I think my counterpart may have other ideas." Chester steels herself and tries a sip of the drink before remembering that while Tanek is unlikely to so blatantly poison her, so too is he unlikely to have checked whether this is physiologically compatible with a human digestive system. Oh well. That will be a problem she'll deal with as it arises. "She doesn't take defeat well."

"Yes. Your counterpart." He leans back, making a blatant attempt to seem at ease. He usually manages this easily. It is strange to see him have to try. After a moment he leans forward again. "I have, on occasion," he says, looking anywhere but her, "had missions that required me to

employ similar techniques as you did with your counterpart. They are seldom pleasant. I sympathize, and I...respect your dedication to your crew and to our assignment to be willing to employ them.”

Chester takes a long sip of the Romulan drink she hopes isn't going to melt her stomach, and simply says nothing. Is he breaking up with her? Or simply stating how much he respects her for sleeping with her alternate self? Softening her up for future manipulations?

Whatever this is, it's weird as hell and he doesn't seem to be comfortable with it. Or he's acting like he's uncomfortable to put her at ease.

At a certain point in any negotiation, you have to simply go with it; too much hesitation and analysis may just cause offense, and it's unlikely to be accurate. She leans back and looks at him. “I appreciate that,” she says. “It seemed like the simplest way to gain her confidence, in the short term, at least, without compromising something more significant. The safety of this ship, for example.”

“Given human cultural views of these affairs, I did not expect you to be so... ruthless in your approach.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a compliment, Subcommander.”

“It is meant to be. It is also meant to be an expression of sympathy. I have little enjoyed these duties when my assignments required them; I doubt your reaction differs substantially.”

In short, he's checking in to see if she's all right after a very unwise one night stand. She wonders what an expert in Romulan culture would make of this. “I can't say I don't have regrets. Especially since it wasn't nearly as effective as I'd hoped.” She lifts and drops a shoulder, making a face. She feels like an idiot, and since this is him offering an olive branch—a very strange one—she lets it show. “A slightly more conservative approach might have been warranted.”

“Had you taken that approach, I am sure you would be questioning if a more aggressive one would have succeeded where it failed. The time you bought with it was substantial.”

“Thank you.” She takes another sip. Either her tastebuds have died in protest, or the drink is getting smoother and more pleasant. He's been drinking his as well with a dedicated focus. She wonders how much of a resistance he has to traditional inebriates; it's probably substantial.

“The Romulan Senate is as full of intrigues as any governing body in the Quadrant,” he says. “The Tal Shiar monitors them, of course. And sometimes, this requires...”

“A hands on approach?” she says dryly.

He makes a subtle face at that. “The pun is atrocious, but accurate. And the powerful are rarely considerate.”

That provokes a stab of sympathy. As unwise as her... liaison with her alternate self was, at least she was the one to make the call. “I'm sorry.” She means it, too.

He glances at her, then settles himself on the couch with an air of assumed relaxation. It's a little threadbare, like all of his gestures of ease since he came into the room. “I will recommend against any such approaches to compromise you,” he says. “I believe I have ample evidence they will not work.”

It catches her mid-sip and she inhales sharply, sending it up the back of her nose where it feels just as horrible as might be expected. If he meant to incapacitate her, he's thoroughly succeeded. It takes her a while to recover herself and a glass of water—he smugly declines one for himself as she orders it from the replicator.

“All right,” she says at last, her dignity bruised and her eyes still streaming. “Glad to hear it. I think. But what the hell has the whole formal engagement thing been about, then?”

“I was going to ask you the same question,” he says, frowning. She thinks she's got enough experience with these frowns to identify this one as confusion, instead of annoyance. “You do not do things without a reason, Captain. I have had ample demonstration of that over the last day.”

“Sometimes that reason is that I'm stupid and make bad decisions.”

He *stares*, openly shocked. “Stupid is not a word I would find appropriate to apply to you.”

Careful, Tanek, that's verging on a compliment. “It was unintentional. I believed you were in danger—genuinely so—and intervened to save Starfleet the embarrassment of you dying on our watch. Your people haven't exactly been open about your cultural traditions, you know. I had no intention of proposing. Or of embarrassing you in the way I have been assured my proposal did.”

He looks even more genuinely startled, verging on bewildered. It's a much better look on him than anything else she's seen.

“I apologize if this is a disappointment,” she says, and doesn't bother hiding her grin. “Subcommander—have you spent the last five days trying to figure out my angle? It was a genuine accident. Especially as your people seem to regard it as an insult, given its source.”

“I...would not go so far as to call it an insult,” he says, like he's still looking for the words. It makes her eyebrows go up again. “For my part, Captain, allow me to assure you that, despite the ongoing political reaction, I do not, and will not, view it as constituting any significant obligation on your part. An accident it was, and an accident it shall remain, at least between us.”

She raises her glass. “I'll drink to that. Truce?”

The smile it earns her looks something close to genuine. “Yes. A truce.”

He then goes and ruins it in the next moment with a sly look and, “Though I shall make no promises regarding my mother.”

Being called into the Emperor’s presence is seldom a good thing. Even for the First Admiral.

Admiral Chester takes a long, deep breath, eyeing the length of the throne room on Imperial Deep Space One. It gleams in gold and silver, a tribute to better times. Then she swallows hard and starts down the long inlaid floor to the throne.

The small, white-suited figure of the Emperor seems very far away. She does not think the Emperor will kill her, but it does not do to assume. In the Terran Empire, there are a great many things worse than death.

At the foot of the dais is the Emperor’s pet Borg, slumped like a broken doll, long pale hair disheveled and blue eyes staring blankly. The Emperor found it, rehabilitated it enough to make it useful, pruning its implants back to suit her own aesthetic preferences. The patch of metal that covers one eyebrow is all that remains on its face of what it was, metal on the backs of its hands and ridges under its jumpsuit.

It is useful, but there is no more personality there than there was before it was reclaimed; it’s merely a puppet with a new master.

Chester wants to give it a wide berth, and restrains herself only with an effort. There is nothing at all broken about it; she has seen it move before. There are not a lot of things that someone who has lived through what she has fears, but that Borg is very close to the top of the list.

“Admiral,” says the voice above her, and Chester drops immediately to one knee, partway up the many stairs to the throne, far, far too close to the Borg, “I hear your hunting expedition was a little less than successful.”

Chester bows her head. “This is true, my liege.”

“I hear, in fact, that a ship from the other universe made a fool of my flagship, and of my Admiral in particular. That you foolishly indulged yourself in swordplay with your alternate self,” the Emperor’s deep rich voice pauses and shades amused, lending a wealth of dirty possibilities to ‘swordplay’, “and while she distracted you, her crew got up to an impressive array of...shall we say, *shenanigans*, which have comprehensively disabled my flagship. Our technicians inform me they are *still* finding new things wrong with it.”

A rustle of fabric as the Emperor rises and descends to meet her. Chester swallows hard.

“I cannot afford to have my flagship or my First Admiral out of commission because you became overexcited about fighting *yourself*.” The Emperor comes to a halt in front of her; Chester stares at the glossy boots on the glossy dais, and does not dare raise her head, her cheeks flaming hot with embarrassment. “I am extremely disappointed in you, Admiral. You are not the feckless carefree commander of the *Bedivere* anymore; there are some impulses you simply cannot indulge.”

Chester stays silent.

“Diane. Look at me.”

It takes a moment to steel herself, dreading that disapproval more than any coming pain or humiliation. She looks up into the clear merciless blue eyes of the Emperor.

“Do not do this again,” says the Emperor. “The next time you encounter your counterpart, kill her. Do not get fancy about it, do not get sentimental about it or try to make an example of her. I want her dead, and I want her ship. Is that understood, Diane?”

“Yes, my liege,” she says, quickly.

The Emperor’s mouth quirks, almost sympathetic. “Very good. Now, moving on to what you *did* secure... Accurate scans, security codes—useless now, I’m sure—basic specs and information. This has not been a dead loss. Direct Intelligence to continue their monitoring. Our shipyards tell me we should be ready within a year. Make sure your people are prepared.”

“Yes, my liege,” says Chester.

“The Federation and its allies in the other universe have taken too much from us with its meddling; I mean to end that.” Emperor Kathryn Janeway of the Resurgent Terran Empire looks down at her First Admiral and smiles. “Get up, Chester. You have work to do.”

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