

Sources and Methods

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Sources and Methods

by [B_Radley](#)

Summary

Plots and Counterplots on both sides of the Neutral Zone.

Notes

“Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception.” Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Chapter 1

By Way of Deception

Starfleet Command Sol III (Terra)
San Francisco, old state of California
2296

Rear Admiral Hunter watches the numbers increase in the turbolift. There is no one else in the car with her, only people with a need to go see the Prince being allowed in this particular 'lift.

Especially as his only defense is a Chief Administrative Technician (Command/Intelligence), who probably has more power and skill than most starship defensive systems.

Not to mention their offensive capabilities.

The door opens.

A tall woman, even taller than Chandra, stands there in full service-dress uniform, complete with white command shirt and markings, and the rank pin of a lieutenant commander. Hunter thinks that she is probably her foster-daughter's age with a short brown bob.

Hunter's eyes narrow as they fall on the purple streak in the front of her hair. She decides not to make an enemy of the young woman, as she wears the aiguillette of a staff officer on her left shoulder.

Especially when she looks down at the feather braided into her own hair, from the traditions of the colony world she'd been born on and adopted into the society.

The young woman comes to attention. She waits there until Hunter nods, then tentatively extends her hand. "Admiral Hunter. It's good to meet you. I'm Eleanora Cavendish. I'm Admiral McCall's flag lieutenant," she says in an upper crust English accent. Hunter notices that she pronounces her title in the usual way, rather than as 'lieutenant.' Something that warms Hunter's military history heart with its preciseness.

Only the Army in England had pronounced it that way. The Royal Navy had pronounced it in the usual way that the rest of Earth had pronounced it for a long time. Not many people know that.

"Lead the way, Flag," Hunter says.

She notices that the officer is wearing the regulation skirt, rather than the service dress trousers.

Cavendish is also in possession of a pair of very long legs.

She stops at a pair of wood-paneled doors. Hunter narrows her eyes as she sees lettering on the doors that proclaim this the inner sanctum of the DIRECTOR of STARFLEET INTELLIGENCE, UNITED FEDERATION of PLANETS. Hunter grits her teeth. Every other admiral in the fleet bears the title of 'Commander', or 'Chief,' except for McCall. Just like his father.

A scanning beam comes down and locks on Cavendish's dark brown left eye.

The doors open.

A woman in her forties sits at a desk. She comes up to stand at attention. Her thick red hair is tamed in a queue; her dark eyes study Hunter. She is clad in the white undershirt with a delta pinned on the left side of her chest, with her rank on display on it. Her trousers show no stripe along the seam, indicating that she is one of the senior technician ranks, rather than an officer. The short 'bomber' version of the service dress jacket, with a single, broad white shoulder strap on the right shoulder hangs precisely on the rack.

The delta bears the insignia of a Senior Chief, with a white background on the rank title part.

"I'm the Admiral's yeoman. You can call me Castellan."

She sees Cavendish roll her eyes. From Hunter's own inside knowledge, she knows that the flag lieutenant's codename is 'Battleaxe'.

"Hello, Hunter," comes a dry voice, with the inflection of Texas still in it, after all of these years.

She turns and give the man a warm, but wary smile. She can see that the face has gained a few more wrinkles and crags in it, along with his seventieth birthday. The blue eyes are still just as intense, as when he had been completing a tour as an instructor in history at the Academy and she an overaged retread cadet with five years' service in the Fleet, on the frontier.

Hunter walks in, with the door closing behind her, or at least behind Cavendish. She crosses over to him just as he advances on her.

She holds herself against his chest for a long moment.

"Congratulations on your new job. I think it suits you much more." He moves over to a conference table, pointing out the coffee carafe.

"I do too," she replies.

"At least now I won't be raked over the coals as much by the OPSPEC chief's hatchet woman."

“Yeah, you’re now able to rake me over the coals as just a field commander.” She narrows her eyes. “Which I think that you’re about to do.”

“Not really,” he says. “Just some caution for one of your groups.” He gives a wolfish grin. “I’m especially not going to be raking someone who I’m advocating to be the next Head Dog of the Border Patrol.”

Hunter exhales sharply. She is hopeful that she gives him enough of a baleful glance to discourage him in that endeavor.

Cavendish sits against the wall, near the view of San Francisco Bay. She watches both of them from where she sits, a PADD in her lap. The stylus in her right hand. Hunter gives her a quick smirk, which is returned.

She knows that in spite of the Flag’s lawyerly demeanor and her upper crust accent and family connections, she is quite capable of putting that stylus into an attacker or a target’s eye.

To protect those who she serves, or those who she loves.

Hunter knows that includes a few of her Academy classmates. Including her foster-daughter and Chandra’s once and hopefully future love.

She comes back to herself. Jameson McCall is watching her carefully.

“What is it?”

“It seems like the 17th might be stepping into an op that my people on the Romulan border are running. I could use your discretion in telling Chandra to back off.”

Hunter feels her left eyebrow climb. “That depends. It better be a good reason for me to interfere in a field unit’s operations. Plus, it depends on what the hell your people are stepping into as well. It could get mine killed.”

The sharp blue eyes narrow at her. Finally he nods. “Then I’ll read you in. At least some of it. And a lot of it can’t be read in to your people on the ground.”

“Well, if I know some of your Clandestine folks, my crews’ll figure it out when there is a brass fucking band marching through the op.”

The blue eyes don’t just narrow, but flash. Hunter feels a warning look from Cavendish to her.

To her boss, Cavendish says, “Director, Admiral Hunter’s folks know what they’re doing. Probably more so than any of the other Border Dogs out there. Especially after what that group went through and what they managed to pull off while going through it.”

Her eyes harden at her boss. He looks at her with that predator’s look, but she doesn’t seem to quake in her boots.

Finally he shakes his head. “Yes, your Grace,” he says. There is no hint of sarcasm—any more than the usual—in what he says.

Hunter feels her eyebrows knit together at the honorific.

McCall says, “You’re sitting in the room with the 27th Duchess of Devonshire. When they finally made it where the oldest inherited a title of nobility, not just royalty, no matter what gender, they maybe thinned out the dumbassery of the English nobility a bit.” He looks at Cavendish with what is probably the closest thing she’ll see to fondness. “Especially with this one.”

Cavendish smirks at him. “They probably did that when the Honorable Robert McCall left England for Texas.”

Hunter laughs out loud at the mention of Jameson McCall’s father. The first ‘Director’ of Starfleet Intelligence.

Their laughter, which Jameson shares in, subsides after a moment as they come back to the subject at hand.

Hunter stares out the window at the Bay. She knows that those particular windows have a distortion built in them, so that anyone trying to snipe the Admiral or anyone within would be off target.

If their shot could get through the window’s reactive shielding. And if a certain Yeoman’s own rifle doesn’t mark them a moment later.

“How big is this op?” Hunter asks finally. “Are your assets in harm’s way?”

McCall looks at Cavendish. After a moment, she nods quickly.

“Big,” he starts. He nods to himself. “It could destabilize the Romulan government. Or at least one portion of it.”

“Haven’t we tried that before? With Ael’s folks?” She looks down. “Her movement?”

“Yes. And we’ve succeeded only in having a small government-in-exile. One that bears the S’harien blade from the Empty Chair in the Senate.” He closes his eyes for a long moment. When he opens the blue windows he looks into Cavendish’s dark brown ones. “Nell?” he asks.

The young woman narrows her eyes at him—Hunter knows that name is reserved for only a few. Perhaps only three or four from an Academy class. Including her foster-daughter. After a moment, she gives that briefest of nods and replies, “Go ahead.” She pauses. “Jimmy.”

Speaking of forbidden names, Hunter thinks.

He tears his eyes away from Cavendish, which Hunter knows she prefers. His look says, *I’ll deal with you later.*

The look is returned.

“We have someone high up in the government. A former Admiral-Superlative, then Senator, then higher.”

She marks what he doesn't say in the litany of positions. “Probability of this going ass-end-upwards?” she asks.

“High. Almost certain. Except for the elements on the ground. Or ‘grounds’ I should say.”

Hunter says nothing, but listens. She waits on him to say the name of one of those elements.

He exhales, then nods. “Croft is part of it.”

Hunter pounces. “So his former bondmate—maybe even still, I don't know—believes that he ran away after Vostus?”

“As far as Starfleet is concerned, he did run. It needs to be that way. So if you're asked, you'll salute and tell Chandra he is.”

“Oh, no, hell I won't,” she says emphatically.

He stands up. She follows suit, moving into his personal space. Hunter wonders if she'll get the stylus through her eye in defense of Cavendish's master.

Instead, Cavendish remains seated. He looks at her, then back at Hunter. He gestures at his aide. “Just so you know, she agrees with you.”

Hunter says nothing. At least until something hits her. “Chandra can be a part of this. Even if she doesn't know about him.”

He doesn't immediately rebut her. “Go on,” he says after a moment.

“The 17th is rated as Special Operations Capable. Which means that they can be trusted to support intelligence operations—even behind enemy lines, or in hostile territory.”

She sees Cavendish sit up. A slow smile quirks one side of mouth. It disappears just as quickly when McCall looks over at her.

“We could use more support. But we do have to keep it compartmentalized.”

“Within reason,” Hunter says. “The Captain of the Light Forces SOC group should be read in.”

“That'll be up to the senior asset and operator.”

She and Cavendish exchange looks, but keep the expressions even.

He looks at Hunter. “And I think that it's also up to the Control officer.”

“And who would that be?”

He points at Cavendish, without even looking.

Hunter says nothing for a moment, then shoves forward. “As you know, the 17th's numbers have been depleted by the division commander using them as a ‘reserve’ group, rather than what they were created and trained for. They've managed to be reinforced by a torpedo squadron, but they're short on *Lancers*.”

She tries to keep any sort of calculation from her tone.

From his look, she doesn't succeed as well as she'd thought she would.

Finally, he looks at Cavendish. “See to it. Use our squadron if you need to.” He looks back at Hunter. “It looks like this whole thing started with your daughter trying to con a Free Vessel into joining them. I think I'll let that continue for longer than the initial contract. For my own amusement if nothing else.

“Dismissed,” he says.

Hunter rises, snaps to, then turns to leave.

In the outer office, Cavendish turns to her. “That was well-played, Admiral.”

“Thanks, Cav,” she says. “You'll handle informing Chandra, or at least your asset?”

She nods. She looks at her chronometer. “The sun's almost over the yardarm. Castellán and I are through for the day. Fancy dinner and a drink? We can catch up on what Chandra's up to, as well as that brat of a daughter of yours.”

“Sounds good.” She looks at the yeoman. “As long as I can learn what Castellán's real name is.”

“That's only for pillow talk, Admiral,” Castellán says.

As she raises her drink to the two women, both of whom are no longer in regulation Starfleet service dress uniform, but in garments that could be classified as ‘little black things,’ she wonders how the 17th are doing.

She smiles, thinking that they could use some good news about now.

The Backdoor

Siobhan grits her teeth and switches her phaser to her left hand. She holds her right arm down by her side. She pokes her head to side of the large stanchion that has somehow been keeping her from being disintegrated from the inside out. She nearly starts that disintegration at her head for her troubles.

She isn't sure how much the duranium knock-off would hold.

"If you value that part of you, little girl, you might want to keep it behind cover," says the Romulan woman.

Siobhan wonders what the Romulan word for 'asshole' is.

"'De'atrix,' is a good substitute," Kaylin says from the stanchion she shares with 'the Captain.'

The Romulan woman, D'Shaya stares at her, then fires to her right, without even switching her gaze to the target. Siobhan hears the scream of a Klingon warrior as she is hit in her chest.

The disintegration takes much more time than it should, given where the bolt strikes the armor.

"We need to get to the ship," D'Shaya says. "We can fire up the antipersonnel cannons then. Make mincemeat out of these targ-humpers."

Siobhan looks over at the ramp. It might as well be a light year, as both groups seem to have that area zeroed. Freetown seems to have demonstrated that as he had received a scorch mark on his ass when he had come the closest.

Fortunately the reaction of the disruptor hadn't taken hold with the glancing blow.

"We're going to need a distraction," Kaylin says.

"Yeah. I know. You volunteering, Commander Sweetcheeks?" D'Shaya asks.

"Sweetcheeks, this," Siobhan whispers. Kaylin hears it, as well as sees the gesture accompanying it.

She is sure that D'Shaya heard it as well, with keener-than-human-hearing.

"Guys, I just need to get to the ramp. Got something right there that I think will even the odds," Freetown says.

"What's that?" Siobhan asks. As she looks directly at him, she sees D'Shaya clearly out of her peripheral vision. The woman shakes her head and rolls her eyes simultaneously.

"I call it my...odds-evener."

Siobhan meets D'Shaya's eyes, then Kaylin's.

"Looks like we're going to have to save our own asses, Shiv," Kaylin says.

D'Shaya's face twists with anger. "Don't lump me in with that dumbass," she spits.

"Never doubted it, Kay," Shiv replies, ignoring the Romulan. The familiarity is born out of membership in the Border Patrol, as well as nearly being slaughtered by some of these Klingon's kinfolk or clanfolk.

"These two asshats are what you were looking for to join the squadron?"

"To be the crew of the squadron leader, to be exact," Kaylin says.

"We're crouching right here," D'Shaya says.

"We know," Shiv and Kaylin reply in unison.

"Maybe we don't want to be a part of your little club," Freetown says.

"Oh, yeah, and what would you do if you weren't? Ain't exactly seen you burning up hyperspace in the last few weeks. Deuterium don't grown on trees," Siobhan says. She winces as she hears her grammar and syntax loosening up while her accent sharpens.

"And what are you going to do, little girl?"

Siobhan is about to retort, but realizes that she might be engaging in a battle of wits with an unarmed man. She gives Kaylin only a little heads up, then jumps up and runs for a stanchion over a bit farther away, firing her phaser as she does.

"Goddamnit, Shiv," Kaylin screams.

She can see the puffs of dirt and flame as she jinks right and left.

More and more erupt as all of the Klingons focus on her. She manages to make it to cover, but she realizes this one is smaller than the others.

"Come on Francis," she hears D'Shaya exclaim. "Get your finger out. Little girl's done something stupid."

She glances back and sees Freetown, or Francis, back at the ramp. He reaches up and pulls a long rifle that looks like it has a long, single-edged cleaver for a bayonet in front of the foregrip, from the ramp housing.

He laughs in triumph. "Odds-evener," he yells. He pulls the trigger.

Nothing but a few sparks come out of the muzzle. He tries again, with the same result.

He shakes the rifle.

“Fucking Francis,” D’Shaya and Kaylin spit at the same time.

“It’s not my fault,” he says in a whiny voice. “It’s not my fault.”

Siobhan feels the heat of the disruptors starting to melt the stanchion.

A word in Romulan cuts through her hearing. She turns in time to see D’Shaya pull a duplicate disruptor from the back of her belt with her left hand, stand up, and charge.

Opening fire with both of them. Each bolt taking out a House of Klinzhai soldier.

Just as a dozen more start to run into the docking bay.

D’Shaya slides to a stop, parallel to Siobhan’s position. She dives to the ground.

Just as a roaring sound permeates the air above the open docking bay. The ground starts to tremble, then outright shake.

The *Comstock* blots out the sky as she slowly, majestically moves over the bay.

Beams start to strike the ground, as well as the Klingons. Siobhan sees the ventral ramp lowering. A crew member runs out, a safety line attached to his harness. He is holding a large phaser, which he mounts to the extending column of the ramp.

At least two of the single mounts are firing from the open conning platform above and slightly behind the bridge.

She is conscious of Kaylin yelling and screaming, with some whooping involved, as well. Shiv is just able to make out what is being said.

“That’ll teach you to screw with the Banshees!”

It is the figure behind the gunner on the ramp that draws Shiv’s attention.

Chandra stands there, her holstered, nonstandard assault phaser on her hip. Her arms are crossed in her sleeveless vest, ignoring the cold.

Her eyes are burning hot azure as they stare at Kaylin and Siobhan.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Knuckleheads on both sides. Reunion. Separate ways, for awhile. One reason for everything.

An ending. For now.

Laying Down the Law

Chandra stares at the two of them as they stand at attention in front of her in her ready room. Kaylin can see that even through her anger, which has mostly taken the form of synonyms for the word 'knuckleheads,' there is something lighter about Chandra.

It can't be—*please gods, don't let it be*—the entertainment she might've gotten from Grasp.

"So what the hell do you have to say for yourself?" Chandra asks. She holds up her hand, then looks at Shiv. "Lieutenant, as much as it pains for me to say this, but Starfleet Command has spoken, and I must obey. I can't really confine a newly promoted full lieutenant to quarters, or have her cleaning my ship's heads with a toothbrush."

Kaylin grins at Siobhan's poleaxed expression. Chandra holds out her hand to shake Siobhan's.

When her hand returns, Siobhan is holding the fully-joined bars for the service dress uniform's flap and sleeve, as well as two full pips for the rank bar of her smaller delta when needed. She lifts her hands to Siobhan's cheek, holding it there for a moment.

Kaylin sees her gray eyes glistening as she reaches down and pulls Siobhan into a tight embrace. The embrace of those who'd fought for their crew's survival on Vostus. When they pull back, Chandra reaches down and touches Shiv's lips with hers.

That was for a *prelanka-gere* in Chandra's culture. A bond of the heart.

"I've got a job for you, Shiv and your scrounging skills. I've got some supplies coming in, but I'm going to need more. See the Engineer for a list."

Siobhan looks at Kaylin, who breaks her attention to blow her a kiss.

Chandra turns to Kaylin when the door closes. Kaylin braces herself for the onslaught.

Instead, Kaylin moves over to a cabinet and pulls out a bottle and two glasses. She sees that it is a brandy from her family lands on Delta. She pours out a precious couple of splashes in each glass.

She hands it to Kaylin, who sips the green liquid. This version of Deltan brandy is only brought out on the rarest of occasions, ranks only under the purple version, distilled by the ruling family, at the preceptoral, or the light rose-color of the procuratorial levels, rather than the curatorial level that Chandra's estranged family is a part of.

She puts her glass down and returns to attention. "Captain, I—"

Chandra holds up her left hand. "You were following my orders," she says. "To solve the problem of the *Lancers*. You were doing that." She reaches out and takes Kaylin's hands in hers. "I just wished you'd given me a bit of a heads up that you were reaching out to a Free Commando and Trade vessel."

"So how did you know?"

"Decker. She didn't rat you out. At least not until you wouldn't respond to comms. Then she told me. I'm glad she showed good judgement. She'll be a good officer."

"She will," Kaylin agrees. "And the job you got for Shiv?"

Chandra takes a sip of her drink, then lifts the bottle to pour more. She thinks better of it apparently. Not only is it rare and exclusive, but very potent. Even for Deltans. "I was working on our short-handedness as well. From another angle, to complement what you came up with."

Kaylin feels her anger spike, but she suppresses it instantly. *The good of the service*. Realization hits her. "The security ship. You're going to refit her as a *Lancer*."

Chandra grins. "Got it in one, babe." Kaylin can detect the pride in her voice. "Which will give you four ships in your lead squadron, without the *Comstock* and the jarheads. Giving you an operational squadron rather than an HQ squadron."

"So I guess the redshirts will come here." Kaylin grins. "Including their commander."

Chandra closes her eyes. "Yes, the All-Link help me. We'll also farm some out to the other eight ships as well. Which brings us to a choice. You can take the *Reed*, and be the squadron leader, since she has the Cohort system, or you can take the *Starlight*. We'll have to decide if we want them to have a Cohort system or not."

“They could use some adult supervision,” Kaylin says. “It may not have to be me, but we’ll have to figure that out. They might be a good recon asset.”

Chanda looks at Kaylin, her gaze thoughtful. “There may be another wrinkle. We may not get any full more commanders as squadron leaders. We may have to use light commanders to lead the three squadrons. If that happens, would you be okay being my deputy instead of a squadron commander? Taking two squadrons while I oversee one and the HQ detachment, as well as the whole group? I’ll see if I can pick up another squadron.”

Kaylin says nothing for a moment. “I think I can do that. Whatever you need. But it might be good if you can pick up a staff exec or an intel weenie. I have a feeling they’re going to give you the broad pendant full time for the wing, or the flotilla, or whatever the hell they’re going to call it.”

Chandra nods, grateful that she didn’t have to bang her head against Kaylin again. “Figure out, where you’re going to be, Commander,” she says, echoing her earlier order. She closes her eyes again, rubbing the end of her scar.

“Are you okay, Chandra?” Kaylin blurts out.

Chandra stops, then looks away. She takes a deep breath, then turns to look Kaylin in the eyes. “I’m getting there,” she whispers. “And I’m okay enough to be in command. In spite of blowing my whole crew out with a case of the horny.”

Kaylin smirks. “I’m sure your crew found it mildly entertaining. Just as I did back in the day.”

Chandra snorts. “You seemed to be doing an awful lot of screaming and carrying on when you were being mildly entertained.”

She looks down, then back at Kaylin. “I don’t know if we can go back to the way that it was, when we were growing up. But I may need my prelanka-soné at some point.”

Kaylin chokes out her response to the use of those Deltos words. The bond of the soul—the bond of all. One step below a spousal, familial bond. “You have but to ask, Chandrelle,” she asks. “Of any of us. Especially those who helped you on Vostus, like Shiv. Even those you helped.”

Chandra nods after a moment, then reaches out and pulls Kaylin’s head to hers. She kisses her foster-sister on the nose. “It’ll probably have to be off of the ships.”

“I understand. We’ll be there.” She smirks. “Even if you get another craving for dumbass, Grasp’ll be on alert-five,” Kaylin says innocently.

Kaylin stills her laughter. Chandra gazes at her, curious.

“When we were attacked. I saw someone helping us.” She falls silent, wondering how she can continue. “He wasn’t there when you came in, but I think he was helping us as much as he could.”

Chandra raises her deadly left eyebrow. One that Kaylin knows was similar to the one wielded by the man she is about to mention.

“It was Croft, Chandra. Jamie Blackthorne. I’m sure of it.”

How It Will Be

Decker watches as Chandra studies their potential new captain. The man known as Oscar Freetown stares right back at her, his dark eyes calm.

She looks back down at her PADD, then at Freetown, then at the Romulan, D’Shaya. Decker realizes that she is looking up at the ceiling, the light dusting of freckles over her nose are more delineated in the light of the small ready room.

The dark eyes seem in danger of either rolling or becoming bored.

Probably already there, Decker thinks. She resists the urge to kick the Romulan, which would probably constitute a challenge.

She doesn’t even think about being defeated.

“So, I have an issue,” Chandra says.

Just one? comes into Decker’s mind.

“You’ve told everyone that your name is Oscar Freetown. Your compatriot,” Chandra continues, pointing at D’Shaya, “who I can’t tell if she is the brains of the operation or not, called you Francis in the heat of battle.”

Chandra looks over at Decker, who remains at ‘parade rest.’ “My ensign here has found your Master’s License on file. It has as the name listed on it as ‘Rajesh Koothrapali.’”

She takes a sip of coffee. “Further research by my very thorough ensign, finds that the only reference to that name is the name of a character in a situation comedy on earth, pre-Eugenics Wars and pre-World War III.”

Freetown remains impassive.

“So tell me, Raj. How long did it take you to not have to drink to talk to a woman. To your First Mate?” Her eyes flash with challenge. “Or me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Captain,” he says, his expression innocent. “Apparently I’m not as much of an expert on shitty Earth

television comedies as you.”

Decker sees something she would’ve never expected from her skilled, polished group commander.

An intense blush darkening her features.

She turns to the pair before them. ‘Koothrapali’ still has the innocent expression on his face. He is examining his fingernails. D’Shaya is now looking at Chandra and Decker. Her lips are quivering as she fights to keep her face with pseudo-Vulcan neutrality, rather than actual-Romulan hilarity.

Chandra jerks her head toward the door, then turns away.

“I think we’ll just call you ‘Francis’,” Decker says as they exit.

Classmates

Two Days Later

Chandra stands on the conning platform, waiting for an acquaintance—*no, a friend*—of over ten years. She sees a holocapture from that time. Six people stand in the picture.

She sees herself, younger, but not much different than she is now, standing in the center, not the tallest one, but close. The tallest one is the one on approach to land on the docking platform aft of where she stands.

Another young woman, maybe a couple of inches shorter than the lone male figure. She has bronze curls pulled back, with large brown eyes. Eyes that in the capture can clearly be seen to sparkle. They are full of life. Next to her, with her arms tightly around her, is another young woman with the most piercing blue eyes Chandra had ever seen.

The sixth is a Rigelian, one of the five distinct genders. To one who wouldn’t know them, they are grave, but to any of the other four beings in the capture, they appear to at least in a good mood.

Maybe even joyous.

She closes her eyes as she sees his staring eyes, looking up at her. Roged Meeliy had died in the line of duty on a training cruise.

One that had turned into a battle for their lives.

Chandra looks up as she hears the roar of the shuttle. The shuttle had already dropped its warp package; she settles on the landing platform. As the turbulence from the docking settles, the hatch opens.

A tall figure, dressed surprisingly in working rig, with a heavy field coat against the cold, moves off, carrying her own folio and seabag. She drops the bags and comes to attention, saluting the Federation flag on the nearest bulkhead, then the OOD, one of Grasp’s security ensigns, the traditional telescope under his arm.

The only two instances when a member of Starfleet was allowed to give a hand salute without a hat, if unarmed. Arriving on and leaving a ship.

She leans against the coaming of the conning platform, her hand on one of the mounting brackets for an antipersonnel phaser. She watches as Eleanora Cavendish ducks under the hatch, still carrying her own gear. Footsteps clamber up, until her brown and purple hair appears in the hatch to the platform.

“Hello, Captain,” she says in her English accent.

“Hey, Nell,” she says, using the name that only those five from the Academy could use.

“Do you think we could get out of the cold? My nipples could cut diamonds.”

Chandra rolls her eyes at the characteristic bluntness. She can see the lookout stiffen, his eyes wide at the words; she doesn’t blame him.

Hard to believe she is a lawyer, as well as an officer and a gentlebeing, by act of the Federation Assembly, confirmed by the Council.

They are soon in the tiny ready room. Nell’s eyes take in the CIC before the door slides shut.

“What have you got for me, Nell?” Chandra asks.

“I’ve got sealed orders. You’re going to be working some for Starfleet Intelligence.”

Chandra raises her eyebrow. “How does Hunter feel about that?”

Nell pulls out a data cube. “You’ll see that she signed it. As well as the Prince.”

“What is this about, Nell?”

“I can’t tell you more than the name. Operation Vandal.”

“Let me guess. It has something to do with taking down the Romulan government.”

Nell keeps her expression neutral. Finally, she gives the customary Nell-level smirk. “Yeah. It is subtle, ain’t it,” she replies in her upper crust drawl.

“So give me the digest version. You’re obviously reading me in.”

“To the greatest extent I can, dear,” Nell replies. “It involves agents and officers behind enemy lines. It will probably involve some of your ships, especially your new FV on the other side of the Neutral Zone.”

Chandra smirks. “Oh, so you heard about that one, huh?”

“Yeah. Especially since they already worked for us.”

Chandra finally laughs at that revelation, but it does take her a moment. She looks down at the old drop front desk that she’d inherited. She kind of actually likes it; it has grown on her.

“So tell me one thing, Nell.”

“If I can, love,” she replies.

“What the hell was Croft doing near my base, around that damned Free Commando vessel?”

Thou Shalt Do War

Two weeks later

Chandra sips her coffee, looking out the large windows on the port side of the wardroom at the activity outside of the *Comstock’s* revetment. She had just finished her breakfast; she’d found out, by accident, almost, that her lead ship’s first officer was a more than passable cook, especially of the morning meal.

The wardroom, like many on larger ships, was equipped with a small, but full kitchen. Decker had taken advantage of it, making a couple of breakfast casseroles that their carnivores, omnivores, and herbivores could all appreciate. She closes her eyes as the memories swell. Of Jamie Blackthorne making breakfast for them on the deck of T’Vari’s home away from home on Earth.

Memories of those mornings, when all three were home, usually spent in an extremely lazy fashion after breakfast, reading, then waiting to see which one of them would reach for the other two, precipitating a deliberate, but quick move for the bed, or sometimes even the floor of the living room, that bring her back to the conversation with Nell.

She could tell that Cavendish was holding something back, throughout the hours-long conversation in Chandra’s cabin. When Cavendish had finally fallen asleep against her, it had been early morning. There had been a reconnecting of that bond from long ago.

The Threads and the Link had been active, but there had been no overspill for the whole crew. She had felt others doing a bit of connecting; there had been a new energy in the ship, in addition to those doing the connecting.

Their mission was still classified for most of the crew, but even those not in the know could feel that their purpose had changed—could feel that they actually had a purpose and a mission again, other than supplying ships to the other groups in the division and beyond.

She still didn’t have a clear picture of how Croft was involved in this whole goat-rope as he would’ve called it. Nell had only said that he was on the other side of the Neutral Zone. She had mumbled something about second chances as they had been removing their clothing for bed. When pressed for more, before they had kissed, Nell had smiled and given that timeworn phrase that Intelligence gives when they don’t want to reveal something.

“Sources and methods, dear.”

Chandra is sure that there was something more. She’d never been able to figure out why Croft had abruptly left, severing all ties with her, even after their anger at each other over T’Varilyn’s death.

Not even bothering resigning from Starfleet. Harriman hadn’t hesitated, reporting him for desertion to his father, who had promptly raised a stink with the Prince, the Director of Intelligence and even the Prince’s superior.

Who Admiral Harriman had now replaced.

She has her suspicions, but will keep them to herself. She can only hope that she can confront that manipulative old bastard that was Croft’s and Nell’s direct superior.

She feels a presence next to her. A young woman of medium height, with dark eyes and dark blonde hair, with tan skin that is a hint of her birthplace in Portugal, moves up next to her.

Lieutenant Commander Ava Fonseca smiles carefully at her. When Chandra had asked for volunteers to be the ‘adult supervision’ for their newest ship, she had volunteered immediately, from her position as XO of the marine ship, the *O’Bannon*. Something had told her that the Romulan and the human on that ship, in spite of their apparent moral flexibility, would be easier to deal with than acting as go-between for her CO and the marine Major, Starros. The fact that she was Intelligence-trained had helped seal the deal for Nell as well, with the revelation that the ship was already contracted by McCall for whatever devious jobs he needed done.

“You ready, Commander?” she asks.

“Aye, captain,” Fonseca replies. “Seems like there’s a possibility that Commander Cavendish will be accompanying us after we take our first

little trip in the Neutral Zone.” She smiles slightly. “Any tips for handling Battleaxe?” she asks, using Cavendish’s codename.

“She snores and hogs the bed,” is all that Chandra can come up with. Ava would learn Nell’s mercurial moods, better than any preparation from anyone else would bring.

Ava looks at her strangely, then nods, moving away.

Kaylin watches her from the hatch of the wardroom. “Any regrets about not taking the *Starlight*?” Chandra asks.

“A few,” Kaylin replies. She turns her attention to Decker and Siobhan, arguing over cleanup. “But I think I’ll learn more on the *Reed*. I’ll be able to keep a closer handle on the squadron.”

Neither of them speak, as they move up to the conning platform. They watch as the *Starlight* lifts off, heading towards the Neutral Zone. Three of the *Avengers* are raising as well.

She grins to herself, knowing that Kaylin is watching her.

“I guess it’s time for all of us to go,” Kaylin says. “As soon as I get mine repurposed.”

Chandra nods. “I think so. I’m going to rendezvous with our new *Lancer* squadron.”

“Going to put them through their paces? See if they’re worthy of being called Banshees?”

“You know it,” Chandra says.

Kaylin comes to attention. Chandra does as well. She then pulls Kaylin close to her, whispering a few words of Deltos in her ear.

She watches Kaylin walking towards her own command. There is a spring in her step.

New adventures, Chandra thinks. New steps forward.

Siobhan comes out on the platform. Chandra turns.

“The ship is ready in all respects for space, Group,” she says formally.

“Then let’s be about it, Captain,” she says, walking towards the ladder. She thinks of one of Croft’s favorite sayings, with only a small amount of internal pain in her heart.

“We’re burning daylight.”

Postlude: The Empty Chair

chRihan (Romulus)

Ra’leihfi (Government District) - Ki Baratan (Capitol City)

Now

Megara t’Khnialmnae stares out at the empty Senate Chamber. Her eyes turn back to the Empty Chair, bereft for so many years of the exquisite S’Harien blade that her ancestors had brought when they had left Vulcan, thousands of years ago.

She exhales sharply as her eyes track to the empty floor space away from the Chair. A space traditionally used for Senatorial level executions, at whatever level of pain and slowness was desired.

She watches as the muscular bodies of the executioners gleam in the low light as they fold the latest corpse into the shroud. The bright swath of emerald blood one end is the only spot of color on the whiteness of the cloth.

The head had already been removed for public display.

She closes her eyes. She is now the last Praetor, out of twelve.

Save one. The one most responsible for this slaughter over the last two decades. A slaughter with no replacements for the slaughtered Praetors.

She would be the last holdout against Llara t’Rrallion’s lust for power.

At least in this chamber. There were others out in space, both in Rihannsu space and in Federation, along the Outmarches, what the Federation called the Neutral Zone. Including her own daughter. Including her daughter’s commander, who had removed the S’harien from the Empty Chair those years ago. Effectively declaring herself to a position that had been vacant for centuries.

With one old Warbird as the center of her reign.

t’Rrallion’s own granddaughter was a part of the holding out as well, she surmises. She turns at the sound of footsteps. She recognizes the tread of the C’draya, the man who was the bearer of communications between herself and Ael.

Through many different layers. A man who was liable for an even more painful and slower death, if caught, than she was.

Even though the Praetor-Prime held him in high regard.

At least his body.

Her eyes lock with the green eyes of the human. He is clad in rich clothing, but that isn't what gives him access to this chamber.

The golden collar that he wears about his neck, with the platinum signet of the Praetorate is what allows him here.

"Report," she says.

"Everything is moving forward, your Eminence," he replies in surprisingly good Rihan, with no hint of a bumpkin's accent.

An accent she had been accused of having, in her youth.

She nods. "I'm ready," she replies in whisper. In the language of his birth.

When she is alone again, she thinks of her names. It isn't the names she'd been gifted with from birth onwards that she concentrates on. It is one that if known could be the precipitator of her head being removed in front of Llara and the Senate.

A name from Earth's history. A codename in this endeavor. She shoves the word away.

Gaiseric. The King of the Vandals.

The one who had sacked Rome itself in that ancient Earth history.

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