

Respite

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Respite

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Summary

Leave becomes deadly peril when a figure from Lt. Commander Piper Hawthorne's past resurfaces--the mysterious officer whose takeover of his engineering project back in the war heralded the explosion that killed his team and left him half-dead. An officer he is sure is part of a parasite within Starfleet. A parasite he is certain Captain Diane Chester of the Interpreter is also complicit in.

Meanwhile, Chester wakes up to a mysterious intruder in her quarters, offering her a secret mission of the utmost importance to the Federation, a mission full of the spycraft and intrigue right out of her favorite holonovels...

Chapter 1

Captain Diane Chester has spent all morning making mistakes, and if she's not very careful, they're about to get her killed.

Nevertheless, she grins as she jauntily salutes the three men in front of her with her rapier. "I regret, gentlemen, should I be unable to discharge my debt to all of you. You see, I'm engaged to fight Monsieur Athos first, and so he has the right to kill me first; which may well frustrate Monsieur Porthos; and Monsieur Aramis, whom I am not to fight until two, will have very little chance of a contest at all. On that account—and that account *only*—do I apologize."

She takes her hat off, sweeps them a bow, and sets it aside. "Now, gentlemen—*en garde!*"

She's tweaked this program; rather than the stage fighting of the original *Three Musketeers*, it's a real fight, based on the competitive historical fencing she does. It means this counts as practice. Really fun practice. And the satisfaction of an actual contest—it feels more like what fighting Athos *would* be like, with the difficulty dialed up as high as possible.

But they only trade a few blows before a shout stops both of them. The Cardinal's Guard has arrived to break up the fun, dueling being illegal in the Paris of this time, and the little knot of Musketeers is in flagrant undeniable violation of the edict.

There's only one thing to do. Chester and her erstwhile enemies turn as one on the Cardinal's Guard. Chester aims for Jussac, the commander of their attackers, moving in close and finding his blade. He disengages, but she follows him, turning her blade to foul his lunge.

"Should have run while you could," he sneers. "It's hardly sporting to kill a foolish youth."

Jussac, too, is programmed to fight like someone who knows what he's doing, and Chester finds herself rueing turning up the difficulty settings. But as her arm starts to go sore, he gets sloppy. He's going red in the face. "Insolent whelp, I'll teach you a lesson!"

"I'd prefer not," she says, "your carelessness would spoil my form," and slips her sword up in a sharp-angled parry, shoving his easily out of the way and rolling over his blade to drop her tip down directly at his heart and *lunge*—

At a figure who is no longer there.

Chester stumbles a little, pulling her sword up out of line as Jussac and his outrage vanish.

In front of her reappears the black walls and orange lines of the holodeck, and the doors open to reveal Lt Commander Hawthorne, one hand on the wall console, the other holding a datapad he's glaring at. "Sorry, Captain Chester," he says, not looking up from the datapad and not sounding sorry at all, "emergency maintenance. One of the other holodecks is having glitches so we're doing a full shutdown and maintenance checks before someone ends up held hostage in the ancient American west."

Chester takes stock of herself, in doublet and breeches and full-sleeved white shirt, her elaborately plumed hat on the ground some distance away, where the post she'd put it on has vanished, and her sword in hand. She's still in full extended lunge, her sword the only part not in line to kill, but pulled up and to the side.

"Right. Of course." She steps back, dropping into a more natural stance, and looks regretfully around the holodeck. "Understood, Mr. Hawthorne. Were comms working?"

Hawthorne finally looks up, briefly registers with widened eyes that she's got a sword in hand, then looks back down. "Spotty in the one that was glitching. Gull and I need to go and make sure the last two are shut down."

She steps back, sheathes her sword, and goes to get her hat. "Better safe than sorry," she says, but can't really put her heart into it.

Hawthorne is already moving along down the hallway.

Chester sighs heavily. The *Negotiator* and Captain Jel'n aren't due back to Deep Space Nine until tomorrow. So much for *The Three Musketeers* to take her mind off the waiting. At least Hawthorne didn't walk in on Milady DeWinter instructing her ruffians to rob her while she was face down in the dust of the innyard; who knows what he would have assumed from *that*. The sword seems to have spooked him enough.

Dispirited, she slopes off down the hall in the opposite direction, sword in sheath and hat in hand.

Piper's had plenty of time in the Gamma Quadrant to think about 'if I were Starfleet Secret Police, what methods would I have for monitoring and long range communication with my ranking Starfleet operatives?', tinkering constantly with mechanisms to detect encrypted comms and sweep for bugs. But of course, the constant traffic of DS9 makes it the perfect place for a covert meeting, so he's been poring over the transit logs to look for anything that raises red flags.

That is, when he's not dealing with glitching holodecks. No one's getting stuck in some James Bond adventure today - or, apparently, in some ancient swordfighting adventure.

But the systems have been shut down, the bug identified and cleared, and the systems triple checked and brought back online incrementally for testing. And no one had gotten stabbed! Somehow.

His first inclination is to go back to poring over transit logs, something that might be productive in figuring out a next step to identify what the secret police, and particularly his secret police captain, are doing. Particularly anything that will make him feel a little less freaked out about

having said secret police captain point a sword at him, even incidentally.

But. He's not - well, he's *mostly* not stubborn to the point of stupidity, he knows how long he's been at the transit logs and the holodeck debugging and he knows about medical recommendations and how overwork and lack of breaks makes you prone to errors. So he *is* actually trying to take a break when he's over on DS9, out walking above the promenade, watching the wormhole.

Of course, it's when he's not looking that he spots it. Or rather, her.

Chester isn't sure what pulls her out of sleep, but she wakes up in a hurry, hairs prickling upright on the back of her neck and hand reaching for something to defend herself with, even as she rolls out of bed and onto her feet. A sweeping glance shows her commbadge nowhere in evidence, and the faint glow of all the computer access terminals is just as tellingly absent.

Her questing fingers find a familiar hilt on the bookshelf, and her hand closes around the solid, comforting weight.

There's a human woman in the armchair between bookshelf and door, blinking down the length of steel leveled at her. She's small, blond, pretty in a picture-book way, huge blue eyes and pouting lips over a black, featureless uniform.

"Explain yourself," Chester says.

The woman looks at the sword, then at her face, then back at the sword. "There's a practice tip on your blade, Captain." She says it like she's doing Chester a favor.

"We practice in armor for a reason," says Chester coolly. "Explain yourself."

The woman sighs, makes a gesture at the bed. "Have a seat, Captain Chester. The Federation needs you."

Chester remains standing. "Because I should trust the word of every person who sneaks into my quarters in the middle of the night that she's a representative of the Federation." She eyes the other woman, critical. "Dressed in leather, too. Legitimate security activities aren't the impression *that* conveys—not when you break into people's quarters and start ordering them around."

The woman huffs, plainly irritated, and uses a beautifully manicured finger to nudge the point of the sword out of her face. "Are you quite done?"

Chester shrugs, flicks it right back into place. "Door's right there. You can leave at any time."

"A covert branch of Starfleet Intelligence requires your assistance, Captain."

"You don't say."

The woman gives her a tight smile with no amusement behind it at all. "Would it make you feel better to have something to call me while you threaten me with that ridiculous toy of yours? How about DeWinter?"

Chester can't help the snort of laughter. "What, seriously? Fine. What's my chances of meeting Richelieu?"

DeWinter chuckles. It's not a nice laugh. It's the sort of laugh that might make Chester reconsider her crack about the uniform, if she weren't so annoyed. "Oh, he'll *certainly* be interested in meeting you one of these days."

She does realize Milady DeWinter is one of the villains, doesn't she? Chester elects not to say this out loud. "Yes, everything about this screams above-board and perfectly Starfleet," she says. "None of it has been sinister or threatening at all. Since when do we take notes from the Tal Shiar?"

"We can spend all night engaging in the witty banter you so enthusiastically parrot on the holodeck," says DeWinter, "or we can get to work. The facts are simple, Captain—Starfleet needs you."

"You've given me no evidence you're actually Starfleet."

DeWinter sighs and settles back into the chair, hands folded in front of her, and gives Chester a tight smile filled with dislike. "Maybe you're just going to have to trust me."

"Maybe I'm a remarkably untrusting individual. It's night, I'm on leave—whatever this is, you can either spit it out now, or it can wait for morning."

"Your leave's been canceled, Chester. Check the rosters. You'll be on a delicate assignment related to Federation security—"

"Nice try. If you actually were familiar with me and my files, you'd know that I'm not a soldier, and that I don't do spy shit." She stares the woman down. "I left that behind with the war. This *ship* left that behind with the war. Starfleet wasn't a military, and it never should have been."

"How sweet," says DeWinter. "Except we both know that's a lie. You have a Tal Shiar agent on your bridge and you know the Gamma Quadrant better than almost anyone else in the fleet. You *know* not being a soldier is a luxury, Captain. I can't blame you for indulging it, now that you can, but right now, you're needed. Or would you prefer that you and this lovely new ship of yours be used to start the next war?"

"I still don't have a reason to trust a word you say. Work on that."

“The hypervigilance and combativeness aren’t in your profile,” says DeWinter. “But, as Captain Jel’n may tell you, useful in an asset.”

Chester leans forward. “I am not an asset. Not yours. Not anyone’s.”

DeWinter just gives her a cool, disappointed look.

“I’ve worked with Starfleet Intelligence before,” Chester says coldly, really meaning that she’s talked with Ril’as Jel’n about working with Starfleet Intelligence before, and had some passing encounters with agents on their way to and from the field. “This isn’t how they operate. This is how a spy in a particularly bad holonovel operates. This isn’t about hypervigilance or combativeness; you’re putting me on the defensive so I’ll want to be more agreeable in order to seem reasonable. No, this is psychological manipulation to ensure I’m not thinking clearly when you tell me what you want me to do. That is *not* the behavior of someone engaging in legitimate activity, Intelligence or otherwise. You’ve ensured I can’t call Security. That’s not an indicator of legitimate activity, either. What little credibility you have is eroding by the second. So if you’re not playing silly games, start talking, and stow the flattery.”

DeWinter eyes her, evidently evaluating how serious she is. Then a touch of a smile curls her mouth. “There are plenty of officers who’d jump at undertaking a dangerous secret mission to save the Federation offered by a mysterious stranger, you know. Unfortunately, that’s not the kind of person we tend to recruit for these assignments—and your reaction is exactly why we want you for this one, Captain. You’re not easily taken in.”

If that’s not blatant flattery, Chester doesn’t know what is. She silently raises her eyebrows, waiting for DeWinter to continue. “I represent a particularly covert branch of Starfleet Intelligence. Your next assignment, if carried out as ordered, will pose a threat to Federation security. I am here to enlist your aid in making sure that doesn’t happen.”

Reward the behavior you wish to see. Chester lowers her weapon and takes a step back to sit on the bed, her entire body language saying, *I’m listening*.

Her next assignment is an aid mission. The Federation under threat from them playing delivery service? This gets fishier by the moment. “And who is this ‘we’?” she asks.

“Section 31. Our authority is in the original Federation charter,” says DeWinter, evidently guessing that starting with the legalistic argument is her best bet. “We are an autonomous department. We submit no reports, undergo no reviews, and we do not answer directly to Starfleet Command. You have not heard of us because our existence is highly classified—your loyalty to the Federation is clearly unquestionable, or I would not be here. Our secrecy and autonomy leave us in a unique position to protect the Federation from existential threats—threats like the Dominion.”

“Or the Romulans,” says Chester softly. “Or, a few decades back, I’m sure the Klingons were on that list.”

“Times change,” says DeWinter. “And we change with them.”

“Of course you do,” says Chester. Perhaps her tone is a little more snide than it ought to be.

“We take care of those threats before they materialize,” says DeWinter, as if she hasn’t spoken. “We’ve saved millions—billions even—of lives, and because we did our jobs, the rest of the Federation will never know. You’re a woman who knows what it is to do what you need to, even if no one ever knows. Your conduct during the war shows that much.”

“We’re closer to another war than you know, Captain Chester. The Dominion isn’t as beat as it would like us to think. You know where you’re taking those medical supplies next week—but you don’t know their final destination.”

“They’re medical supplies,” says Chester. “We hit the Dominion’s production capacity hard during the war. And as soon as they lost—as soon as there was a crack in the facade—others moved in. They’re not the only empire in the Gamma Quadrant, and even pirates can make a hell of a dent.”

“Those medical supplies are going back to the Alpha Quadrant,” says DeWinter, quiet and intent, “to a rocky planetoid called Respite at the edge of Cardassian space. The treaty allowed the Dominion to use it as an evacuation point for their forces. But they’re still there...and those medical supplies will be used to make ketrecel-white. I want you to go to Respite, Captain Chester, and I want you to see for yourself what’s coming. Everything you need to know is on this padd. I’ll give you your next instructions when you arrive.”

She rises and walks out the door. Chester hurries after her, a little too late—by the time the door opens onto the hallway, there’s no one there.

“Captain?”

No one there but J’etris. Dammit. Chester’s learned just enough from Tanek to know that revealing the activities of a covert organization to one of her officers is probably a very good way to put a lot of other people in danger. But she’s realizing there are only so many excuses for appearing in the corridor in the middle of the night with a sword in hand and pajamas with little smiling cacti on them. The options spiral through her head—a little late night session in the gym (no, the pajamas put the lie to that), I thought I saw a vole (particularly inhumane, to go after it with a blunt practice sword), simple insomnia, Q?

“Doing some drills,” she says, lifting the sword, “thought I heard a noise. I know the station team thought they got rid of the voles, but we’ve heard that before.”

J’etris’s eyes gleam with the prospect of making someone’s life miserable. “I’ll get sweeps started in the morning, sir. There are a few ensigns that could use the practice.”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” says Chester. “Thanks, J’etris.”

She goes back into her quarters and contemplates the padd, wondering whether she's got any inclination to sleep now. Then she picks it up, looks it over. Respite is eighteen hours away by runabout; the rendezvous is set for two days from now. She looks at the bed, then sits down on it with the padd.

A check with the ship's computer does indeed show that she's been recalled from leave and placed on a "sensitive field assignment" for the next five days.

There's almost certainly a way that could be manipulated. Going would be stupid. But not going—and leaving the upcoming mission to get sabotaged by Section 31 in a way she won't know about—will be stupider.

...and what if they're right? What if the Dominion *is* planning another invasion and it can just be quietly stopped, right now? Without more deaths, just with a small change to the incoming supplies? No more ships dying like the *Bedivere*. No one making the choice between their life and the lives of others.

Her mouth tightens for a moment with pain, and then she sets the padd aside and starts to pack.

Chapter 2

Piper wouldn't forget her face. He never got a name, but he knows the faces that swept in, just there on the edges of the project before everything went to hell.

Finally.

He sends Gull up to snap a holoimage before she can disappear, then starts to follow. Casually. Super casually.

Okay, really not all that casually.

She does disappear. *Dammit.*

He has Gull send the holoimage to 'Pret, with the request for a flag if someone matching this image showed up on board, or if the Ship's systems ran into any other irregularities. There's a flood of data, he tries filtering for anything related to the Captain; ready room, quarters - a *hah.*

Someone had thought they were being clever. Or maybe they just thought no one would be looking that closely. Fortunately, he and 'Pret were cleverer.

'Pret's sensor readings of the Captain's quarters had been briefly interrupted, then looped.

He knew it. He *fucking* knew it...

When he gets back on the *Interpreter*, 'Pret lets him know that J'etris is outside of the Captain's quarters. Damn. She's got enough of a history with Chester that he's been assuming she's in on it, but he'd been hoping she wasn't. Also she could break him like a toothpick without really trying, so - he keeps his distance to stay out of her sight. He has no idea what he would give as an excuse for skulking around the Captain's quarters at this hour. From around the corner, he overhears something about - voles? Maybe code. Hmmm.

'Pret pings him with a notice of a non-standard runabout request, with the Captain's authorization codes. So, Starfleet Secret Police was sending their operative off on some covert mission. Well, not covert enough.

He pulls open the cover on a Jeffries tube and starts taking a shortcut to the shuttle bay.

This is it. He's going to put a stop to whatever nefarious mission Starfleet Secret Police is running here, expose their existence, and watch them burn to the ground to restore the integrity and ideals of Starfleet.

... Yeah, it's a lot more likely that Captain Chester is going to shoot him in the face and claim that secret Dominion programming in his cybernetics had activated. What a tragedy, what a shame, everyone thought they had gotten rid of all of that, damn that wiley Dominion programming.

Marbog won't buy that story. He hopes his friend has the good sense to keep his head down. He can try and - but no, that would put too much risk of leading back to them, Marbog is already closely linked to him.

It's him, and Gull, and the programming from 'Pret that runs the runabout. They're a good team. And when it came to finding hiding spaces in a runabout, well, at least that was one benefit of being - ugh. Short.

Gull is tucked away, out of sight in one of the upper bulkheads, but still able to monitor - but then he hears the sound of footsteps and has to hurl himself into a small cargo trunk quickly. *Dammit.*

Chester gets into the runabout, stows her things, sets the course, and leans back in the pilot's seat once they're clear of the station.

A few seconds later, her eyes open. A certain paranoia has woken up in the back of her brain, and she can't fully relax. So she carefully searches under the console for tampering, then moves on to the crew quarters, the replicators, the little 'fresher in the back, not sure what she's looking for. It's not like Section 31 would instantly kill their new operative, but she doesn't want any surprises.

She's not sure what she's looking for until she pulls open the port cargo hatch and stares in appalled surprise.

Chester *knows* Lt. Commander Piper Hawthorne doesn't like her. He doesn't seem to like much of anyone; she's guessed that's just what happens when Changelings infiltrate your top secret research project and get your entire team horribly killed, mutilating you on the way by. She also knows they got off on the wrong foot and have continued on the wrong foot, as she's asked him one too many times for the miracles that captains too often expect from their engineers, though she knows damned well he's a safety-minded, by-the-book officer. She's *tried* not to, but *Interpreter's* high-risk missions don't leave a lot of room to spare his feelings. Neither does the ship's incredible wealth of malfunctions.

This does not explain why he's staring up at her from the port cargo locker, his face a sickly gray-white, looking like he expects a phaser blast.

Is *he* the way Section 31 has been evaluating her? Of all the people on the ship, he'd find it easy enough to override the access to her quarters, shut down her computer terminals, and whisk DeWinter away when their meeting was done.

Thing is, his appearance seems a little too clumsy to be DeWinter's style. His clear terror isn't in keeping with a secret agent, either, and to

consider the possibility it's an act invites paranoia.

"Lieutenant Commander Piper Hawthorne," she says, enunciating each word carefully, "what the *hell* are you doing?"

Hawthorne looks - well, he looks like he's spent the past several minutes hyperventilating, and he stares up at her with something like blind terror, frozen. Then in a jolt of movement, he pushes himself half upright, jolting himself partway out of the tight space, and when he looks back at Chester horror and fear are quickly covered up by defiant anger. He inhales a sharp *hiss* of breath. "I think *I* should ask that of *you*," he practically spits, "*Captain*. What 'mission' do the 'Secret Police' have you on *this* time? Or don't you have anything to say for yourself before you shoot me?"

Chester stares at him a long moment, trying to parse that. She knows her confusion is clear on her face, and what it seems to be doing is making him even angrier. Scared and angry is a good recipe for him doing something stupid, but now he's upright he's frozen again, like a frightened rabbit.

It seems she may have an explanation here for why he dislikes her so very much. That is, if she can tease it out of his defiant, accusatory declarations, which will be a task in and of itself.

She slowly steps back and out of the way, like she's trying to soothe a wild animal. "All right," she says, "first things first, I'm not armed."

That doesn't make her much less dangerous to him, and he knows it. He's happened through the gym a few times when she's been sparring with J'etris. The incredulous glare he gives her is about what she expected. "Commander Hawthorne, I'm not going to hurt you. We're going to turn around and go back to the station. Why don't you come on out of there, have some tea or something, and you can kindly tell me what you think is going on."

She then deliberately turns her back on him and goes to the replicator for some coffee herself. She steps well back afterward so he can get to the replicator as well without getting too close to her. The height difference is probably not doing any good at all.

He does clamber the rest of the way out, very slowly, but heads for the open space in the center of the ship, not the replicator. "I don't know what game this is," he says, pulled up to his full 5'1" of height and looking every inch a furious feral cat, minus a puffed out tail. "But it's unnecessary. I know what's happening."

Chester raises her eyebrows and takes a drink of her coffee—anything to occupy her hands and make it clear she's not a threat. "That's more than I do," she says. "Care to read me in?"

He glares at her. "I'm not *stupid*," he says. "I know Starfleet has its own Tal Shiar, or 'Secret Police' or whatever name they've decided to give themselves. And I know if they had their fingers deep inside *my* project - and inside *me*, literally - just because it *might* have helped them beat the Dominion, then there's no *way* they sent out a mission of *this* magnitude into Dominion space without making sure they had *their* agents running the 'Armistice Class' ships." Air quotes again. "I don't know whether you've been working for them before the war or if they recruited you after it ended, before giving you the Captaincy, but I know you're working for them. I told you, Captain, I understand wanting to do anything to prevent the kind of loss you experienced happening again. But," he continues, fists clenched, "I'm also going to do everything I can to try and prevent what *I* experienced happening again, and I know that Starfleet's Secret Police was responsible for it, and they'll be responsible for worse in the future. Whatever they have you doing now, I'll stop it, or die trying. Though," he adds dryly, "the latter is looking much more likely right now."

Chester looks at him over the rim of the mug, puts it down, and stalks to the controls. "We're turning around," she says. "I'm sure you believe everything you're saying, Commander, but I want you checked by Dr. Tyrell and Counselor Rala." Even as she speaks, doubt twinges at the back of her mind. The woman who showed up in her quarters tonight admitted that Section 31 answers to no one, and Chester is far from convinced that such an entity has anyone but its own interests at heart.

"Yes, so you can just quietly make me go away," snaps Hawthorne. "Oh, Hawthorne went crazy, we had to lock him up for his own good. Nice try. *Not* going to happen."

Chester sits, hesitating before she starts punching in the course change. "Then start talking. You have context about this Section 31, then give it to me. They've taken an interest in our upcoming supply mission, and I mean to find out why."

"Section 31. I *knew* it," Hawthorne mutters.

"I'd never heard of them until a few hours ago, when a woman claiming to be affiliated with them showed up in my quarters unannounced and apparently *canceled my leave*." That actually rankles more than she thought—she'd been looking forward to a week of backpacking with Rilas. "I don't like the implications of their existence. I am *not* planning to kill you. Think of all the paperwork."

Hawthorne snorts at that.

"I'm not bringing you along, either, because I'm not going to be responsible for putting you in this kind of danger."

She leans back and eyes him. The thing is, getting him off the ship might be a problem. Yes, she can pick him up and physically carry him, but he will probably make a lot of noise about it, and stunning him will *not* help their work relationship one bit. Which weirdly enough, she'd like to try and preserve, even if starting all over with an engineer who isn't a paranoid insubordinate mess seems really appealing right now. "...you're going to make a fuss about being put off the ship, too, aren't you. Hawthorne, *kindly tell me what I'm getting myself into*."

He has his eyes narrowed still, not quite a glare, but an expression she recognizes from when he's looking at engineering problems he's trying very hard to solve, but hasn't quite cracked yet. Like the last time the industrial replicators started making tubas again, after he had confidently asserted that he had solved the problem.

That had ended with one falling on her, so it's not really the best sign.

“... Right,” he says slowly. “We’re going back to the station, so you can let your superiors decide what to do with me, *you’re* not going to make that call. They’ll move their mission to one of the other operatives - it probably makes more sense for Captain Jel’n anyway, she’s the one with the experience in Intelligence work, isn’t she? Unless this is all coordinated, and she’s already somewhere else. Either way, Captain, no, I don’t think I plan on being cooperative with waiting and letting your secret police - ‘Section 31’ superiors decide what to do with me. It hasn’t turned out so well in the past.”

The thought occurs to Chester that he might be right—not about Rilas, not about her own involvement... but that Section 31 might be less than thrilled with *his* involvement, and could take action against him once she’s out of the picture. Returning him to the station might just be putting him in more danger.

She frowns at him, thinking. She’d like to leave him on the *Interpreter*. Probably to beam him directly to Sickbay for rest and evaluation, given that he’s had what most people would term a paranoid outburst. But that *would* make him a target for anyone watching—and she’s just had someone in her quarters, claiming there’s a secret branch of Starfleet doing all the things everyone else is too chicken to do, which takes some of the delusion out of the paranoia. Having someone who knows about these creeps and doesn’t trust them might make the difference between her getting screwed over, or surviving.

She sighs heavily. If this goes wrong, if he gets hurt, she’ll wear it. But she’d much rather have him right here, where she can keep an eye on him and protect him. “Fine,” she says. “Fine,” and resets the course. “Settle down here and please start from the beginning. You think it wasn’t the Dominion that installed your modifications?” She pauses. “You think it was Section 31 responsible for the accident.” It’s not a question. “Just...tell me from the beginning, as if you think I’m genuinely telling the truth when I say I just learned about Section 31 tonight, and possibly also as if you think I’m very, very stupid. And in return, I’ll tell you exactly what *I* think I’m doing. All right?”

Hawthorne distinctly does not sit down or do anything else that might even resemble *settling down*, but crosses his arms instead. “Right. So you have a recording of this conversation to share with your supervisors, so they know exactly how much I know when they decide what to do with me.”

Chester just looks at him with all the exhaustion the coffee isn’t doing a damn thing about.

He glares at her, and then sighs. “Fine. I’ll play along, none of this should be news to them anyway. I know the Secret Police - Section 31 was responsible for the accident, and I know damn well it wasn’t the Dominion who installed my cybernetics. You - well, *playing along*, I suppose if you’re *not* a Section 31 agent, then they *wouldn’t* have given you my real file before the mission, so you *haven’t* seen the real details of what I -” he grimaces “- woke up with, but I *know* Federation tech when I see it, and I damn well know it when it’s embedded in my own *flesh*, or when I wake up in a damn - fucking -” he waves a hand around in the air as he searches for a word, “*box* made of it. You - well ‘*someone*’ should really let them know that sleek black everything is really isn’t the subtle, ‘we’re not the secret police’ look they think it is.”

Her stomach drops at his words. Whether or not he’s right, he certainly believes it. And even just imagining that Starfleet might be complicit is sickening.

No. Right now, it’s better to assume they’re a domestic extremist group. It’s probably closest to the truth.

“I agree,” she says, very dry. “I just had a strange woman in black leather show up in my quarters in the middle of the night, and try to order me around. The initial impression was not particularly professional.”

He lets out a snort of laughter at that. “That - tracks. It’s bloody *stupid*. I know the stupid -” he waves a hand again, “- *Dominion goo*, fuck, *changelings* - *that* story was a cover up, of course it was. Of course there was a smooth official cover story, because every bloody other thing about the ‘accident’ had been just as smooth. It wasn’t official channels and it wasn’t Intelligence, and it was too well - not repeated, *practiced* to be war exigencies. The Admiralty can sometimes seem like it’s their first bloody time doing something that’s been procedure for decades, much less when they’re throwing something together. This was a smooth operation, all so they could rush this tech out, regardless of risks, just on the chance they could have a bigger stick. *Stupid*. If it hadn’t blown up, I’m sure the *Tal Shiar* would have been proud. But of course they had a cover story for when it blew up, stupid ‘blame the witches’ cover story that it was. Of course they did. *Section 31*. Hah.

“They put Federation tech inside me and tried to turn me into - some sort of puppet, and when I woke up without strings they just - blamed that on their whole witch hunt cover story too, and expected - *me* not to *recognize* it? They thought *I* was that stupid? But of course,” he laughs humorlessly, “they could make me disappear just as easily, so,” he shrugs. “But then this? Obviously they weren’t just going to leave the Dominion alone. Obviously they were going to rush risky tech out, *again*, so they’d have the biggest sticks in the Gamma Quadrant. Of course they were going to have their hands on it.” He snorts. “And obviously they decided they weren’t done with me either, for whatever reason.

“I’ve always known this was going on. It was just a question of when I could catch it and stop it, and today -” he snaps his jaw shut, abruptly cutting himself off, before taking a breath. “I told you, Captain, I’ll be fighting tooth and nail to keep everyone alive. I’m not letting the secret police kill anyone else.”

She leans back and looks at him. Frankly, he doesn’t look too good. “Would you please sit down, Commander? I promise I won’t kill you with anything if you do.”

“I’d say ‘if it’s all the same to you, I’ll stand’, but actually, I’m standing whether it’s all the same to you or not.”

“I can’t blame you for your suspicions. If you’re right about what happened, it’s a wonder you stayed in Starfleet, and a wonder you’ve trusted me as much as you have. That was an incredible betrayal, and before tonight I’m not sure I could have believed it.” Her mouth twists a little. “But I find it more believable than I’d like now—and I certainly trust your assessment of your cybernetics.”

There’s a brief screwed up expression on his face. “Well. You should.”

She scrubs a hand over her face, not sure what to do. “You accepted the post on the *Interpreter* because you thought they were doing the same thing again,” she says, “and you wanted to save the crew.” She doesn’t say *us* because he pretty obviously thinks she’s Section 31 and one of

the people responsible for such an accident. "That was incredibly brave. So is being here right now, as much as I wish you were safe back on the ship."

He snorts. "Brave is generous. Might be better to call it stupid."

"And I know you have no reason to believe me when I say I'm not Section 31—that I'm here because they seem to want to involve themselves in our mission, and saying no means that they'll be doing it behind my back." It sounds like a lousy excuse when it leaves her mouth, but she keeps going. "You've got very little reason to trust me, or to trust anyone in command right now, and I respect that. But I need you to tell me what you want me to do—take you with me or leave you behind—and if I *do* take you with me, I need you to stay back and follow my orders. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to leave me behind, *you leave me behind*. I am *not* losing you."

Her voice gets sharp on the last sentence and she regrets it. She clamps her lips tight and looks away, her fingers knotting in her lap with a sudden jolt of memory, the memory of another too-stubborn engineer. *Mr. Bena, now is not the time to be a hero.*

"No," Hawthorne says, after a long moment. When she glances back, he's absolutely glaring at her. "No. That's not how this is going to go. I'm not going to be shipped off to the station to be parceled off to someone else, and I'm not going wherever it is you're going just so I can be led around by the nose to see whatever your supervisors decide it's strategic to let me see, or be sent running into another explosion or trap - if they don't just decide to shoot me on sight. You," he jabs a finger at her, "admit I have no reason to trust you. If you want me to play along with this game that you're not Section 31, you should have no problem telling me exactly what you've been told in your 'first meeting'. Any message gets sent to this ship, I see it first. *Then* I'll decide."

She just gives him a flat level stare. "If you insist on treating me like the enemy, we are going to fail. And if you're right about them, we will probably die. I'll tell you about that meeting, because it's important that you know what I know at this point. Then we'll see if we can work together on this, or if it will just get us killed."

He glares at her but after a moment he nods. She'll take that as a victory, however small.

"Right," she says. "I woke up in the middle of the night with a stranger in my quarters. She introduced herself as DeWinter and told me to meet her at a rocky planetoid called Respite, which she claims is the staging ground for a Dominion invasion. By disrupting our supply mission, she believes we can undermine this invasion. Why she believed I was still a good recruit after she remarked on my hypervigilance and combativeness is beyond me." She pauses, letting that sink in.

He snorts. "Did you pull that from my psych file?"

"Is there anything I can say to make you think I *didn't*?"

He raises his eyebrows and shrugs.

She sighs, stretches. Too much coffee, too little sleep- she feels like her teeth are buzzing. "She tried to butter me up next. Lots about what a great loyal Starfleet officer I am, which I won't bore you with. She was still claiming to be with Starfleet Intelligence at that point. I told her bluntly I didn't believe it, and she told me about Section 31— that it was even in the Federation Charter."

He snorts, but his face pales dramatically.

"If anyone is planning to mess with our supply run, I want to know about it," she finishes. "Hence the shuttle."

"Come have a look' - you can't expect me to believe that was the extent of your instructions."

"I didn't say it was a particularly good idea." Chester sighs. "I suspect it's meant to lead me step by step into becoming one of their agents. DeWinter did express a certain hope that would be the outcome."

He rolls his eyes. "'Becoming' - right, *of course*. 'Playing along' - are you just supposed to fly around this planetoid - is it *actually* named *Respite*? - until you spot - what? Ground based invasion forces?" He glares. "You can't expect me to think you can fly me around a planetoid, point at something that looks shifty, and fly back and I'll *buy* that. Please. You were given coordinates, or at least a contact, a point to wait for further instructions."

"Amazingly," Chester tells the air, leaning her head all the way back against the pilot's chair, "this is not all about you."

For reasons she's far too tired to parse right now, he actually *grins* at that.

"I have coordinates. I'm going to go down there and meet DeWinter there like the idiot I am, and find out what the hell she wants with my damn ship. And see if I get to survive them failing to recruit me. That'll be really fun."

"Right, right," he says dismissively. "What are the coordinates? And how did she give them to you?"

She hesitates, weighing security risks against his trust. Then she pulls out the padd and taps the screen. "If this is actually a Starfleet operation, we're both toast," she points out.

"I have no doubt this is actually a 'Starfleet operation'," he says, taking the padd immediately. "But that part of 'Starfleet' needs to be torn out and ejected before it blows up the ship. I don't give a damn if some Black Widow wannabe says it was in the Federation charter, I didn't swear any oath that included a *secret police*. There's nothing more I can do to fulfill my oath, or for - well. I'm going to do my goddamn best to tear it out, and if someone doesn't see that as fulfilling my oath, well. Most of me looks like toaster parts already, so..." he's shortly distracted by scrolling the padd.

"This being the work of a domestic terrorist group would make a great deal more sense," she says. "And be much better than Starfleet

Intelligence being involved.” She doesn’t like saying it; it sends a chill down the back of her neck as she thinks of it.

“If it was some branch of Starfleet Intelligence that got my team killed and stuck their toaster-parts in me, then I’ll tear *them* out all the same. I don’t care what they call themselves,” he says bitterly. “But - sure. This is a vigilante group with a fondness for black leather. And you only met them today. I usually prefer my holodeck fantasies with more swords and rich landscapes, but whatever you’d like me to play along with.”

They’re going in circles, and enough is enough. “When we get there,” she says, “I’m beaming down alone. The last thing I need is this DeWinter spooking and running. I will need you on the runabout, scanning the planet for whatever they *don’t* want us to see.” She raises a hand to forestall his protests. “I’m not arguing about this, Hawthorne. If I were actually a Section 31 agent, I’d have had easily a dozen chances in the last hour to get you out of my way. And if I were a Section 31 agent, playing out this long complicated gambit to pull the wool over your eyes—especially as you’ve made it clear you won’t believe anything that comes out of my mouth—makes much less sense than just killing you.”

He actually laughs. “But pulling a long complicated gambit to stall for enough time to *consult privately with your handler* about what to do with me makes fine sense. Come on, Captain.”

“I understand you’re upset. I understand you feel betrayed. I am investigating a threat to Federation security; whether that threat is from the Dominion or Section 31 -”

“Or both.”

“- remains to be determined. I’m here to determine that, not to earn your trust.” She hopes she doesn’t have to mention that sedating him and sticking him in crew quarters for the rest of the trip is very much an option, but she gives him a hard look. “We don’t know what the hell this is, and you jumping to conclusions, however extensive your experience, is not helping. Are we clear?”

“As mud, Captain,” he says dryly. “I’m not here to have my ‘trust’ earned. I’m here to put a stop to whatever the - Section 31, Starfleet Secret Police, whatever - is trying to pull. Sending you off alone is no part of that. Even if you’re *not* a secret police agent, sending the Captain alone into unknown territory to meet with some shady agent would be stupid. That said,” he adds, as she appreciates his flash of common sense, “I’m also not thrilled about the idea of showing my face to a secret police operative who already knows me. Even if you claimed my covert secret police programming reactivated, they’d probably want to check, and I’m not letting them anywhere near my skull.”

“You can keep a transporter lock on me if it makes you feel better,” she says, electing to file everything that starts with secret police under rambling she doesn’t need to listen to. “You being there will compromise the mission and both of our safety. My decision is final.”

“Please. I’m Chief Engineer, I can do better than a transporter lock, and I fully intend on having ears on the ground without showing my face. Though I’d rather not do this.” He turns to a bulkhead and starts pulling it back. “Gull, friend, I think it’s time for you to come out now.”

“Your objections are noted,” says Chester. She watches Piper’s small drone emerge with raised eyebrows. “Aren’t you worried they’ll recognize Gull?”

“Absolutely bloody terrified.”

“That’s the most common sense you’ve shown all evening.” She scrubs a hand over her face.

He grins, and turns his attention to the drone. “Gull, how do you feel about doing something dangerous today?” The drone beeps. “Yeah, I know. Okay. Thank you.” He looks back at Chester, “Gull’s smart enough to stay *well* out of visual range, even if they have some sort of super-secret-police-tech - and you *will* stay well out of visual range, understand?” he says to the drone directly. The drone beeps. “I know, I know.” He turns back to Chester. “If you’ll let me borrow your comm badge,” he says, “I’ll tweak it so that your connection will stay open, patched through Gull. He’s got enough redundant systems to cut through most interference, and then I can maintain my connection with him over the distance, and both of us will be able to hear what’s going on. And if they’ve got something that can interfere with Gull, or, say, *someone* tells them he’s there to knock him out of the sky - well. That’s the point where I’ll start to worry.”

“Understood,” says Chester, eyeing Gull. “I have to entertain the possibility that what DeWinter told me *is* correct—that there may be a Dominion invasion force waiting on Respite. We’ll hope she’s lying, but proceeding as if she’s not protects us in either case—we don’t want her to know we doubt her, if she’s lying, and if the Dominion *is* there...” She looks away, because the moment she entertains the possibility her gut drops with visceral dread. “Well, *that* prospect scares the hell out of *anyone* sane.”

Hawthorne pats Gull. “Do *not* get shot by any Jem’Hadar, understood?” he tells the drone. The drone beeps back. “Yeah, I know.”

“Great. You go get some rest. Don’t do anything that makes me wish *Tanek* had been the one to stow away.”

He snorts. “Yes, Captain.”

Chapter 3

Chapter by [squireofgeekdom](#)

Piper sits huddled on the floor where he'd collapsed next to the shuttle bunk - like hell is he sleeping - with Gull watching the door.

It takes a while before he can think, and then more before he can think much other than *stupid stupid stupid*.

It's very annoying that having mostly-metal legs doesn't make him immune to these physical symptoms of anxiety and panic at its worst, but he still feels a tremor in calves he doesn't have. He could probably stand, if he really had to, but it doesn't seem like it from here.

Up to ... oh, about fifteen minutes ago, he's been following what he'd consider fairly strong logic. Point A, you can't help anyone if you're dead. Point B, if you trust someone who isn't trustworthy with the information that's in your head, you get a bad case of dead. Distrusting people, correctly or not, got you ... well, it got you to the point before he'd gotten onto this shuttle. Trusting a trustworthy person could get you a good outcome. (Hopefully. It could also get that person dead, and you too) Trusting an untrustworthy person got you - again, he can't stress this enough - dead or worse. He could decide who to trust. He couldn't decide who was untrustworthy.

(One could argue that the Federation was a project in getting people to choose trust in spite of logic. But there's a parasite in Starfleet, in the Federation, and he's just one cyborg. Plus Gull, of course. And death had a very clear way of making these decision games one-shot.)

That logic applied to everyone on the ship. Not just the Captain, though she held more weight by her position - and of course, because there was no way the Secret Police had let the flagship operation into the Gamma Quadrant go without their people in charge, making her highly likely to be a reason he ended up dead.

And of course, she was the one who knew. Because he was an idiot. And, because it turns out that 'oh fuck I'm going to be shot' has a very effective way of kicking logic right out of your brain. At least his. Vulcans probably have a better way of dealing with this. Lots of people probably do. But it turns out just because you should be dead, you don't get any steadier when it's looking you in the face.

(Also, given the whole 'woke up in a box' thing, throwing himself into a cargo container for hours was probably never going to go well, in hindsight. Not that he'd been spoiled for alternatives.)

So he'd vented his rage and his secrets instead of coming up with any sort of cover story for being in the shuttle, no matter how half-assed. He had been so panicked he probably couldn't remember half of what he said if his life depended on it - *hah*. Did he tell her he'd seen the woman in her quarters before, when his project had been taken over? He couldn't say. Of all the small mercies, he's pretty sure he kept it together enough not to give away Marbog - who he could already hear, very clearly, in his imagination, reminding him just how stupid he'd been - and that if the Captain or anyone else couldn't piece together that him knowing about his cybernetics meant the guy who worked on his cybernetics knew, they'd have to be dumber than rocks.

The information was out there now, with Captain Chester. And even if it was worth crying over spilled secrets any more than spilled milk ... on a gut level, it's hard to regret it. He's very, very angry, and has been for a long time. And if he's going to die - and he is going to die - there's something preferable to being shot in the front and not the back, looking him in the eyes and seeing every last ounce of spite and defiance, know that he's been defying them all this time. He's going to die Starfleet.

And at the very least, he can be an inconvenient pain in the ass to the fascists for every second he has before that.

The option of keeping secrets was gone, and now with the truth out the question is whether the recipient of the truth is trustworthy or untrustworthy, and of course the recipient was nearabouts the least likely person to be trustworthy - apart from her handler. So he's almost certainly going to die. No bluster makes up for the fact that his life depends on Chester being trustworthy or the secret police for some reason deciding that Chester appearing squeaky clean is more important than taking him out, and for her to act like she's trustworthy for long enough for them to kill him in three weeks when they have a better cover story. Why would they do that? He doesn't know. Lure out co-conspirators maybe? But if they can't infer Marbog's involvement, they'll have to try a lot harder if they want Piper to give his name. He's bad at acting, bad with people - trying to anticipate what people would do or reason why people did things that weren't in an engineering manual generally didn't go so well - and generally not suited for spycraft. Having some of it off his chest would be something of a relief, if he wasn't too panicked to register it.

Because unfortunately 'being alive' was a precondition of stopping - or trying to stop - whatever the Secret Police are doing here, and if *he* doesn't... he can't count on anyone else. He's too tired and currently more dysfunctional than usual to be the clever one and get away and stay alive that way. But he has to keep trying. He has to. He's survived this long leaning on the simple rule of trusting nothing. And bad actor that he is, if nothing else he's probably not too tired to play grumpy and arrogant.

He has to keep trying. He has to stay alive.

And if he doesn't... There has to be a way to keep trying even if he's dead. Marbog will keep trying, will stay vigilant... but Marbog doesn't know anything about the specifics of what is on this moon. Not that he does, not really, but -

If there's any chance that he can give Marbog a warning that the secret's out - if there's any chance that Marbog knowing could help stop this...

It's an engineering problem. Work the problem. You're good at *this*.

He opens a panel on the hull, and gets to work.

Hopefully, it will look like a minor bits of noise in the internal shuttle's system's logs when they download to 'Pret. The code isn't

complicated, the encoding phrase is hartleyrathaway, so it's not impossible to guess - but Marbog would guess it first.

As he inputs the message - nothing more complicated than 'captain knows' and the coordinates of the planet - the woman's face keeps lingering at the edge of his mind, smirking. He wouldn't forget that expression, just a flash on her face when she'd walked on to his project. Before she'd gotten his team killed. Before she and her fascist cohort had shoved this in his head.

He is probably going to die. A significant, not especially rational part of him - the same part that had spat the truth at Chester in rage - would very much like to see her go down with him.

It wouldn't change anything. Or maybe it would. Sometimes you couldn't see the results of your shot.

He is probably going to die. There's nothing else he can do between now and then. He certainly won't be sleeping. He should try and eat, but he can't bring himself to try and stagger to his feet just to go back out and replicate plain granola in front of Chester, especially given he'll almost certainly throw back up again before they land.

Nothing left to do but think of a song, but his flute is back in his quarters. He looks up at the shuttle's ceiling and hums, instead.

It ranks high in Chester's list of most unpleasant shuttle rides ever, including that one with a JAG officer and Captain Steenburg after the whole debacle of rescuing Rilas that one time during the war, but they get there, and Hawthorne beams her down with only minimal grumbling.

She materializes in a desolate clearing in a boulder field. It's almost a relief after eighteen hours in a shuttle with a man who hates her, but unfortunately it also contains DeWinter, who is waiting for her.

"Captain Chester," she says. "It's good to see you."

"Well," Chester says, "it seems my leave got canceled, so I didn't have anything better to do."

"Sorry about that," says DeWinter, obviously not sorry in the slightest. "But it's urgent. Come on."

Chester follows her along a narrow trail. "So when did Section 31 become aware of this?" she asks.

"A few months ago. But it took some time to realize the scale of the problem. Respite was chosen because it was convenient to both Federation and Cardassian space. It was an ideal place to stage an evacuation—and now the infrastructure is in place, it'll be an ideal place from which to launch an attack."

"Tell me about this infrastructure."

"Barracks," says DeWinter, "exercise and medical facilities, a landing field. You'll see in a few moments."

"Any reasons given for the evacuation stalling?"

"None. No official communications, either."

"Hm. Outside observers?"

"Primarily Federation." DeWinter's face screws up, displeased. "They're so worried about another war they won't see what's brewing right under their noses."

"Yes, the prospect of another war with the Dominion should scare anyone," says Chester.

"You saw more of it than most," says DeWinter. "You know what they're capable of. They shot your commanding officer in front of you during the Battle of Betazed."

It's the last thing Chester wants to be reminded of—the shock, the guilt. The certain knowledge she could have done something.

Of course, lying low meant that Commander Faisal's sacrifice wasn't in vain. It got her, and the others, out alive. But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt, it means she's got a slightly better excuse than most.

"And there was the *Bedivere*," continues DeWinter, as they climb the ridge, her voice getting softer as they go. They're probably getting closer. "They like to talk to you about the civilians you saved, and the crew you saved, but not about the ones you didn't."

Yes, a lot of the Cardassians who'd run to them for help had been gunned down before they'd even reached the wreckage. They'd saved nine.

"And you were on the retrieval team for Captain Jel'n when—"

"You know, reminding me of all my worst experiences in the Dominion War before showing me a Jem'Hadar encampment is fairly clumsy emotional manipulation," Chester says. "Let's not, shall we?"

DeWinter shrugs. "Only making conversation."

"Yeah, sure you are," says Chester, and just before they crest the ridge, DeWinter gestures for her to crouch and get behind a line of rocks. She does, following the other woman around another corner and through a crevice until they have their vantage point, high above the encampment. DeWinter hands Chester a pair of field glasses.

Chester uses them. Yes, that's a Jem'Hadar encampment, and that's a *lot* of Jem'Hadar. They look alert, prepared, purposeful—as if they're just waiting for the ships to arrive to take them to their next conquest. There are guards, there are patrols. She pans the glasses over, finding the training facility, the medical facility, the ships.

There's no way it's this simple, she thinks. No way. What is she missing? But the ball of dread in her gut grows heavier. This really *could* be a Dominion invasion, forming right under their noses.

Piper watches Captain Chester and Gull dematerialize at the same time; Captain Chester to her designated rendezvous point, Gull to a point where a careful preview of the terrain had put him out of visual range and not near any other life signs.

The transport has no hitch, and there's a handful of seconds where he thinks it worked; that the meticulous tweaks to the comm badge to keep the open connection with Gull, that his extensive work on Gull's many redundancies was good enough, that his sweep of the train had been accurate.

And then there's static from Gull's comm connection.

"Gull? Gull!!"

The static cuts off and he gets back a string of beeps that roughly corresponds to *I'm fine, idiot. The connection's down on the planet. I muted the bloody static I was getting.*

So nothing's wrong with Gull, Captain Chester just beamed down into an area with signal jamming sophisticated enough to block *Gull* for her private conversation with her boss.

"*Fucker.*" It doesn't matter that Gull is no longer here to keep static running to interfere with any internal recordings, if the secret police want to listen to him swear, there's plenty of footage of that. And if they can jam Gull, they can probably overcome the static program too.

Well, he's probably dead anyway. Might as well know what he's dying for. Maybe get a chance to be a thorn in someone's side while he's at it.

"Can you find a redundancy that works? Or get a transporter lock?" *I already bloody tried.* "Okay, okay. I know. Don't get shot." *Obviously.*

"*Fucker,*" he mutters again. She must have been trying so hard to keep a straight face when he put this together, she must have known her bosses would be blocking any surveillance Gull could do. Smug *fucker* and her fucking mindgame *bullshit*. Right now she's probably having a good laugh with her boss and figuring out what new generation of mind control tech to shove into his head next.

That'll teach him to *play along* and let his guard down even the slightest fraction. Had he thought for a second that there was a chance she was trustworthy? *Idiot.*

Right. He's not going to just sit here and sulk. Maybe they thought they'd blocked him finding out anything, but they were going to learn how wrong they were.

At least Gull had beamed down outside of the jamming field, so he hadn't just dropped out of contact on materialization. And he still has the shuttle running sweeps of the planet, for whatever good that will do if they have something good enough to block Gull when he's on the surface, anything they don't want him to see will probably be well out of sight from the ship. Where, by now, the secret police know he's waiting.

Fuck that. He's spent months waiting with his mouth shut, waiting for a break.

Whatever's there to be seen, he's going to see it on the surface with Gull. If he's going to die, he's going to die being a thorn in the secret police's side.

And specifically the smirking face of the woman who had gotten his team killed.

That rage still boils in him, desperate irrational desire to see her go down with him. Maybe he won't get a chance to take the shot. But maybe he will.

He steps over to the replicator. "Steak dinner with mashed potatoes and gravy, with tray and cutlery including fork and steak knife, please."

He half wishes he could just call up the replicator pattern for one of the batarangs he keeps under his pillow - yes, he knows it's dumb, but the secret police hadn't given him laser vision, or any of Victor Stone's cool cyborg weapons.

Well, what he really wishes is that he had Sting, a good elvish cape that would keep him hidden from enemy eyes, and ideally a Samwise Gamgee.

At least Sam would approve of fighting with the cookware you had to hand, even if he probably wouldn't approve of anything else about this.

And, of course Gull would zap him if he compared the drone to Samwise Gamgee.

He dumps everything but the steak knife back into recycling, tucks the knife inside his boot - there's certainly nothing it can cut in there.

Plausible deniability was his friend. If he wasn't going to get stunned or outright killed on sight down there - the only way he'd get close enough for this to be any use - it would be because Chester was actually trustworthy - a possibility, however unlikely - or playing trustworthy so the situation appeared squeaky clean. She wouldn't know - or would be pretending she didn't know - that the connection was jammed.

Maybe she hadn't even gotten the chance to tell her handler he was here - so her handler would have no reason to suspect he knew anything at all. Of course, if she had told her handler, it wouldn't matter how he played it.

She knew he was here, knew he was sweeping the planet, knew he was monitoring. Well, he'd *said* that if the connection cut out he'd start to worry.

He's Lt. Commander Piper Hawthorne. He never doubted the official story of his accident. He hates the Dominion. He is *very* concerned about having lost contact with his Captain after detecting some irregularities in his planetary sweep, so he beamed down a safe distance away. None of this is a problem. He's a professional young commander who won't stab you in the throat with anything, no matter how grumpy he seems.

He could keep thinking himself in circles - he's too tired to decide if it's the best option, if it makes sense. It's the easiest thing to do, he's been playing this part for months.

You've gone quiet. We're doing something stupid again, aren't we?

"Unfortunately." Piper says, plugging in the coordinates he had beamed Gull down to. "I'm beaming down to meet you."

Chapter 4

“How long?” says Chester.

“How long do we have?” says DeWinter. “We don’t know. I’d like to avoid doing things on the Dominion’s timeline if at all possible. If we sabotage the ketrecel white, however, it’ll blow the whole operation sky high.”

“What if they have enough already? It could just move their timeline up.”

“They don’t. We know that at least.”

“What if they don’t get evacuated? Dominion’s never been big on that.”

“Then we all get a demonstration of exactly why we can’t give the Dominion a toehold in our space,” says DeWinter, cold. They step around the corner back into the clearing where Chester beamed down, and Hawthorne is there, coming from the opposite side.

DeWinter’s breath hisses in sharply, and the blunt nose of a phaser nudges into the small of Chester’s back, just in the right place to shred the abdominal aorta and give her a few minutes of serious regret before she bleeds out. DeWinter doesn’t seem the sort to set her phaser to a nice instantly fatal setting under the circumstances. She raises her hands instantly.

“Stop right there, Lieutenant Commander Hawthorne,” says DeWinter. Piper’s hands are already up. To Chester she says, “What the *hell* were you thinking?”

“I was thinking it was a bad idea to go to an unknown location with an unknown party without some backup,” says Chester, her voice even. There’s something about having a phaser pointed at her that’s left her mind full of bright, clear adrenaline—a weird distant sort of sharp-edged calm. “How do you know my chief engineer?”

Said chief engineer’s eyes widen in apparent confusion.

“Not relevant,” says DeWinter. “One more step, Hawthorne, just give me an excuse. You have ten seconds to tell me why you’re really here.” She doesn’t need to finish the threat. A phaser shot through the guts isn’t going to be a nice way to go.

“He’s here on my orders,” says Chester. “He was doing scans of the planet—”

“Shut up,” says DeWinter, almost conversationally. “You don’t have anything I want to hear right now. Hawthorne, talk.”

“Lieutenant Commander Piper Hawthorne, USS Interpreter, reporting under Captain Chester’s command. I was performing planetary scans as ordered, but lost communications with the Captain when she beamed down. Planetary scans were picking up irregularities and I was concerned when I could not raise communications or transporter lock. I beamed down a safe distance away from the Captain’s transport site to investigate and provide any needed assistance.” His hands are still in the air, voice sounding like he’s reading something memorized by rote.

“Do *you* believe any of this?” says DeWinter to Chester, her tone poisonous. “I’ve read your files, Captain. You do everything you can *alone*. It’s not like you to drag one of your crew into danger. Much less your *chief engineer*.”

Chester closes her eyes at the last one, breathing out through her nose. She knows the button DeWinter’s trying to hit, and she’s not going to give her the satisfaction. “He insisted,” she says. “He said I had the responsibility not to go haring off on my own. He told me I could take him, or Commander J’etris, and if she went the possibility of Subcommander Tanek noticing and reporting to his superiors was significantly higher. So I allowed him to accompany me. Or did you want me taking the chance of the Tal Shiar joining our little party?”

DeWinter shoves her forward, so she can cover both of them with the weapon. Chester keeps her hands raised, darts a look at Hawthorne. She would very much like to ask what the hell *he’s* thinking.

“If there’s anyone here who has a *damn* good reason to want to stop the Dominion getting their fingers back in the Alpha Quadrant, it’s *me*,” Hawthorne snaps. “Whoever you are, if you’ve read her file, maybe you’ve read mine. The Dominion sneaking around in the Alpha Quadrant got me blown up - and then they stuck this tech in me and tried to turn me into a puppet. You think I’m not going to try and stop that? You think I’m going to let my *Captain* go out here to the enemy camp without help?”

“As I was saying, he insisted.” Chester gives a little *what can you do* shrug.

It finally makes DeWinter hesitate.

“He was doing scans,” says Chester. “Think about it—you showed up in my quarters in the dead of the night, claiming you were from a secret Starfleet agency. It seemed like a set-up. So he didn’t have to insist that much. When I was a commander—a lieutenant—I could get away with going off on my own. But I have a ship, a crew, an assignment with heavy public scrutiny, I don’t get to do that anymore. Because if I go off half-cocked on this, a lot of people will die. *Interpeter’s* mission is to help stop the next war before it even gets started, and if I were to spike the ketrecel white without good evidence—well, there are a lot of covert ops agencies just praying for the chance to start the next war, on every side.” She takes a breath in, tries to move so she’s a little in front of Hawthorne, so he’ll have a bit more time to run, if it gets bad. “I couldn’t take you at your word. So I took Commander Hawthorne, because he’s exactly who I want at my back right now. All right? And you’ve showed me, you’ve convinced me. There’s a Dominion invasion force right over that ridge, and we’re going to have to stop them. Commander Hawthorne being here won’t change that. Right?”

“Amazingly stupid,” mutters DeWinter. But the phaser lowers. Chester breathes out.

“Right, then.” Hawthorne’s hands are still in the air. “If we’re all done with the guns? I am already here, and you may as well utilize my technical expertise. The Dominion invasion force is just over the ridge? The irregularities in the scans prevented me from getting anything useful. I should make a firsthand technical assessment. And whatever this is with ketrecel white and the supply run, I’ll need to review it. No one knows the - ah.” he waves a hand. “Elliptics - *Eccentricities* of the Interpreter’s replicator system than I do. You’ll want me to make sure it’s an adjustment we can handle before we’re in the middle of the mission. Yes?”

“Yes,” says Chester, heavily. “We should have him take a look.”

“Absolutely not,” says DeWinter. “We’ve taken enough of a risk of being noticed as it is.”

“Well,” Hawthorne says dryly. “Given that you didn’t notice me until you’d practically walked into me, I don’t think I’m adding much to the risk of being noticed. And while the Captain has a superlative tactical analysis of the camp, I’m sure, I’m *very* closely familiar with Dominion tech, *obviously*, I’ll know what’s important right away when I see it, and I can assure you I will give you valuable insight.”

He has a sort of heightened arrogant affect to his voice, she has no idea if he’s intentionally putting it on. She wishes he wouldn’t.

“Very well,” says DeWinter. “Keep it brief. You lead the way, Captain. I’ll bring up the rear. Make sure we don’t get further unwanted guests.”

Which means they’re still very much in danger of being shot.

“‘Unwanted guests’,” Hawthorne mutters, with the same exaggerated arrogance, “I provide valuable technical expertise and I’m an unwanted guest...”

They reach the top of the ridge again and Chester hands Hawthorne the field glasses, staring down as best she can at this distance. Dominion outposts are all so similar, and she feels a queasy recognition of the layout. She did enough pre-mission briefings...

Wait. She’s letting her memories lead her. It’s not like the damn planet is shielded, why’s Section 31 the first concerned party here? It can’t just be willful blindness. “Thoughts, Commander Hawthorne?”

“A moment, please.” He has a white-knuckled grip on the field glasses. “They certainly aren’t set up to evacuate. This is a stable encampment - something that can be built out into a staging area. The ships are troop transports. I - hmm. I suspect they’re still active. Clearly in good working order.” He looks up. “The assessment of the threat is correct. Give me some time to review additional technical documents, and I can give you precise estimates for how many troops they can move at present, and how large the camp is likely to become. And whatever else you need to know about their ketrecel white supplies. They clearly have manufacturing facilities, all operational. Definitely meant to supply a larger group than this.” He’s still gripping the field glasses.

“If we could hurry up. You certainly won’t be reviewing technical documents *here*.”

“I’ve seen what I need to. I can evaluate the documents for modifications to the ketrecel white on our way back.”

That is a terrifying prospect. Chester closes her eyes briefly in dismay and hopes Piper saw something he’s not mentioning. “Well, DeWinter. It seems we’re at your disposal.”

They beam back up. Chester immediately turns to Hawthorne. “Please tell me you saw something there that indicates it’s not an invasion force.”

Hawthorne ignores her, turning to the transporter controls. “Gull?”

An ungodly series of screeching beeps comes through the ship’s comms. *You fucking shit idiot do you know how long you were in comms blackout! I was dead in the fucking water! Are you trying to bloody die, you shit idiot?! I am not helping you with this kind of shit again! Never! Fuck!*

“I know, I know. I’m *fine*, thank you very much, I’m beaming you up now.”

He drops the field glasses to the floor to grab on to Gull as soon as he rematerializes, cursing under his breath before finally remembering the Captain exists. “Yes, fine, I am suitably terrified of the imminent prospect of Dominion invasion, that’s my official report to Section 31, let’s go.”

Her face falls. “So she’s not lying? That really is...didn’t it seem off to you, aren’t those ships a bit old...?” She’s fishing, a desperate note in her voice.

He looks at her. Her expression seems entirely genuine.

There was, technically, an option here, one he’s already - grudgingly - acknowledged was a non-zero possibility, that she was telling the truth, that she was trustworthy. That she wasn’t a secret police agent, that Section 31 hadn’t bothered or hadn’t been able to get their hooks into all of the Armistice captains before the mission, and she had only met the secret police when they had tried to co-opt her tonight - last night? He was losing track of time. Lack of sleep makes you prone to errors and poor judgment. He knows this, it’s why he won’t let the safety of engineering and the ship be compromised by enthusiastic all nighters.

Where was he going with this. He had a point.

Right. Nonzero possibilities. A Captain Chester who wasn’t a Section 31 agent, who didn’t trust the secret police - that would make sense to be a Captain Chester who the secret police would draw a phaser on when he showed up - when one of their loose ends showed up. That would be

a reason to lie about him being there, and not point out any of his obvious lies. Support him getting a good look at the camp. All of that would make sense.

On the other hand, the other possibility he'd laid out - the other one that ended with him alive at least for the next few days - was the one where the secret police had prioritized Chester appearing squeaky clean, and she would act trustworthy. That might even have been what they were discussing when he beamed down - and you didn't become a secret police member by not knowing how to deal with unexpected contingencies - if his arrival had even been unexpected. If they could block Gull, maybe they had detected his transporter signature. Maybe they had time to put a story together before he got there. Or maybe they were just good at improv. Either way - a great way to make Captain Chester seem trustworthy, right? That would keep him nicely in the fold with no bodies to clean up.

And if that was the case - letting them know he wasn't a monumental idiot and had actually recognized the old, grounded-for-months ships and lived-in camp for the near-zero threat it presented was a good way to get himself dead. Of course Captain Chester was *fishing* - she knew he'd been lying about thinking he had Dominion tech inside him, she knew he'd been lying for most of his performance on the planet, and he could just as well have been lying about the nonsense he'd just spewed back there. He'd already made it clear he hated her contact and didn't trust her, why would she immediately believe him when he said he bought their story?

Either way, he has the information on the sabotage of the supply mission. He's going to sabotage the sabotage. The most important things are a) ensuring he's alive to do that and b) ensuring the secret police don't have any reason to suspect that he's going to do that, so they sabotage his sabotage of their sabotage.

Unless she'd handed him a dummy datapad and the real sabotage was something else.

Fuck, he's tired. The rule was trust nothing and stay alive, and paranoia hasn't gotten him killed yet. Lying it is.

"The ships will work," he snorts. "Not everyone flies around in tech so new it's barely a toddler."

"You're sure." There's a grim note to her voice, a mask settling over her face, flat determination and icy confidence sliding down behind her eyes. If he hadn't just seen that apparent horror and uncertainty, it would seem she wasn't surprised, that she already has a plan. But he did, so he realizes it's the face of the Perfect Starfleet Officer In An Emergency. The part she's playing to seem trustworthy; and she's using it to excuse what she's about to do, he thinks with a bitter twist. She *does* already have a plan.

"You looked at them too, before I got there. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You're my technical expert. But..." She frowns, shakes her head slightly. "You noticed how she hurried us? She hurried me, too, the first time. She didn't want you to look at all. If that really was an invasion camp, you'd think she'd give us a nice long look. Really soak in the horror. But she didn't." She stands there a moment with her arms folded, then makes a decision. "We're going back, and we're having another look, and finding what she doesn't want us to see."

He stares at her for a long moment. *What the actual hell.* If this was fishing, it was an extraordinary effort. He just has to laugh. "You know, that's a terrible idea, but it's not more ridiculous than anything else I've done today."

"Everything I've done today has been a terrible idea," she says. "That's why I didn't want you coming along."

Gull beeps his *vehement* agreement that they should not be there. "You can stay in the ship if you want, Gull." *Fuck you, you're obviously too stupid to be allowed to wander on your own.* "Yeah, alright." He shakes his head. "Just to be clear, they can jam anything Gull and I can do, so I have no way of knowing if she's actually left, or if she's still here watching us, or even how the hell she got here. Just in case you were wondering."

"I'm not throwing us into another war because I wouldn't take a second look," she says, still with that perfect Starfleet officer expression, and the voice, too. He wonders if the command-track cadets have to take *classes* on it. "But that's my risk to take; you've already made your judgment. You should stay here." She glances up at him, mouth turning up in an unnatural little grim smile, at odds with her cold eyes. "*Actually* stay, Commander Hawthorne. Almost getting gutshot *once* today was more than enough for me."

He narrows his eyes. Right, and trust whatever she was going to do on the surface alone.

Maybe this was a situation where the best outcome *did* come from trusting her because she was actually trustworthy, not just play along, tell her it's obviously not an invasion, avoid Captain Chester deciding to go back to have another look, not raise a watching Section 31's suspicions and get them both shot to death on the surface and have it blamed on the Jem'Hadar invasion, and then have the go ahead for destroying this Jem'Hadar camp, whatever it really was.

But then again, telling the truth at any point in the past, oh, twenty minutes or so would have gotten him shot in the head, so.

Maybe this was an attempt to do something else on the surface out of his sight, something she had been meant to do before, but had been set aside upon his arrival. Maybe this *was* the extraordinary lengths to fish for his doubts - which, given that he'd made it very clear he hadn't believed anything else they'd said...

Or maybe it's an attempt to make it look like he was killed by Jem'Hadar.

Fuck it. He's already thought he was going to die plenty of times today. What's one more?

"No. I've come this far. If you're going back there, I'm going with you. Going separately seems to end in too much phaser pointing."

Chapter 5

They're back on the planet, because of course they are. Captain Chester looks through the field goggles.

This is stupid. Gull pings him through his cybernetics; being practically on top of him, the comms blocking didn't matter. He didn't say 'this is stupid' in Federation Standard, or in anything that really fits into the context of a universal translator as they exist, but Piper was used to sort of - interpreting the impressions and outputs. *What kind of ploy do you think this possibly could be? Tell her it's not an invasion camp and let us get out of here before we all get shot to bits.*

"Hawthorne," Chester says, her voice promising trouble, and Piper finds himself freezing. "You didn't see much combat during the war, did you. Or many Jem'Hadar, for that matter."

"No," he says. *Why bring that up now?*

"Well, I did," she says, "and I'm seeing Jem'Hadar like I've never seen them before." She lowers the field glasses, frowning intently. "I'm seeing *unarmed* Jem'Hadar."

He can't say he noticed that, but at this distance, it would be hard to tell one way or another.

"And I'm pretty certain I see Starfleet Medical insignia on some of those crates," she says. She tucks the field glasses back on her hip, then thinks better of it and hands them to him. "I don't need someone getting jumpy and mistaking them for a weapon."

"Mistaking them for a weapon? Why would anyone—what do you mean?"

Her chin juts, determined, the Perfect Starfleet Officer once again. "I'm going down to talk to them," she says. "We're less than a kilometer from what looks like their front gate. You stay here." And she starts down the slope.

It takes Piper a moment to actually parse what she's doing, and then a moment longer of flat confusion. He's given her everything her murderous handlers are looking for, he's played the good little spy, why the hell is she striding determinedly into a camp full of Jem'Hadar, armed or not. It's so completely stupid it makes no sense.

Unless it's *not* a trick.

The only reason the Captain would go to *talk* to the Jem'Hadar—who do *not* need to be armed to pull her limb from limb—is if she genuinely cares that this isn't a staging camp. If she genuinely doesn't want to kill them. If she trusts DeWinter just as much as she's been saying she does—that is, not at all.

If she's *not* secret police.

"Shit," says Piper, which really isn't enough to cover the situation, and goes scrambling after her.

It takes him a while to catch up with her, given her head start and the way she's navigating the rocky, unpleasant terrain like it's a level flat corridor. "Hawthorne," she says, "I told you to stay put. I feel like I'm saying this a lot today."

"They might be unarmed, but so are you!"

She doesn't look up from finding her footing. "Frankly, a phaser wouldn't do me much good if they decided to kill me," she says. "So I'll just have to make sure they don't want to kill me. Turn *around*, Hawthorne."

"Captain!" The camp is getting closer. He grabs at her sleeve to stop her for one moment, so they can *talk* about this, before she goes and gets herself killed, which he suddenly gives a shit about. She stops, her eyebrows raised. "Okay, look. You don't need to go down there, it's not an invasion camp."

"You lied to me?" she asks, that perfect mask still in place. Her voice gives her away; there's an edge under it, a suggestion of fangs and claws.

"Of course I did!" he says. "I thought you were Secret Police! I wasn't going to run my head into the noose you were oh so helpfully holding out for me! I wasn't going to let you and DeWinter know that I saw through both of you! Only... I'm guessing you're not. Erm. Actually Secret Police."

"Hawthorne," she says, as even and businesslike as if they're around the briefing room table on the *Interpreter*, "I'm pretty sure that's a hospital. If I hadn't checked, *we could have destroyed a hospital.*"

"That's the *point* of me trying to *stay alive*. I wouldn't have *let* you," he says, which, admittedly, sounds a lot dumber and more improbable spoken aloud than in his head. "I was going to stop you."

She just stares at him a long moment, then starts walking. "Last chance to turn around," she says. "I *was* going to trust you to get back to the ship and warn J'etris if this got me killed, but I think *trust* is not something I should be expecting today."

"Look," he says, and has to go scrambling gracelessly after her again. How is she doing it? He's almost eaten shit and died three times on this awful rocky slope; she's got some Legolas bullshit going on, not a single slip or grab at an—*ow*—sharp boulder to steady herself. "Look, this is exactly why I *wasn't* going to just trust you! These assholes blow up *hospitals*, apparently, the only reason I'm here is to stop them, and I *am* going to help you stop them—can you slow down? This is stupid. You realize this is *stupid*. You're on a list I could count on one hand if I wasn't fond of all my fingers of people I trust to not be secret police. So if you could *not die immediately* after *confirming that*, that would be

great. ”

“We can work out our interpersonal issues later, Commander,” she says. “Right now, we don’t fully understand the situation, and I mean to fix that. And that means talking to whoever is in charge of that camp.”

“That’s not—” he stops himself as they come around the last of the boulders and run almost directly into a group of Jem’Hadar.

They do *not* look friendly. “You are not authorized to be here,” says one, and even Piper with his limited experience can tell that’s a precursor to them just getting killed.

The Captain is supremely unfussed. She spreads her hands at waist level, showing she’s unarmed, and her voice is still just as steady. “I need to speak to the administrators of this hospital, please. It’s urgent.”

There’s a long, bad moment. Hawthorne, behind her, has completely frozen, which is the smartest thing he can do. Chester looks calmly up into the eyes of the Jem’Hadar in front of her, making it clear with every inch of her body that she is not a threat. Jem’Hadar take a refreshingly direct approach to threats; they kill them.

Now, the question is whether the very fact of their presence is a threat, in which case they’re about to die, and DeWinter will have martyrs she was looking for.

“Why are you here?” asks the Jem’Hadar.

“A security threat has come to my attention,” says Chester. “I will share the information with the hospital administration and your superiors.”

The Jem’Hadar trade looks. Trading looks is not snapping anyone’s neck, so it’s good.

“You will come with us,” says the one in front of her.

The war is too close a memory not to send little creeping feet of terror up her spine when the Jem’Hadar close ranks around them, and she’s got no idea if she keeps it off her face or out of her body language, but they’re *used* to other sentients being scared of them. She’s not sure it even registers. A glance out of the corner of her eye shows Hawthorne following, wooden and stiff. Good. Just. Keep it that way.

They’re being *nice*, by Jem’Hadar standards. All the same, the gate closing behind them sends a sick little lurch into her gut. If she’s fucked up, this is going to be a horrible way to die, and she’s going to feel stupid about it the whole time.

Except she’s *certain* she hasn’t fucked up. Even their escort isn’t armed.

Not a threat. Not a threat. You don’t need to do anything about me. Just take me to where protocol says I ought to go.

Even with all her certainty, the first Starfleet uniform she sees makes her breathe in sharply in relief. It’s a medical uniform, on a stocky middle aged human woman, graying black hair in a tight bun; she looks up at their approach and her mouth goes disapproving, a look more intimidating than those of the Jem’Hadar around her. Next to her, a willowy Vorta straightens up with an expression of utter disdain.

“We found these two scouting the perimeter,” says the lead Jem’Hadar.

“I wasn’t informed of any additional Starfleet presence,” says the Vorta, her voice cool.

“Neither was I,” says the human. “Dr. Yvonne Graves. Who the hell are you?” She pauses, looking Chester over more thoroughly; a Lieutenant’s pips gleam at her throat. “Captain,” she adds, reluctantly.

“Doctor,” says Chester. “A security threat has come to my attention. I’d like to consult you on our best course of action. May I?”

“Well,” says Dr. Graves, “You’re here, I suppose.”

A few minutes later finds them in one of the temporary shelters, Graves plopping down a cup of tea in front of each of them without even asking. The Vorta—Amda, if Chester caught her name correctly—is stirring a concerning number of tapioca pearls into hers; Chester doesn’t miss the delicate shudder Graves produces as it catches her eye.

Amda smiles that unpleasant Vorta smile. “We have a very weak sense of taste,” she explains. “But a great appreciation for texture.”

And a great appreciation for horrifying the humans in your vicinity, thinks Chester, watching her apparently enjoy the chewiest tea in history. The tapioca is probably melting in the hot liquid. Chester is trying not to think too hard about the result.

“So,” says Graves, “Captain. You’ll have to forgive our manners, but I’ve been juggling a political hot potato for the last eighteen months with a skeleton staff, and I’ve got no patience for ceremony. Who the hell are you and what’s this security threat?”

“Diane Chester, USS *Interpreter*. This is my chief engineer, Lt. Commander Piper Hawthorne. We became aware of Respite’s existence a little over a day ago, when a member of an extremist group approached me, seeking an accomplice to tamper with the ketrecel white supply.” She’s ready to step on Hawthorne’s foot if he tries to say anything. She knows he suspects Section 31 is Starfleet, but she herself isn’t sure, and like hell is she airing that kind of dirty laundry in front of a Vorta.

Besides, even if they have some kind of official sanction, ‘domestic extremist group’ is a hell of a lot more accurate to the kinds of things they’re trying to do.

Amda laughs condescendingly. “Of course,” she says, “the Federation is having difficulty keeping its house in order.”

Chester looks at Graves, sympathetic. Tanek is bad enough. She can't imagine being stuck on a remote planetoid with him for eighteen months.

The sympathy is lost on the other woman. “So what are you here to do, Captain?” she asks. “Inform us of the danger before going on your merry way?”

Chester folds her arms and leans back in the rickety chair, eyeing both of you. “No,” she says. “I'm here to consult you on our course of action. It's clear enough to me, whatever you're doing here, Command has hung you out to dry, and even if I turn this group down flat, they'll find someone else to do the dirty work for me. They'll probably succeed; they were remarkably convincing, in large part because no one knows what's going on here. So first things first, what the hell *are* you doing?”

“She's probably not cleared for this,” says Amda, in a tone of such smugness that Chester is surprised when Graves actually hesitates before responding; that kind of tone would make her want to spill her guts out of spite alone.

“You're almost definitely not cleared for this,” Graves says, reluctant.

“And that almost got you killed,” Chester says flatly, “because to someone not looking closely and being briefed by someone claiming to be a Starfleet Intelligence operative, this looks like a staging camp for an invasion. Please let me help you, Doctor.”

Graves looks down. Amda sips her tea, which is slowly congealing in a very upsetting way, with the air of someone watching a play. Chester makes eye contact with her. “Perhaps you can shed some light on the situation?” she asks.

“She won't,” says Graves. “It'd be admitting a mistake. You recall that during the war the Dominion began to produce Jem'Hadar in the Alpha Quadrant, tailored to the environment?”

Chester nods. It would be hard to forget; they were arrogant bastards, and they weren't quiet about their superiority over the previous generation.

“Well, it seems they tailored them a bit too well,” says Graves. “Something like 0.01% of them are incapable of processing trace elements prevalent in the Gamma Quadrant. They can't go home.”

“Standard procedure would have been to cull them,” says Amda, “but your people are such a sentimental species, and in the midst of treaty negotiations, it seemed a trivial concession. We were perfectly happy to let you take care of them, as long as you didn't get too interested in their genetics.” She smiles over her cup like she thinks she's being clever. “Inok Nor wasn't the *only* illicit medical research going on during the war, you know.”

Chester isn't sure she does know, and the idea settles a lead ball in her guts. She puts it aside to worry about later.

“So I am here to observe,” Amda says, “and sample the wide variety of your replicator menu. You really do value the little luxuries, don't you?”

“We can't send them to the Gamma Quadrant with the rest of the evacuated Dominion personnel,” says Graves, “because they'll die. We can't turn them over to the Dominion at all, because they'll be killed. We can't just let them go off merrily into unaffiliated space, because the treaty terms forbid any Alpha Quadrant signatory from allowing the Dominion to transit its space on its way to any other part of the quadrant. And for obvious political reasons, Command hasn't been real eager to let them run around in our space in general. So they're stuck here. And so are we.”

“For another seven years or so,” says Amda, “until they die of old age.” She makes a delicate face. “Not the way I envisioned spending *my* career.”

“As you can see, Captain, our options are limited.”

“It would seem so,” says Chester, frowning into her tea. “I can make sure they don't succeed this time. But not next, or the time after that. We can't keep kicking this can down the road, that's clear enough.”

Graves sighs heavily. “Absent a way to remove the dependence on the white, I don't see a way to do anything but kick the can down the road.”

“Evacuate all Starfleet personnel,” says Amda, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. “And civilian observers, of course. It's not like the Jem'Hadar aren't self-sufficient. And if something goes wrong—”

“When,” says Graves, her voice sharp.

“There will be no embarrassing extra casualties,” Amda finishes, and meets all of their glares, horribly smug. “What? Jem'Hadar want to die in battle. It's not like these ones have value to us anymore.”

“It's not an option,” says Graves. “If there's anything we can do for them to get them home...”

Amda snorts, disdainful.

“It's not going to happen in the time it'll take for your erstwhile murderers to realize I'm not the sweet gullible thing they thought I was,” says Chester. “We need a third option.”

“Or fifteenth,” mutters Graves.

Chester looks at Hawthorne. "You have experience with this group, Commander," she says, hoping he's wise enough not to divulge exactly what that is right here. She wishes there was a way to convey *please don't tell the Dominion representative this attempted act of terrorism might have had official sponsorship, even if you really believe it* in just meaningful looks, but she's going to take the chance anyway. Hawthorne needs to be brought in on this, and know she's bringing him in on this, because he'll go behind her back otherwise. She can't trust him to do that. "Your analysis?"

He stares at her. She looks steadily back. He's an absolutely awful actor; Graves and Amda very likely can tell something's up, and she's not looking forward to answering their questions.

"Well," he says, his voice full of disdain, "if keeping them under the influence of the white is *really* more important than their *lives*—"

"It is," says Amda, and gives his indignation a cool, unruffled smile. Chester very gently bumps his knee under the table, in lieu of stepping on his foot. *Not the fight to pick, Hawthorne.*

He jolts, glares at her, spreads the glare around the table to cover for it. Then he quite obviously ignores Amda and looks at Graves. "What's the leeway in your supplies for the white? If you reported a problem with these supplies when they arrived—"

Graves shakes her head. "We're operating - if you can call it that - on a shoestring. Replacement supplies would never get here in time. Unless you have an option you're not sharing," she adds, to Amda.

Amda shakes her head. "Not having supplies on the next run would very quickly lead to the Jem'Hadar going into withdrawal - just as quickly leading to their death and the death of anyone else unfortunate enough to be left on this moon." Her tone suggests that she has no intention of being among that number.

"And tampered supplies in the white leads to their death..." Hawthorne is frowning, but more thoughtfully - looking like he's less angry than focused on the problem.

"I wasn't planning on tampering with the supplies at all, and telling the recruiter to—ah—get lost." Chester is thinking of telling DeWinter something a great deal ruder, but now's not the time to explain the vulgar points of human idiom, even if it's likely Graves already beat her to it. "We could make it look like we'd tampered, but I'm pretty sure they'd notice the lack of results."

"That's what I—" she nudges Hawthorne's foot before he can say 'was planning' "- was thinking. How I - we could reverse the tampering." His frown deepens.

"Hawthorne has experience dealing with this extremist group," she explains to the others, and turns back to him. "If it just looks like we made an error, do you think they'd try again?"

"I don't know," he says, sounding lost in thought. Then his head snaps up and he looks at her. "They were recruiting you. Now, I mean, this is their recruitment of you."

"Yes..." It sounds like he just readjusted his thinking to realize that.

"They might have someone further down the supply chain checking whether you - whether you modified the supplies, and doing it themselves if you don't. If they're smart - which they might not be - they won't just wait to see dead Jem'Hadar to determine whether you're onboard."

"That would be a problem."

"I'm not sure though. I don't understand anything about what they're planning here." He shakes his head. "I don't understand their endgame. Even assuming that a bunch of dead Jem'Hadar is what they want - is this operation - an operation involving Starfleet personnel - really being kept so secret that if every Jem'Hadar here died, nothing would come out about it? And you—" he adds, looking at her. "- they think they'd be able to tell you you got rid of a staging ground, without you finding out that you'd killed a hospital? It doesn't make sense."

"It does rather rely on me being stunningly uninquisitive and rather amoral."

"Well, they clearly underestimated that."

Is that an olive branch? She'll take it. "I believe the goal is to make it clear how dangerous it is to offer the Dominion so much as a toehold in the Alpha Quadrant, even on humanitarian grounds."

"And anyone we could ask for help is back on Earth," says Graves. "This whole venture is incredibly classified. I don't envy you the footwork you're going to have to do once you make your official report, Captain."

"Incredibly classified," murmurs Chester. It's damning that DeWinter knew about it, then. And because she knows about it, the protection that that level of classification should confer is instead a vulnerability.

That's it. The one thing in their power to do, to take the situation completely out of Section 31's hands. She looks up sharply. "Well, something about this situation has to change," she says. "That might as well be it."

"What?" says Hawthorne, quickly echoed by Graves, and Amda simply looks blank.

"This level of classification was intended to keep exactly this situation from arising," says Chester. "Well, it's arisen. It's not helping you anymore, and the way our opponents are aiming to have this operation declassified will be a hell of a lot more damaging to both the Federation and Dominion than just blabbing it to the news services now. So that's what we'll do. Find the right reporter, one who will handle it sensibly, and make sure it gets blabbed. They can't kill front page news."

All of them stare at her. Amda's mouth opens a little, then closes. Does the Dominion even *have* a news service? Certainly not an independent

one.

“You... wouldn’t happen to have such a reporter in your back pocket, would you, Captain?” says Graves in a tone that implies she’s very much hoping the answer is no.

Chester simply smiles.

Amda has gone from mildly amused to outright horror. “Freedom of the press,” she murmurs, utterly disgusted. “How barbaric.”

It’s sometime later and the actual shouting has subsided when Graves follows Chester out for a breath of fresh air. Respite is gray and cold, and fresh air about all it can offer, aside from some interesting lichen. Chester glances back over her shoulder at the temporary shelter. “I shouldn’t have left Hawthorne in there alone,” she says. “He’ll cause a diplomatic incident.”

“Let him,” says Graves. “Amda’s a walking diplomatic incident. At least she has been since she realized she’s not getting a promotion out of here.” A fresh cup of tea wavers steam into the chill air in her hand; she sips it and looks around the camp. “They’ll want your head for this, Captain.”

“I rather doubt that,” says Chester. “I became aware of an imminent threat to a delicate operation, and was forced to take extreme measures to head it off without loss of life. *Without loss of life* will do a lot of heavy lifting there, as it ought to. Besides, I know Jake Sisko—he can be trusted to spin this as a demonstration of the Federation at its best. Largely because it is.” She smiles, a little crooked. “And all the extra attention might just embarrass the Dominion into actually doing something to help the soldiers stranded here. Within the realm of Federation ethical practices, too. They’re ever so determined to seem reasonable, even when they’re killing entire species.”

Graves tilts a curious look at her. “The Klingons, Romulans, and Cardassians are all going to throw an unholy fit about that.”

“I’m sure they will. Half the Federation will, too. But it’s hard to torch something everyone’s already talking about.” She glances at Graves. “As long as you and everyone else here are all right being the center of attention.”

Graves shrugs. “It’s been eighteen months. Like hell are they going to find someone to relieve me at this point; I knew I was ending my career, coming here.” She catches Chester’s curious look. “I was one of the personnel who picked up on the problem in the first place,” she said. “I filed a complaint. I kept following up on it. When I got assigned to supervise the result—well.”

Chester gives her a look of profound respect and she shuffles uncomfortably, then levels a sharp glare at Chester. “Your right eye is artificial,” she says. “A Terra Mark VII, I’m guessing. The holoprojection for iris pigmentation got better with that one. The Mark VI always looked a little flatter, and sometimes the veins didn’t load right. Surprisingly creepy. Lost during the war, I’m guessing?”

“Battle of Cardassia,” says Chester. “Jem’Hadar used my eyesocket as a handhold.”

“And here you are lighting your career on fire to save a planet of them,” says Graves.

“He pulled out my eye, not my conscience.”

Graves snorts. “You’re a good old-fashioned kind of insane, you know that, Captain?”

“It’s been mentioned a few times.” Chester leans against the nearby safety railing. “I like to think Command knew exactly what they were promoting. Speaking of, if either of us get out of this with our skins intact, and you’re willing to work with a CMO with all the bedside manner of a textbook, my Sickbay is still short-staffed. You seem like you’re a good old-fashioned kind of insane, too, Doctor.”

“It’s a big if,” says Graves. “I want to get this lot on their merry way, safe and sound, before I think about doing anything else.”

Chester raises her eyebrows. “They improve on longer contact?”

“They *really* don’t,” says Graves, “but that doesn’t make them any less people, as much as the Dominion would like us all to forget it, and as easy as it was to forget when I was patching your sort up during the war. Put a lot of eyeballs into a lot of skulls.”

They stare at the camp a little longer. “Do you think this debacle is going to get us any closer to a lasting peace?” wonders Chester.

“Oh absolutely not,” says Graves, “but *that’s* no excuse from doing the right thing.”

Chapter 6

Well, as far as substantial shifts in his perspective in a short space of time go, this one wouldn't make the top - that one was still solidly 'finding out the attempted mind control cybernetics in his head were Federation tech' - but it was definitely up there.

The Captain isn't Secret Police. Which is good news for him and his current and present survival. Also she's *terrifying* and definitely batshit crazier than the average Starfleet Captain, and he'd hate to see that on their side. Plus, it turns out she's very good at coming up with ways to thwart them.

Well, at least plausibly thwart them. He's hopeful her plan will work, but he doesn't know how far the Secret Police will be willing to go when this goes public, or what contingency plans they might have in place.

It will be over when it's over. Except it won't, because Respite has to *stay* safe, and there will be a next murderous plot to thwart.

At least he'll have another ally to face that one. Or, hopefully. Chester might want to stay far away after this, or at the very least have nothing to do with him, and he couldn't blame her.

Better to focus on thwarting this one, first.

A few hours later, Piper watches Chester stagger into the shuttle and collapse heavily into the pilot's seat, for once actually looking tired. She eyes him. "Any more accusations about how this means I'm secretly working for Section 31?" she asks, exhausted and wry.

He snorts. "If the secret police are training their operatives to walk, unarmed, into Jem'Hadar camps to keep their cover, well, I never had a chance." He shakes his head, doesn't mention that he never had much of a chance anyway. "That takes a special kind of crazy."

"Thanks," she says. "I'm sort of counting on that being a bit beyond their expectations."

"What now?" he asks. "You think it'll work?"

"Well, I can't say I've got a better idea," she says, "so I'll give it a try, and if it doesn't work, hopefully we'll have enough warning to come up with something else. I can't say we've got a wealth of choices just now."

No. They don't.

He sighs, and sits down in the co-pilot's seat. "Look, I had the measure of you wrong, and I'm damn lucky to be wrong."

She snorts. "Thanks, I think."

"But the secret police *are* clearly interested in the *Interpreter*, even if they didn't manage to get a recruit in the Captain's chair to start with, and they're interested in you. Whether this works or not, making this move is only going to mean they're keeping a closer watch on you."

Chester gives him a long, deeply annoyed look. "Hawthorne, I almost got gut shot to keep you in one piece. You'd think *that* would have made you trust me a tiny bit more."

Piper shrugs. "I said if I lost comm contact I'd get worried," he deadpans. He slumps over in his chair, and starts pulling off his boot. "I didn't beam down there expecting to get out in one piece." He dumps the steak knife out onto the floor. "But I thought there was a chance I might take her with me."

Chester looks at the knife, and then at him, an evaluating look that doesn't come out anywhere in the neighborhood of flattering. "With a table knife."

"Stupid, really. I wouldn't have stood a chance," he says, flexing his prosthetic foot, checking for scrapes, and pulling his boot back on. Gull beeps agreement with his stupidity. "It was good you managed to bluff the way you did, on why I was there. That's what I'm trying to say. What I told you - what I know about *these* -" he points at the cybernetics in his head. "That - I need that to stay between us. They're going to be paying attention, and if they know that I know about those - they might assume others know and start trying to guess who, and that would put ... people at risk. Without them knowing." He shakes his head. "They might already be trying to guess, but I'd rather not go knocking on that door."

"No shit," she says. "No, I don't want you being a target, let alone anyone who might have been helping you. As far as they're concerned, I'll be the overenthusiastic brand new captain who had a fit of idiotic idealism and decided to pick a fight with them."

He lets out a sigh of relief for Marbog. "Thank you."

"You're one of my crew," she says. "I'm not hanging you out to dry, and I'm not abusing the trust you put in me when you accepted this post." She pauses and gives him a very wry look. "However little it was at the time. And beyond that—you're a fellow officer. If we can't rely on each other, we might as well forget this whole Starfleet business, pack it in and call off the boldly going. You've had that trust badly enough abused, in a way that should *never* have happened. I can't imagine how terrible that must have been, or how lonely. I'm not going to add to the long list of those betrayals."

He feels the impact in his gut, like an unsecured piece of cabling had come loose and struck him across the midsection. He lets out a snort without even thinking about it. His boss had been a fellow Starfleet officer, and so had every other official he had tried to report the problems to. His team had been fellow officers, and they hadn't been able to rely on him to keep them safe.

But he's not ready to pack it in just yet.

"I'm still here because - well, I still think it's worth keeping up this whole Starfleet business. I think there are more fellow officers that can - *should* - be relied on than not," he lets out a huff of chagrined laughter, "which includes you, now. But," he adds, "the reason I could be betrayed was that I believed that I could rely on my fellow Starfleet Officers and their superiors, and, well." He makes a face. "The people we can't trust don't always show up in black leather. My boss didn't, his boss didn't. *She* didn't, when she showed up on the base with her cadre. I'm grateful to have been wrong about you, but - be *careful*, when it comes to who you trust with this. And, you know, in general."

"I understand," she says. "But they'll already know what side I'm on when we pull this off. I'll have a target on me, and it'll be a big one. I'm all right with that.

"But you've had your trust betrayed enough. I won't risk it with you." She pauses, looking down. "I came back to Starfleet to get us away from this ends-justify-the-means thinking, even though I really didn't want to be used as a killer again. Silly me to have thought I wouldn't end up doing a lot of heavy lifting to get it done."

"Welcome to the club," Piper deadpans. "I came back for the heavy lifting. The officers that can be relied on - the Starfleet that I joined, that you wanted to come back to - it's worth the lifting. And this secret police needs to be pulled out of it. But, if this is any indication, there's a lot of weeding to do to stop their damage before anyone can even start to get at the roots. That'll be a *lot* of lifting." He looks at her seriously. "This is a long game. I always knew it was. And if you're on-side - you need to know that targets on you - that those risks - some of them are going to be necessary, yes, but some of them - well, like I said, I just found someone else I can trust. I don't want you gone so quick. Besides," he adds, "you're the Captain. If people knowing I know the truth puts targets on the circle around me - the circle around you is that much bigger. I'd rather 'Pret not go the same way as - well." He makes a face. "You know. Just - be careful."

"I understand," she says again, and he's not sure she means it any more than the last time she said it. "And I *will* be careful. I have a duty to keep all of you safe." There's a *but* lurking in there somewhere, but it stays hidden.

Well, this is going to go well. "Trust me," he says, slumping back. "I understand the impulse to scream about it very well." He sighs, and then looks up at her. "It really is good to have found someone else I can trust. I've been ... alone on 'Pret for a while now," he says with a mental apology to Marbog, who is, technically, not regularly assigned to *Interpreter*, "trying to find a chance to do something. Now I'm not - *we're* not." *So let's please keep it that way.* "So - I guess it's a team now. Though I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to run away screaming."

"I've made my career on not knowing when I ought to run away screaming," she says, her voice very dry. "Don't worry, Hawthorne, I'm not going anywhere. Not with these bastards cluttering up *my* home."

He grins. "Tell me about it."

They sit for a little in companionable silence until Chester yawns. "It's a long flight. I'm going to sleep."

"You can sleep? Now?"

"She woke me up in the middle of the damn night," Chester says, and his stomach drops at being reminded. Filed under more reasons he can't sleep. "It's been a while since I've been facing down Jem'Hadar on a grand total of three hours of sleep, and frankly, I don't care for it. Charming codenames from ancient novels aside."

He snorts. "Figures it was a codename. She got it from an ancient novel?"

"It's the name of one of the villains in *The Three Musketeers*." She sees his expression of incomprehension and explains further. "The holonovel you walked in on me playing through. It's based on a 19th century book, and Milady DeWinter is one of the major villains. A sort of secret agent figure long before that genre became popular."

He blinks. "They seriously named themselves after the *villains* in your *holoprogram*."

"It would appear so."

"That's—that's incredibly stupid." He actually laughs. "That's *so* stupid. They were trying to recruit you, and they named themselves after *villains* from *your* holoprogram. That beats the shiny black everything."

"Yes, that was about my reaction," she says. "I'm not sure why they expected me to cooperate, honestly. DeWinter was very flattering, but I'm not *quite* that shallow."

"Oh, I'm Evil McFascist, come work for me, my secret police has a stupid codename for everything'." He snorts. "Well, fascists do seem to get an undeserved reputation for competence, which is fortunate enough for my brain."

"And for the rest of us." She makes a face. "I'd have been solidly fucked if you'd actually been working for them. It crossed my mind as a possibility, but you didn't shoot me rather than letting me near the camp. At that point, I figured we were on the same side."

Not as fucked as I would have been. "It's crossed my mind more than once. I've done what I can to make sure my head," he taps his cybernetics, "is secure, and my best is quite a lot. But it's not something I've ever fully ruled out."

She's looking at him with real sympathy. "I'm sorry. That must be an awful doubt to live with. For what it's worth, I'm taking the fact you haven't killed me yet as a very good sign your best did the job."

He lets out a huff of laughter. "Thanks."

She stretches. "In any case, there's nothing I can do right now, I'm exhausted, and I won't be use to anyone without rest. So I'm going to take

the opportunity to catch some sleep.”

Well, that’s accurate. He’s told his engineers that enough times.

“I’m a light sleeper, I’ll be up if there’s trouble. Take the bunk, I’ll stay here.”

Here is the pilot’s chair. He makes a face at her, but she’s closed her eyes, leaning back with her head firmly on the headrest, looking horribly comfortable, somehow.

Okay. Well. Maybe it helps to be part giant.

He steps towards the replicator, then turns to check if she’s not sure she doesn’t want the cabin, since he won’t be sleeping anyway. The sound of snoring stops him.

That’s downright *unsettling*.

He’s pretty sure he won’t be able to sleep until he’s quite literally passed out or is barricaded in his own quarters that have been re-swept at each three times and with a new set of security measures, probably with a batarang in hand and a hefty dose of anxiety meds. And given that the agent had beamed into the Captain’s quarters, *actually* unwanted - and they were good enough to cut through Gull’s measures - made that less likely. Maybe literally passing out was a real possibility.

Maybe he’d sleep in a Jeffries Tube.

Might as well sit down before he falls down - the last thing he needs is *more* head trauma. He quickly replicates some supplies he’s most likely to keep down and a weighted cloak, while he’s at it, before thanking the shuttle and settling in the cabin.

The sound of soft snoring from outside taunts him.

Chapter 7

It's been a very busy few days, and a very difficult few days. Chester and Hawthorne have spoken little, except in quick glances as they've put everything in order, checked the medical supplies, moved them to where they're supposed to go, as Chester has sent some quiet messages and she's fielded their responses...

...as the Respite issue has gone up in the press equivalent of a fireball.

She's been fully cognizant of the risks, that this might end up with her command stripped from her, dismissal from the service in disgrace, a sentence to a penal colony. She's had the time to think about that, to accept that, to decide it's far better than letting Section 31 use her, or leaving the people on Respite vulnerable to their next little scheme. Nevertheless, it is still hard to walk into Admiral Ross's office the day after the news breaks and face the dressing down that's the least of the possible consequences.

But he owes her answers too. He made her a *promise*. And while promises from Admirals to junior captains aren't worth the oxygen they're spoken with, she'd like to think Ross is better than that.

We have to try to trust each other, she tells herself, even if right now misplaced trust will cost her everything.

But she's lost everything once before. At least this time, there will be a good reason, not the vagaries of war. She has to know—was DeWinter right, *is* Section 31 an official entity? If it is—that's too terrible to contemplate. She has to know. She cannot deal with *not* knowing. She hopes the news will be comforting.

So she stands at attention, and takes the dressing down with a calmly blank face, and waits.

"I could have your commission for this," says Admiral Ross. "No, forget that, there's a lot of people back at Command who want your *head* for this, Chester. What the *hell* were you thinking?"

Chester waits a moment to make sure he's done. There have been several such rhetorical questions; Ross isn't a particularly demonstrative man, but it's clear that this mess is well beyond anything he's imagined grappling with. She's glad she waits, because after just enough of a pause to take a breath, he's off again. "They want you removed from command, court-martialed, and sent to a penal colony for the next twenty years. And that's before a few of them got into more... historical suggestions. We don't classify things at that level for *fun*, dammit, Chester, you could have kicked off another *war* with this, what in *hell* inspired you to bring a reporter there once you stumbled on it?"

"I could have started another war by revealing we were providing basic humanitarian aid to people stranded in our space?" Chester says, dry as she can. "By taking admittedly extreme measures to resolve a severe threat from a domestic extremist group without loss of life? If Respite had gone up in flames, like they wanted it to, we *would* have had a war. Sir."

The *sir* is clearly an afterthought, and he knows it. But she doesn't miss his look of discomfort at *domestic extremist*.

"Unless," she says, "you mean to tell me an official entity was involved in the orders to murder a hospital?"

She can hear the edge in her own voice; this is the point where Rilas or Sotek would be telling her to pull back, but Ross, for all his sponsorship of her career, doesn't actually know her that well and doesn't pick up on it. "I don't always agree with Section 31," he starts. "But they were necessary during the war. Despite their methods, we still need them—"

"*Bull. Fucking. Shit.*" snarls Chester. There goes her temper whipping out of the tenuous grasp of self-control. Actually hearing the words is like a slap in the face, and even for all of Piper's dark comments, it hurts and it's a shock, and she's reacting before she realizes she's reacting. She stabs a finger at Ross. "You *told me* that we were done with this. That you wanted officers like me to bring us back out of the war, and you have the fucking nerve to stand there and *justify* the shit they just tried to use me to pull?"

She reaches for her commbadge and rips it free of her jacket. It lets go too easily, and she wishes it could be more dramatic, because it fucking *hurts* to do this, she *loves* Starfleet, she loves everything she thought it stood for. It's like ripping off a part of herself. When she tosses it at his desk she does so with enough strength it bounces and skitters, and there's a little satisfaction in that.

She plants both hands on his desk and leans in. "You made me a promise when I agreed to take that ship," she says, fighting her voice back down into a snarl instead of the scream it wants to be. "You. Made me a goddamned promise, *sir*. That I wasn't going to be *used* as a murderer again. As far as I'm concerned, you just broke that promise. Care to explain why the *fuck*," she stabs a finger at the commbadge by his hand, "I should pick that up again?"

"Captain," he starts, like a patient father with a sullen teenager, and stops dead at her glare.

"They tried to make me kill a hospital," she says, "and I stopped them. And here you are, telling me they're *official*? What's next, are you going to tell me their agent *wasn't* lying about them deriving their authority from the *fucking Federation Charter*?"

His silence is telling enough.

"You know what, you can *have* my commission. Go ahead and court martial me. Because I'm not going to be complicit in this." She turns her back on him.

"They tried to go too far this time," he says, too fast to be as calm as he's pretending to be.

It wouldn't be the first time, she thinks, and doesn't say. She just stays there and waits, not bothering to turn to look at him.

“They’ve been making some of us nervous,” he says, “looking for a bigger peacetime role. They say they want to make sure something like the Dominion War never happens again, but we’ve had our close calls with authoritarian coups over the last few years.” When she tilts a brief glance over her shoulder at him, he’s examining the surface of his desk.

“And yet you think I should have let them use me to murder noncombatants?”

“You did the right thing,” he reassures, too fast. “But Diane, you’ve had your command for less than a year. This isn’t the time to be making enemies. Not of this caliber.”

“Well, maybe they should have thought of that before they tried to make me take the fall for their war crimes,” she snaps, out of patience. “What’s it going to be, sir? Are you going to throw me to the wolves, or are you going to make good on all those nice things you said about clawing our way back to what we should be? Did you mean all of that you just said, or did you really just bring me back in out of *pity*, or some sense of obligation to Captain Sisko?”

She’s hit a sore spot; she can see it on his face, and part of her really wants to keep pushing, but she puts it aside and turns around, looks at him with level accusation. *I’d prefer that court martial*, she thinks. *Because then I won’t have to be complicit in this perversion of everything I believe in.*

He still hasn’t responded. He is looking at her now, and his expression is very tired and very sad. “I meant everything I said,” he says. “Regardless of why I brought you back in.”

Something in her flinches at that, that it was indeed pity. It’s a confirmation of the dark dread that wraps around her throat when she sits in a too-quiet briefing room, or alone in her quarters after a bad day.

“Command is aware of the risk that Section 31 poses,” he says. “Even if this was embarrassing, we’re glad they didn’t succeed in their aims. Though I do wish you had picked almost any other way to do it.”

“Every other way would have kicked the can down the road,” she says. “I’m not betting that many lives, or peace, on the next captain they approach catching on in time. I almost didn’t.”

He catches and holds her gaze. “Then I’ll be very blunt with you, and I’ll thank you to hold the dramatics until after I’m done,” he says. “No one’s arguing that what Section 31 tried to do here wasn’t horrific, and no one’s arguing that it didn’t need to be stopped. But the way in which you stopped it was risky, deeply unwise, and blatantly illegal. It exposed you to a hell of a lot of risk that I’m going to be hard put to mitigate enough for you to escape a board of inquiry or court martial. I *am* going to do that, because I agree with you; Section 31’s current activities are concerning in the extreme.”

“Current activities?” Chester asks, her voice cold. She doesn’t care what it does to her career at this point. She’s not giving an inch. She’s not becoming the latest person to fail Piper, or his dead team, or her crew, or *herself*. There is no part of this that is acceptable, and there is no part of this on which she is willing to compromise.

He gives her a sharp look, and she subsides. “You’re damned lucky, Chester. You handed them entirely too much rope to hang you with, and you can’t afford to be sloppy like that again—especially if you want to pursue this.”

She alerts to that like a dog on a scent, with painful and unexpected hope, the world going suddenly bright and clear around her. “Pursue this?”

“You’re going to see them again,” he tells her. “There aren’t a lot of ships in the Gamma Quadrant, and it seems they’re already interested in recruiting you. Even though you responded this way, they might yet try to gain your collaboration. Especially if there are indications that you remain a good candidate, despite this incident.”

“And if that’s the case, I’ll know what they’re up to,” she says. That’s better than leaving Rilas or Sotek or some other poor clueless bastard in the lurch.

He nods. She wonders how close his contacts with Section 31 are, how much weight his word will carry with them. “And then what?” she asks.

“Report to me,” he says. “We want a close eye kept on this. Maybe they’ve gotten a bit too cocky about having no accountability; it might be time to enforce some.”

“And if I catch them up to something equally heinous?” she asks.

“Can I trust your judgment to resolve it without a diplomatic incident?” he asks. “Or to not interfere if it is genuinely in our best interests because the person doing it is someone you disapprove of?”

It takes her a moment to consider that second one, and she doesn’t like those implications. But turning away from this fight, pretending it’s not happening, goes against every fiber of her being.

“This is going to be dangerous,” he says. “For you, and *for your crew*. And it may transpire that Respite was a fluke; that Section 31’s activities remain in our best interest and they will have to be left alone.”

Rage prickles at the back of her mind at that. She cannot, will not believe that. But if she shows it or if she says it, this chance to deal with them will slip from between her fingers, and her memory of Piper’s face, of Graves, will allow her to do no such thing. Working with them only to put them down is the sole circumstance under which she’s willing to do anything but go for the throat.

“Watch. Cooperate. Interfere only if you must,” he says. “Chester, if you can’t do those things, tell me now. Because if you decide to interfere, if you’re sloppy like this again, *they will destroy you*.”

Consider this, sir—I don't care! She stifles the words, keeps her face Vulcan-calm. "And if I do uncover a worrying pattern?" she asks.

"We are considering possibilities," he says. "Well, Captain?"

"I'll do it," she says, after the appropriate pause to hide her eagerness. "I'm not letting something like this happen on my watch, sir. Not ever again."

And if she's thinking of Piper and Forward Research Three, not Respite...well. He doesn't need to know that.

"The meeting with Ross went well," says Chester, in a tone strangely between joking and sincere. She sits heavily in one of the chairs and stares blankly into the middle distance. After a while, with an effort, she says, "You were right. They are official."

She's hurting. She knows it sounds in her voice, and she braces for his disdain. He told her as much.

"Well, yes," he says offhandedly, maybe a bit disdainful but sounding more surprised than anything that it bears repeating. He looks over at her, and his tone shifts. "Ah. Yes. Welcome to the existential crisis club. I'd make t-shirts but I think the figurative targets on our backs are enough without literal ones."

She scrubs both hands down her face. "I feel like I'm in danger of getting used to these existential crises," she says. There's a sharp, forced note to her voice. She's not hiding this well, her humor transparent over her distress.

He lets out a huff of humorless laughter. "Yeah... wait." He looks up, expression suddenly sharp. "You're sure they're official now, after meeting with Ross? He - ? Oh, fuck - what happened?"

"I chewed him out for letting a domestic terrorist group run riot on the station," she says. "He... told me they weren't a terrorist group."

He stares at her. "You thought... a domestic terrorist group. Took over direction of a Starfleet Research Station. For months. And were able to quash whistleblowing through three layers of Starfleet command, and get a cover story with official backing." He tilts his head slightly, and then shrugs. "Well, I can't exactly throw stones about rationalizing the improbable to fit. I assume it's too much to hope for that Ross has actually been doing something about the resident fascists? You'd think they'd have had a harder time getting to you if he was."

"He wants me to do something about the resident fascists," says Chester. "With his support. And if he wasn't on the level..." She lifts and drops a shoulder. "It would have been easy for him to just let me fry for this one."

"Oh, *wonderful*, a Starfleet admiral didn't fry you for *not* murdering a hospital." Hawthorne crosses his arms. "And it's great to hear that this *admiral* is *now* ready to get behind doing something about the resident fascists, now that he's got someone else to throw on the line to do it. How long has he been going along with this? Organizations that see a half-dead body and go 'ooh free real estate for our mind control experiments' aren't typically *new* to massive violations of sentient rights."

"I didn't tell him about you." Her eyes lift briefly to meet his, and she feels a pang of sympathy. It must be so hard to trust after what happened to him, and she can't blame him for being worried about her even now. She's going to have to earn that trust back. Admittedly, she's not entirely sure how, given his prickly nature.

He briefly drops his head. "Thank you," he allows. "But there's no way me and my team are anywhere near the first. He may not have thrown you into the frying pan today, but that's not fucking much to say for him." He looks at her seriously. "It *was* a risk to tell him that much of what you knew, a big one. Not that doing *anything* about these fascists isn't risky, but - this could have gone much worse, and like I said... I don't want to lose the ally I've got so soon."

"The moment I moved against them, I was telling them just as much as I was telling him; they wouldn't have needed to get it secondhand. It's a chance, Mr. Hawthorne, and I'm taking it." Her mouth thins. "Section 31 is a monster, and I'm tearing it out of Starfleet by the roots, even if it kills me. We didn't fight and die for this during the war, and they're not using us now."

She darts him another glance. "I know you've already come to these conclusions yourself. But...it's still new to me. And I am very, very angry."

Her tone and expression don't vary much; it's just a bald statement of fact. She doesn't want to lose control of herself in public twice in one day.

"Well, I had a bit of a head start," he taps the side of his cybernetics. "And I'm still very angry."

She closes her eyes briefly, glad of the bad joke. "That was a terrible pun."

He gives a lopsided grin. "Thank you, I'm full of them."

She gets slowly to her feet. "It's the job in front of us, and we might as well get to it... but in the meantime, I need to go pick a nice fictional fight before I'm fit to be around people again."

"Get back to that sword of yours, I assume?"

"Exactly," she says. "Socially acceptable stabbing."

He lets out a huff of laughter. "I might have to ask for lessons. My rendition of Frodo isn't much to speak of when it comes to Sting."

"It depends on the style you want to learn," says Chester, "since *Three Musketeers* is rather later period than the styles everyone *assumes*

they're using in the Lord of the Rings, but fortunately for you, I compete in both longsword and rapier." It's nice to have something to think about other than grief and betrayal, but she hesitates for a moment. "Well, let me know if you're ever short a Boromir."

Hawthorne snorts so loudly it's likely audible through bulkheads. "You're kidding, you'd obviously be Aragorn."

That shows an...astonishing level of faith in her, and she's not sure where it's come from so suddenly. She gives him a baldly startled look.

"I usually play Frodo or - well, I don't usually play the three hunters portions, but I can try out an axe if you feel like stabbing some orcs." He looks at her, frowning a little at the startled look. "Besides, didn't I *just* say I don't want to lose my new ally so soon? Not even on the holodeck, no fucking thanks."

She chuckles. "All right, fair enough. No heroic last stands, on the holodeck or in real life. Right. Let's go fight some easier enemies... so we can come back to the real ones tomorrow."

There's the same sound to it as to a promise, and she extends a hand to pull him to his feet, a glitter of determination in her eyes.

"Holodeck evils first, then the real ones," Hawthorne says, the same determination on his face as he takes her hand. "My Captain, I think we'll get along just fine."

Postscript

As the agent sometimes known as DeWinter finishes her report, she cannot quite keep the incredulity out of her voice. She sets her notes down, steeling herself for the responses of her superiors.

One of the individuals on the comm clears their throat. “Chester is more unpredictable than anticipated. We cannot afford this in the present delicate situation. I propose she be removed; we certainly have more than enough grounds at this point.”

“It will have a significant impact on our goodwill with the Admiralty,” says another voice. “No. It will be difficult to replace her with a similarly capable commander, and of the three commanding officers assigned in the quadrant, she remains the best candidate. I believe the present situation will persuade her to our line of thinking before long. If not...”

DeWinter shifts her weight, leaning forward. She’s still caught between anger and amazement. She feels she should have seen it coming, but she *didn’t*. No one sane would have been so eager to throw their career and freedom on the pyre! Chester’s reputation was that of a diplomat, ruthless, yes, and willing to do what needs to be done, which with her background should have made her an ideal candidate for a mission like this against the Dominion. But she jumped the opposite direction, and try as she might, DeWinter isn’t sure where Section 31 might have gone wrong. Where *she* might have gone wrong, in her handling of Chester.

Unless...

Unless Hawthorne remembers a great deal more than he ought to.

Her superiors, of course, are now fixated on Chester. Chester is easy to fixate on, rather than the bumbling, officious little twit who follows in her wake like a yapping toy poodle. But DeWinter has her suspicions. Retains her suspicions, even if her superiors have elected to ignore them.

“If not, Richelieu?” one of them is saying, anger and alarm in his voice. “If not, then *what*? A loose cannon is the last thing we need, and she’s established herself as extremely hostile to the Federation’s best interests with her actions at Respite!”

“If not,” says the individual addressed as Richelieu, “the destruction of one or several *Armistice*- class starships will more than make the point that Respite might have.”

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