

Esprit de Corps

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Esprit de Corps

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Book One of Star Trek: Delta, Stars, and Anchor!

Stardate 48002.17: As tensions with the Klingon Empire rise, Starfleet Marine Corporal Brigid Kelley becomes involved in covert intelligence work. With the threats of fracturing alliances and internal rivalries, she must rely on her resilience and skill to navigate the challenges that could determine the future of the Federation.

Notes

Author's Note: The series is an unabashed homage to W.E.B. Griffin's series, "[The Corps](#)." I've borrowed the framework and switched the backgrounds, but my intent is to recapture the essence of his series and set it against the war years of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (The Klingon and Dominion Wars).

Historian's Note: This story takes place three weeks after the event of the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's second season finale, "The Jem'Hadar," and roughly two months before the third season episode, "The Search."

Chapter 1

Archanis IV

Near the Federation-Klingon border

Stardate 48002.17 (January 1, 2371)

Starfleet Marine Barracks, Archanis

Lance Corporal Brigid Geraldine Kelley, Starfleet Marine Corps, stood in front of the mirror and fussed over her uniform's gig line within her shared barracks. To celebrate the new year, she received a liberty pass to explore the city. She would not depart the barracks without ensuring that she represented the Corps in the best possible light. Her attention to detail reflected her twenty-six weeks of boot camp inspections and eighteen months of service since induction. She could still hear the Assistant Drill Instructor shouting so close to her face that flecks of spit would hit her cheek with every sharp consonant. After all, any discordance of her uniform's line, extending from her neck to her trousers, had immense consequences for the Federation's future.

She finished her adjustments and scrutinized her reflection. With her dark brown hair kept to the personal grooming regulation of shoulder-length, it framed her tanned face better than it did when she first reported for duty. Kelley followed the rigorous physical requirements for her short stature and admired how the uniform showcased her well-defined arms and thighs.

Kelley's career as a marine began as a heavy weapons private with the first platoon of Bravo Company, within the Fourth Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB). No marine ever aspired to be posted to the less prestigious units assigned to the fringes of Federation territory.

Unless they wanted to create distance from the core worlds, possibly because they were running from something or someone.

Kelley was among those trying to put her past behind her. However, being posted to a border colony world felt like going back home, since she grew up on the Federation colony on Kessik IV.

She submitted the results of her prerequisite medical check, her physical fitness certificate, and a copy of her secondary school diploma (including eighteen units of university-level coursework through advanced placement) with a high grade-point-average to Staff Sergeant Palamo of the Starfleet Marine Corps. The kind NCO gave her the option of joining the next recruit training class in thirty days, or wait four months before the next class would assemble.

Because of the distance between Kessik and the Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) on Andor, it would take three weeks and change to arrive there. The first leg of her trip was a runabout to a nearby Starbase, then a transfer to a marine transport to Andor. Kelley understood she had to depart immediately to arrive on time. That suited her just fine.

Her father, an elected member of the township's council, often took out his frustration upon the members of his family who could not defend themselves. With regularity, her father would express himself through physical and emotional abuse. The more he vented against Kelley, the deeper her conviction that she would leave Kessik at the earliest opportunity.

That led to a discussion with the non-commissioned officers at the Starfleet office. Although they urged her to seek a commission as an officer given her grades, an appointment to Starfleet Academy (or any university for that matter) required her parents' permission as she'd not yet reached the age of majority. Her father had very particular designs on her life that Kelley disagreed with. The only course of action, given the narrow circumstances of her situation, was to wait until the day of her eighteen birthday to enlist. Since she sought strength and power, her choices were to join Starfleet Security or the Starfleet Marine Corps. Staff Sergeant Palamo charmed her with the traditions and culture of the Corps that appealed to Kelley enough to press her adult fingerprint to the enlistment contract.

On the night before her departure, her mother and younger sister, Riley, held a birthday party for her. Her father arrived ready to celebrate the occasion, however, her party came to a sudden end when Kelley broke the news. True to fashion, her father objected in the strongest possible terms, and years of Kelley's pent-up anger resulted in her use of physical violence against him for the first and only time. She dislocated his right shoulder, then stomped on his right elbow resulting in a compound fracture.

Despite the extreme level of physical damage done, her parents never called law enforcement to their home in order to avoid tarnishing her father's reputation. While her mother repaired the damage done with an in-home bone knitter and dermal regenerator, Kelley spent the night in a transient housing facility in the township, then left for the spaceport. Since that night, neither a missive from nor to her home passed within subspace.

She passed through Receiving and entered Class 14/48 on Andor and for eighteen weeks as a Private Recruit, where Kelley used her rage to push herself to the physical limits and train as hard as she could. She excelled at the confidence course and led her team during the Crucible. Her performance as a recruit resulted in being lauded by her drill instructor and her company commander, and she carried the guidon for her class during graduation, where she received her Delta, Stars, and Anchor and was sworn in as a Marine.

She received a promotion to lance corporal upon graduation because of her pre-enlistment college units, and the military assigned her to Archanis in a heavy weapons platoon. There, she took the annual weapons qualification and proudly wore her Expert Bar for Phaser Rifles and Phaser Pistols. She qualified for compression rifles and cannons shortly after; leading to her assignment. Kelley found she had a flair for all weapons, especially phaser rifles and bladed weapons.

Kelley checked her reflection once more before moving out of the bunkroom she shared with her squad mates and into the company's complex. Archanis IV housed the entire Fourth, but Alpha, Beta, and Gamma Companies received housing within the capital city's center. She counted herself lucky that she got the assignment to Archanis instead of some of the other, more depressing colonies like Sherman's Planet or worse, the guard detachment at Tantalus. At least Archanis had an entertainment center large enough to house a majority of the Starfleet personnel assigned there. Not to mention the occasional Klingon military detachment that found themselves guests of Archanis' hospitality.

after long patrols of the shared border with the Federation.

Such as that week. The colonial government had invited members of the Klingon Defense Force, the Bajoran Militia, and the recently reformed Cardassian military to discuss Alpha Quadrant relations regarding the impending threat of the Dominion in the Gamma Quadrant. The primary concern for the marines lay in rubbing shoulders with the prideful Klingons and Cardassians as they walked the streets of the colony's capital city. Orders from her company commanding officer outlined that any incidents with Klingon or Cardassian military personnel may lead to "political solutions."

Her company's gunnery sergeant clarified that lance corporals would be expendable under those circumstances.

In her time at Archanis, Kelley made it a point to keep her head down and focus on her duties. When given the chance, she stuck to her usual spots instead of trying anything too different. She made fast friends with the owner of the Furball Bar & Grill near the city's outer limits, far from the prying eyes of the government and the law enforcement agencies. The owner, a former marine himself, took an instant liking to her and treated her like his long-lost daughter.

Owen Hardester made it to the rank of master gunnery sergeant before calling it quits and retiring on Archanis. With over thirty years in the Corps, she valued his advice on fast promotion to corporal. His advice led her to pursue and get certifications in many departments, acquiring qualifications in various weapons along the way. He guided her to study for the rank examinations. Kelley completed the exam six weeks prior and expected to place high on the corporal's list within the next two weeks, after the selection committee made their decision. He promised to throw her a party when her promotion came through.

Promotions within the lower enlisted ranks found competition as you reached for non-commissioned officer status, and any negative mark on her record would sink her ambitions and lead her toward a career as a "terminal lance."

"Going out for a night on the town, are we?" asked the muscular human buck sergeant. The departmental insignia of the base Provost Marshal sat on the upper left arm of her uniform. She stood, along with a male Andorian corporal and two PFCs, within the gatehouse into the barracks facility. She inspected Kelley's liberty order with a jaundiced eye.

"Yes, Sergeant," Kelley replied as respectfully as she could. She disliked the hassle one needed to endure in order to pass outside the gate. Privates and lance corporals were seen as unintelligent by officers, commissioned or otherwise.

The sergeant nodded. "Very well. Six-hour pass for liberty," she noted to the corporal, who jotted down the determination on his PADD. Her attention returned to Kelley. "Make sure you check back in here by oh-three-hundred."

She intended to return sooner and came within a hair's breadth of saying so with a biting remark in mind. Her caustic wit inherited from her father and grandfather was drilled out of her personality the very first week at MCRD Andor. The now-Pavlovian response to an NCO's order continued to be, "Yes, Sergeant."

"Stay safe out here, Kelley, and keep out of trouble. I don't want to wake up your lieutenant to get you out of the city jail. Understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Off you go, Lance Corporal."

"Yes, Sergeant," she repeated for the last time and entered the city's main thoroughfare along the center of the governmental section. Kelley waved her hand at the nearest taxi and took a seat inside once it drew near.

The human driver appeared to be significantly younger than Kelley's twenty years. "Where to?"

"*You* have your hack license?" she questioned warily.

"Yeah, I've got it, General," he promised as he twisted around to give her a look up and down. "Where to?"

"The Furball."

Gunny Hardester greeted her as he usually did when she appeared at the Furball. At forty-one minutes past twenty-one hundred Kelley received his customary big smile, big hug, and a big announcement to the rest of the patrons that the marines have landed. Few of her fellow active duty marines went beyond the city limits, especially not to a place lacking the desired entertainment of an intimate nature.

Kelley smiled at Hardester. "Thank you for that, Gunny."

A couple of fingers of a blue liquid within an old-fashioned glass appeared before her on the bar. "On the house, Brigid," said the bartender with a smile on her lips. The Gunny always extended a courtesy to Kelley whenever she patronized the establishment.

She uttered her thanks and moved away from the bar as quickly as possible with the drink in hand. She was led to a private room in the bar area, away from onlookers. Inside, he set up an intimate area where his friends and family could enjoy a meal or a drink without sharing their conversations.

This inner area, Kelley learned on her second visit to the establishment, played host to people of all walks of life. To her knowledge, she was the only active duty marine granted access there. The gunny told her a month after he introduced her he found her to be a trustworthy person. She knew how to keep her mouth shut, and most marine officers "can't look past the bars on their own uniform to take in the big picture."

Not much had changed; she had replied that night.

Kelley settled into the bar within that area and plunked down her Federation credit chit so that the bartender could keep an open tab for her.

While the first drink may have been free, the second through ninth drinks allowed him to turn a profit. Tonight, however, she accepted the first free drink and ended it there. Her dinner arrived soon after she ordered it, being a locally famous dish involving a native fish and potatoes grilled with spices that the gunny said was a family secret. Regardless, she couldn't resist sampling it every time she went to the Furball.

Card Night at the Furball saw games taking place between pairs and quintets in the corner of the room. Poker, blackjack, rummy, even a game of Go Fish appeared to be in store for her that night.

"Can I interest you in another drink?" asked the Gunny.

"Not for me. I'm on a six-hour pass tonight."

The Gunny nodded his approval of her discipline. "Well done. You're going to go far in the Corps, I can promise you that."

She accepted his praise with a smile. "Thanks, Gunny. I'm still waiting to hear about the exam results."

"Don't you worry about that, now. Tonight, enjoy your dinner and join in on that poker game over there with Gerry and Vincent," he said with a point of his finger. "They're trying to get a money game going."

That piqued her curiosity. Poker for money or barter was one of the many ways they passed the time at the barracks during the long stretches of time between watches. Since the company was already forward deployed and holding position until new orders came down from the Command Element of the brigade, cards were in demand. So far, she had accumulated an extra week's service allowance from the Corps for use within the city's economy.

"Sounds like fun to me," she admitted, trying to keep the excitement out of her expression. "Maybe I'll hit them up, later, but right now, I'd like to give this fish a new home."

"Temporarily, of course," said the Gunny with a wink. "I'll let you be. Come find me before you leave, tonight. I want to give you something."

Kelley cocked her head to the side, but knew to exercise patience. "All right."

Before oh-one-hundred, Kelley took her winnings from the table and thanked the men for "teaching" her how to play. She kept her eyes on Gerry and Vincent, the Gunny's two younger brothers and also veteran marines, looking for their tells and reading their expressions. Despite losing the first five hands, she ultimately outplayed the two hustlers. Although they begged her for a few more hands, she opted to take her leave for the night and call herself a taxi back to the barracks.

She approached the bar and passed by the door, back out into the front dining section. The Gunny took himself a meal at the bar as the crowds had died down since her arrival a little under seven hours ago. Kelley took the stool next to him and set her now flush credit chit on the bar's surface. She noticed he consumed the same dish she had earlier and smiled at him. "You wanted to see me, Gunny?"

Gunny Hardester swallowed the bite in his mouth and nodded. He reached behind the bar to pull out a long, thick gift box, and placed it on the bar. A red and gold ribbon kept the top of the box secured to the bottom. "That's for you."

Kelley hesitated to accept it. "What is it?"

"Only one way to find out."

"I couldn't possibly-"

He interrupted her, "Yes, you can. Consider it an order from an old NCO who still outranks you. Besides, I don't have any kids to give it to, and you're the closest thing."

She eyed him for a long moment, still hesitant about accepting the gift. In the end, she chose to not embarrass him by insisting against it. "Thank you, Gunny. I appreciate it."

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"Right here?"

"Of course."

Kelley took the box and tugged on the ribbon and it undid itself under the pressure. She pulled the top off and peeled back the tissue paper, keeping the contents from her view. Upon recognizing it, her eyes grew wide and her protest intensified in ferocity. "*I cannot* accept this, Gunny."

The Gunny waved her off. "Take it. Once you make corporal, you're going to need your own, anyway."

"I haven't made corporal, yet."

"You will."

"Then, maybe you should keep it until then," she said, inching the box back toward him. "I can't really be caught with one of these things in the barracks before it's time."

The Gunny grunted, "If they give you any shit about it, you tell them it's a personal gift from Master Gunnery Sergeant Owen Hardester of the Fourth Marines. You tell them to come out here and take it up with me."

As the taxi sped her back toward the marine barracks, Kelley laid the box across her lap. Only that night did she grasp the true bond she shared with the Gunny, and she fought hard to keep her emotions in check. Luckily, the Gunny recognized this and allowed her to take her leave of the Furball quickly and with no thanking him.

"It's getting a little too warm and fuzzy in here for my liking," he had told her.

She ran her hand over the gift, appreciating its beauty as not just a decoration, but a functional part of any marine's repertoire. Kelley wondered how long it would be until she received her promotion, as she considered it an honor to wear it as part of her duty as a non-commissioned officer in the Starfleet Marine Corps.

"Hey, Corporal," called the driver, an older human woman with silvering blonde hair. "I think we have some trouble up ahead."

Kelley peered around the head of the driver and narrowed her eyes. Five Klingons, who had bloodwine earlier, stood in the street. They were singing, scaring the people walking the surrounding streets, and not bothering to move to the sidewalks like everyone else. She quickly scanned both sides. Impossible to move forward with other cars behind blocking the way.

She cursed at her luck, running dry at the worst possible moment. Just a few more minutes and she would have reached the front gate, checking with two hours left on her pass. "I'll get out here," she told the driver.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Kelley replied, pressing her hand against the credit plate, allowing the colony's bank to draw against the Corps' account. Any marines assigned to a colony using currency-based economics, Starfleet paid for their transportation costs. "But it would be an idea to contact local law enforcement. They're creating a public hazard to traffic in this area."

The driver nodded and opened up a commlink just as her now-former client disembarked.

Kelley walked on the far sidewalk, away from the street, with the long box on her shoulder. She glanced at the three Klingons; all of them wore the accouterment of the KDF's ground forces. The most senior was equaling a marine corporal, what the Klingons called a *Da'*. As they had not yet seen her, she continued walking and made sure not to make eye contact with any of them. Despite it being unseemly for a marine to retreat from danger, facing any of the Klingons would mean disregarding orders from her company commanding officers to avoid conflicts.

"Hey!" called one of them.

She kept walking, pretending not to hear them.

"I said, hey! You! Starfleet girl!"

Shit, she thought. She continued walking.

"I wasn't aware that they commissioned short and ugly girls in Starfleet," guffawed the Klingon who called her.

The others redirected their attention to her. One of them pointed at her and laughed along with the *Da'* who spoke to her.

"You're all standing in the middle of a busy street. I'm worried that a passing vehicle might hurt you," she told them, in her best commanding voice. "Please move to the footpath, where you can continue to make all the jokes you wish."

The *Da'* replied, "Very well, little girl. We will join you on the path." He gestured to the others, and they approached her position. Seconds later, the three approached her position and flanked her.

"My name is Lance Corporal Kelley, Starfleet Marine Corps. I'm not a police officer, so I can't really do anything about where you want to stand." She gestured toward her destination. "If you don't mind, I'm going to keep walking."

The Klingons moved toward her and out of the street. "But we're not done with you," he said to her. "We don't know this city very well, and we hoped that someone like you could show us around."

As they drew closer, she could already smell the alcohol on them. "Somehow, I don't think that's true."

"Pardon me?"

Kelley turned to face them once again. She felt the corner of the box against her palm as she squeezed it reflexively. "I said, I don't think that's true. You know where to find an endless supply of bloodwine."

"Are you challenging me?"

"I apologize, sir," she said. Pride had no place in what her commanding officer will label as an 'incident.'

"That's better. Now, make it up to us by showing us around."

"I apologize, again, sir. I'm afraid I'm required to report back to my barracks."

The Klingon grabbed her shoulder. "You can make an excuse, I'm sure. Starfleet is good at that."

Kelley frowned as she glanced at the hand resting on her shoulder. "Would you please remove your hand, sir?"

"And what if I don't?"

Technically, it constituted an assault on her person. Technically, she would be acquitted of any charges because of the condition of self-defense. And technically, she knew her company's gunny would ignore the situation if it had involved anyone other than the very Klingons the brass ordered the entire brigade to avoid.

But... he had to place a hand on her.

"Sir, I'm going to ask you one more time to please remove your hand," she shot him a sharp glance to match her tone.

"And again I'm going to ask you, what if I don't?"

She grabbed his hand and gripped it tight enough to pull it off. She noticed the look of surprise at her sudden strength and even more so at his arm being twisted in an unnatural direction.

At his cry in pain, his comrades moved to flank her. Gone was the carousing attitude they held until that moment, replaced with implacable rage at the perceived unprovoked attack. They all took a defensive stance not altogether unfamiliar to her. Klingon forces, like the Marines, preferred hand-to-hand combat.

She released their friend by moving through the motion of disabling him by spraining his arm. "I asked him twice to remove his hand," Kelley reminded them.

They stared at her. Either they did not comprehend, or they pretended they did not understand.

The Klingon to her furthest right made a move toward her. She could see his shadow under the streetlamp with his arm outstretched. Kelley bent over at the waist and spun her left leg around to contact the Klingon's midsection, pushing him away from her. The others saw that as their signal to join in, as they all moved in to follow up with the now-laying Klingon began.

Kelley spun around again, using the box as a weapon. One, two, and three impacts against it broke the thin board that comprised it and the gift made its appearance: a saber within its scabbard. The gold-colored briquet gleamed within the light and slapped against each of the Klingon's skulls as she danced with it.

Now that the box was useless, she grabbed the saber by the briquet without removing it from the scabbard. She tied the ribbon on the handle over the edge of the scabbard in order to secure the blade within. Kelley tested its full weight. She started with her right hand and then switched to her left. By this time, the Klingon she pushed away with her foot was now on his feet, seeing his friends on the ground, holding their heads.

He shouted at her in his language, which she understood, meaning that he was questioning her upbringing. Although she studied some languages, she only knew a smattering of Klingon. She thought about this as her commbadge (which doubled as a universal translator) sparked and fizzled on the sidewalk to her right. She lamented the loss briefly before turning her head back to her opponent.

She said nothing in response, instead taking a defensive stance with the saber in hand. "I wish I could warn you off, but I don't think you're going to take me seriously, anyway."

Where the fuck are the police? she thought.

As she expected, he moved toward her with his fists, angrily screaming as he did so.

Kelley sidestepped his attack, using the scabbard against the base of his skull with all of her might. He collapsed immediately, slapping his forehead against the edge of the curb with a sickeningly hard sound. He let out a sigh, rolled onto the sidewalk, and then stopped moving. Purple blood flowed out from his forehead and dripped down in rivulets into the gutter.

The one with the sprained arm reached for the scabbard and closed his fingers around it tightly. When she pulled it back, the sword unsheathed when the ties parted. She flipped the blade around when he approached her menacingly. Using the hilt, Kelley used both hands to jam it hard into his temple. She felt it make contact with the hard bone and knew that she incurred a fracture.

The force of her strike surprised the Klingon; he stumbled backwards, dropped the scabbard to hold his head as he regained his bearings. The other two members of the group moved in different directions. One flanked Kelley while the other lent his aid to the one with the sprained arm.

Kelley kept the blade level, using the hilt to ward off her attackers. With one down and bleeding out, she swiveled her head back and forth to confirm their proximity.

Sprained Arm shouted instructions toward the others, and they moved away from her. She allowed herself a flash of pride as they staggered away, still reeling with the effects of being slapped around with the Gunny's NCO saber.

"Stop right there!" shouted a sharp, masculine voice. "This is the city police!"

Kelley stood her ground, allowing her saber to slap against her thigh. She stood over her possibly dead assailant and waited to be taken into custody. As she felt them relieve her of the saber and slapped binders on her wrists, she sighed and told herself, *Maybe I'll get a private cell in the brig.*

Chapter 2

Archanis IV

Near the Federation-Klingon border

Stardate 48003.88 (January 2, 2371)

Starfleet Marine Barracks, Archanis

Captain Ignacio Montes, Starfleet Marine Corps, ran his hand through the stubble of jet-black hair covering his scalp. He had just exited the barracks' largest conference room wearing a pained expression on his tanned face.

Every morning, the brigade command staff, along with all the senior officers and their deputies, met in the massive conference room to discuss the concerns of the day. Amongst those mentioned included the report received overnight from the city's constables that a lance corporal named Kelley faced down a squad of Klingons in the middle of a busy avenue and killed one of them.

The Fourth Marine Expeditionary Brigade's commanding officer, Brigadier General Leslie I. Ntini, expressed unabashed pride over the news that a petite female lance corporal met and overcame the physical challenge of multiple Klingon threats. However, the political reality overrode the knowing smiles and glances around the room soon after. With great reluctance, as the convening authority, the General ordered a by-the-book Article 39(a) investigation and assignment of counsel for a general court-martial. A proceeding that the General felt quite certain that the lance corporal would meet with a guilty verdict and transferred in disgrace to the marine rehabilitation facility on Andor.

Montes, as the Fourth MEB's Deputy G-2 (Intelligence), did not keep his tongue in check before he remarked, "A marine lance corporal being expendable in the face of a diplomatic crisis." He believed he spoke *sotto voce*, however, not *sotto* enough for Ntini's ears to perk up and narrow her eyes in his direction.

Major Tab Ch'avannel, Montes' immediate superior and the G-2, hid his smirk under the cover of his Andorian blue hand. His muted enjoyment of his deputy's mortified expression doubled when the General suggested Montes seemed to have the right attitude to defend the poor lance corporal from being sacrificed in the interests of national diplomatic needs.

Ch'avannel followed his deputy and slapped the man's back. "By the Four Elements, that was downright entertaining!" he admitted.

Montes grimaced under the force of the Andorian's strength, along with the *faux pas* of speaking out of turn. "I'm so glad, sir," he said with enough of a pained groan it masked his sarcasm. He stretched his back muscles to ease his pain before turning around to face his immediate superior officer. "Back to the office?"

"Not for you." Off of Montes' puzzled expression, Ch'avannel explained, "You heard the General. Go get your client out of the city holding facility. You're under direct orders to secure an acquittal."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The prosecutor for the case was the deputy G-6 (Communications), the Tellarite Captain Golluv. The tentative plea deal included five years, three years of confinement, and return to her home of record. Given the circumstances and the General's desire for swift and satisfactory resolution for the local members of the Federation Diplomatic Corps, Montes believed it was the most favorable option for a lance corporal facing the potential of being charged with second-degree murder.

Transferring Lance Corporal Kelley was a bigger challenge than Montes expected. They were holding her on a multitude of charges; all of them misdemeanors. Without the G-2's chief warrant officer, known as a "marine gunner," coordinating with the city's law enforcement agency, Kelley would still be in their custody. Along with two staff sergeants from the Provost Marshal's office, they used an official Marine ground car to transport her back to the barracks.

Before the detective chief inspector agreed to release Kelley, a bottle of single malt whiskey enhanced the Gunner's efforts. The DCI accepted the bottle as a token of appreciation for the hard work of the city's police forces and signed off on the paperwork.

Although Montes understood material support in pursuing a mission, he did not agree with the spirit of cooperation being fostered by gifts. Gifts in particular that fell too close to the realm of outright bribery for his liking.

Especially on his watch.

However, Senior Marine Gunner (CWO-4) Jamilah Buxani disagreed. She told him, "Captain, the way of the universe lies in the Great River."

He wrinkled his nose. "The 'Great River'? Sounds like some of the Ferengi crap you talk about sometimes..."

Buxani frowned. "Everyone mocks the Ferengi, but if you take the time to read their philosophy with an open mind... for getting what you want or need, it makes sense." She adopted a rather smug expression as she continued. "QED, a bottle of whiskey for one lance corporal."

Montes raised his palms in surrender. "Touche." He lowered his arms and asked, "So where did you bunk our wayward lance corporal?"

"Our colleagues with the Provost Marshal have secured young Kelley in their brig," she informed him.

He winced. "They're not mistreating her, are they?"

Buxani smirked. "I think you should see for yourself."

Montes passed through the large double doors leading to entering the brig facility. A pair of non-comms greeted him upon recognizing the two silver bars on the neck of his uniform shirt.

Standing at attention, the staff sergeant said, "Good afternoon, Captain."

Montes approached the desk at which the two were standing and, with a dismissing wave, he replied, "As you were. I'm here looking for a prisoner of yours. Lance Corporal Kelley."

The staff sergeant focused on the screen, prepared to search the name. The moment she heard it, she smirked. She turned to the larger buck sergeant and ordered, "Take the captain to the lounge."

"The... *lounge*?" Unable to prevent his halting tone, Montes stared at the NCO with a surprised expression.

The buck sergeant smirked. "This way, please, sir." She raised her hand while maintaining a respectful voice.

Montes obeyed the sergeant and walked to the left door. The door lay opposite of the cell block, noted by the placard behind the desk.

Raucous laughter carried through the door upon their approach. The volume jumped upon opening. The fun halted as a lanky corporal made eye contact with Montes.

"OFFICER ON DECK, TEN-HUT!"

Their drill training resulted in everyone coming to their feet. Boots clicked together as marines stood with rigid postures.

"Puh-rade REST!" Montes issued the drill command and scanned the room with his eyes. He interrupted a casual gathering of non-commissioned officers. Each of them held beverages in their hands as they assumed a more relaxed stance. He informed them, "I'm Captain Montez, the deputy G-2. I'm here for Lance Corporal Kelley."

All eyes turned toward the petite woman standing in front of an overstuffed recliner that still shook from her sudden rise. The woman nodded, "I'm Kelley, sir."

Montes returned her acknowledgement with a quick glance. "When they told me you were in the brig, I assumed you were in a cell." The last few words he spoke, he turned his head to the gunnery sergeant for an explanation.

The gunny wore the armband of the provost marshal's office. "Cap'n," she said in a light drawl, "we were all curious about what happened. It's not against regulations, since she's under heavy guard."

He raised a hand. "Gunny, it's fine. I apologize for interrupting, but I've been assigned as defense counsel."

"Understood," said the gunny. She ordered, "Baker, Ordonez, show the captain and the corporal to the spare office so they can have a private chat."

Two corporals set their drinks down on the table and moved to guide them into an empty office. Within were a desk and three chairs. "You can use this, sir," said the shorter guard. He promised, "We'll make sure you're not disturbed."

Montes allowed Kelley to precede him into the room as he thanked the guard. After the door closed, he saw Kelley standing at attention again. "Rest, please," he told her. "Have a seat."

Kelley replied, "Aye, aye, sir," before doing as he commanded.

He consulted his PADD. "The general assigned me as your defense counsel. The deputy G-6, Captain Golluv, is prosecuting. We've already spoken, and she's willing to offer you a plea deal of four years on a manslaughter charge. If you decide to plead not guilty, then she will add a negligent homicide charge which is guaranteed to send you to Andor's stockade for at least fifteen years. So, I recommend you take the deal."

"No," Kelley interrupted him without hesitation. "I acted in self-defense."

Stunned by the breach of protocol, he turned his gaze upon her. "I beg your pardon?" Montes could not keep the incredulity out of his voice. Until then, no enlisted had ever dared to speak out of turn when addressing him.

"I *said*, I'm not guilty. It was self-defense," she said, now staring at him with cold blue eyes.

"Let me explain this to you," he said, ignoring the lack of respect in her tone. "The Federation Diplomatic Liaison is watching this case. Killing Klingons this close to the neutral zone, on Federation soil, will not fly."

"The Liaison can go to hell. It's not their decision to make."

"It's not their decision to make, *sir*," he corrected sharply.

Kelley's jawline worked before she repeated with the proper honorific. "It's not their decision to make, sir."

Montes sighed. "Look, Kelley... take the deal. You plead guilty, and the court will sentence you to the four years. You will also probably lose your stripes. Then we'll go over to General Ntini. As the convening authority, she will reduce the sentence to a year. They'll send you back to Andor on a slow runabout under armed guard. And I can guarantee you that the second you step off, the Division's Judge Advocate will have their say and it'll be cut down to only time served. You won't even see the inside of a cell."

She frowned. "Sounds delightful. I'm busted down to private, slapped on the wrist, and sent off to guard a flagpole or count mess kits someplace?"

He grimaced. After raising a finger to tap at his forehead, he pointed out, "You killed a guest of the Federation, Kelley. You can't just walk away from that without some kind of disciplinary action. The Liaison won't allow it to happen."

"Why does the Liaison care so much about this? The Klingons sure don't." Kelley then added, "Sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Sir, I've been posted here for my entire enlistment so far. The Klingons are the most frequent guests. I've studied them and their culture. They consider this to be an honorable death."

Montes had not considered that. Blushing under the obvious realization, he turned his face away from her to hide it. "Be that as it may--"

"Sir," she interrupted once more. "I mean no disrespect, but the guards out there... they gave me the courts and boards manual to read when I got here. It says I can choose anyone I want to act as defense counsel."

His posture stiffened, and he felt his temper flare. "So, you're a guardhouse lawyer, now?"

"It *is* my right," she insisted.

Even under his glare, she met his eyes to the point of silent insolence. Understanding the charges against her, Montes relented and glanced down at the PADD's display. "Fine," he said. "Who did you have in mind?"

"My platoon leader, Lieutenant Sellick."

"You can't have your platoon leader be your counsel, Kelley."

"Why not?"

"He's your platoon leader."

"Then, I want Lieutenant Lester."

He sat up at the mention of that name. He knew Elona Lester very well; his counterpart in the Logistics and Supply section. "The assistant G-4? How do you know her?"

Kelley folded her arms across her chest. With a shrug, she admitted, "I was in basic with her little brother."

He felt his anger rise at the flippant tone Kelley used with him, but his self-control met the challenge of keeping his composure. "Look," Montes said as he got to his feet. "I *strongly* advise you to take the next day and consider your options. I'll check in with you this time tomorrow. Will that be acceptable?"

She stood when he did and stared straight ahead. "Yes, *sir*."

Captain Montes restrained his anger as he departed the brig. He could not believe the audacity of the lance corporal. The lance corporal, in his learned opinion, did not fully appreciate the gravity of her situation. Not to mention, he knew he would appear incompetent in front of the general, as he would have to report that Kelley refused his services as counsel. Deep down, he knew full well she was within her rights to replace him, but in the ten years of his service to the Corps, he never once experienced anything like this.

Frankly, in his opinion, she was completely oblivious to the politics involved. If she believed that going to trial and pleading not guilty was going to solve all her problems, a general court-martial would bring reality crashing down upon her head. The general made her point clear. Unless a miracle happened, without that conviction, the Liaison would scrutinize the brigade. That could lead to other political ramifications for everyone involved, especially the general.

Kelley just needed to sign off on the deal, and they would fix it for her with no trouble. Defying the court could cause them to make an example of her for the other marines. No question about it. Montes had witnessed it before in his career and the marine(s) involved received a most unpleasant result.

Montes' anger simmered all throughout the day. It distracted him from his daily duties to a point that Buxani kept after him to get his reports done before the boss came down on him.

While reading intelligence materials from Earth, he considered Kelley's perspective. That thought percolated for five minutes, bringing his reading to a halt. He stared at the words, but internalized nothing.

"Uh oh," Buxani said when she entered his office. "You have that look on your face."

Montes blushed under her scrutiny. "What?"

"Is it the Kelley situation?" she guessed correctly.

"Yeah," he admitted, setting the PADD face-down on his desk. "She's a pain in my ass."

Buxani took the seat across from him without permission and crossed her legs at the knees. "I spoke to her platoon leader."

"Sellick."

"You know him?"

"Kelley mentioned him."

"Ah. Anyway... Sellick thinks she's a go-getter. She made lance straight out of basic as the class guide, then did heavy weapons training when she was assigned here. She scored expert in both small arms and heavy weapons. He expects her to make sergeant in record time. Her squad already looks up to her."

Montes picked up on Buxani's tone of voice. "You sound impressed by her."

"That's because she's damned impressive."

He gestured for her to continue. "What else did you find out?"

"She keeps to herself. Spends her off-time on base in the library, taking correspondence courses at the Academy. Sellick said she already took the corporal's exam and is going to be high on the selection list."

"Wonderful. The Liaison's going to *love* that. Does she have any friends?"

"She keeps to herself, mostly. Doesn't try to buddy up with the officers or NCOs. Her gunny really likes her." And that, he knew, was a high compliment in Buxani's estimation, being a former gunny herself. "And... when she takes liberty, she spend it at the Furball."

That information lifted his eyebrows upward in surprise. "Interesting."

Buxani smirked. "I thought so."

Montes ran his hand back over his head. "Do me a favor and use your charm on the local constabulary again. I'll bet that they have their hands on some closed-circuit video of Lance Corporal Kelley's showdown on their city streets."

"Sure, no problem," she said. "And what are you going to do?"

He drew himself up to his full height and replied, "I'm going to head to the Furball and have a little chat with Gunny Hardester."

Montes did not frequent the Furball in the four years since his arrival on Archanis IV. To his mind, the establishment aimed toward the enlisted ranks rather than the officers. An unspoken rule existed amongst them: they all remained under the watchful eye of a legendary marine like Owen Hardester.

His arrival after exiting the official marine ground car at the entrance to the drew looks of surprise at seeing officer's bars on the collar of the uniform he wore. To ease their minds, Montes offered a small smile to each marine that approached.

"Captain, you know you're not supposed to be here," said a familiar voice.

Montes grinned. "I apologize for intruding."

Hardester frowned as he appraised his latest visitor. "Well... I supposed you wouldn't have come unless it were important. Let's go around the back before you spook my customers." He led Montes along the right wall of the building until they came upon the staff entrance and entered there.

A short climb up a stairwell led to a shared office. Hardester took a seat at the desk facing the wall. The other desks in the room had PADDs scattered on them, but Hardester maintained his desk in an orderly and clean manner. The retired marine spun his high-back chair around, and then with his booted foot, shoved a stool on rollers in Montes' direction and pointed. "Squat, Captain."

Montes did so, uttering a soft thanks in reply. "I'm sure you already know what happened."

"Yep. I suppose the brass have it in their minds to toss Kelley to the wolves to suit the high-and-mighty members of the Federation Diplomatic Corps?"

A blushing grimace lined Montes' expression. "Indeed, they do."

"They offering a deal?"

Montes laid out the deal that Golluv offered.

Hardester scoffed, "What utter horseshit. Please tell me you didn't tell her to take it."

Montes cast his gaze downward in embarrassment.

"Fuck me, Montes. *Really?*"

"I had no choice. I have to bring all offers to my client."

Hardester rubbed at his face and sighed. "Did she take it?"

Montes again looked downward. "No..."

"Hah! I'll bet she told you to stick it up your ass."

"Not in so many words... I *am* a captain, after all."

"Then she must've done so in an orderly-"

"-proficient, military manner, yes, she did," Montes finished for him. "And I was livid at her for treating me with contempt."

"Sounds like you came to your senses. What did Buxani say?" Hardester listened to Montes' response with direct and indirect quotations. "She's quite intelligent," he affirmed. "She comes here, she plays cards, she has a bite and indulges this old timer..."

"Why didn't she go to OCS, then?"

"Did you not hear the part about her being 'quite intelligent?'" Hardester shot him a wink as he spoke.

"Har har," the captain replied. "Seriously, though. I could see her with lieutenant's bars on her neck."

Hardester's voice changed its timbre. "Listen, uh... you gotta be very careful with her. She's... she's already been through some shit."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... it's not my story to tell. But, watch her sometime. When she enters the room and her eyes are everywhere. She's looking for threats."

"But, that's just the result of basic training, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. I think it's something more than just that. I think there's a reason her home of record is Fort Miley." Hardester referred to the location of the Marine Corps' Headquarters Barracks in San Francisco. "She's a Kessikan by birth, but she doesn't consider it her *home*. That's where she's *from*."

Montes hesitated, considering Kelley's situation. "Her home is the Corps," he mused aloud.

"Like many of us, yes," Hardester noted.

"She's going to fight to protect what she's got, then."

The older marine smirked. "Just like you or I would." He leaned forward and asked, "Montes, level with me. Is she guilty of second-degree murder?"

He shrugged. "If you'd asked me that this morning, I would've said yes. But... I think once Buxani gets back to me on the evidence, maybe not."

Hardester gave him a thin smile in response.

Montes said, "I came down here to get your take on Kelley as a marine and as a human, but I'm hearing that you'd likely stand on her behalf if it came to it."

"I don't know if you know this or not, but I used to serve in the Fourth under General Meena Kanag before she became the deputy commandant," Hardester said as he rose from his seat. He approached a still holograph of a group of marines all wearing a different version of the uniform.

With a nod, Montes smiled. "I've heard the stories."

"Well, back then, General Ntini was a colonel, and she commanded the ground element force of the fourth under Kanag. I was her sergeant major," Hardester continued. "If I were to go down there right now and ask her to drop the charges against Kelley, I would bet you five bottles of whiskey that you'd get your acquittal by this time tomorrow."

"No bet," replied Montes. He added, "She still sings your praises."

He waved off that information with a short wave. "People whose lives you've saved often find many redeeming qualities in you."

Montes informed him, "She would commission you a reserve captain if you ever wanted to return to the Corps."

Hardester grunted. "No, thank you. The day I put on officer's bars is the day I'll run the Crucible backwards, naked, while singing the Hymn at the top of my lungs."

Chapter 3

Archanis IV

Near the Federation-Klingon border

Stardate 48004.52 (January 2, 2371)

Starfleet Marine Barracks, Archanis

The moment Montes returned to his office, the toothy smile of Gunner Buxani drew his attention. He could not help but wear a smirk in reply as he passed by to walk around behind his desk.

"I imagine by the look on your face that you have good news," he said, seating himself and activating his desktop terminal.

Buxani held up an isolinear optical chip in response. Without waiting for his permission, she slid it into the optical port.

"Is this the video feed?" he wondered aloud.

Again, she said nothing. She manipulated the panel and activated the screen. In response to his query, the video feed from the night in question appeared in full color quality and high resolution. From the distance of a camera sitting atop one of the overhead lights, he watched four Klingons as they disrupted traffic. Then the screen panned toward the lines of ground cars where Kelley could be seen leaving the safe confines of her taxi.

Montes furrowed his brow. "She didn't have to leave the taxi. She put herself in a position-"

"Look at the time signature," Buxani interrupted his spoken thought.

He did so. Then he asked, "Was she late getting back from liberty?"

"If the taxi finished the trip and dropped her off outside the barracks, she would have had at least ninety minutes," she said. To illustrate her explanation, she paused the playback and asked the computer to show Kelley's distance from the barracks. "Since the drunk Klingons were being drunk Klingons, she would have had to hoof it. She had no choice but to get out, walk around the traffic jam, and maybe find another taxi on the other side. Or walk all the way back."

He nodded as she spoke. At that point, given his discussion with Hardester along with Buxani's good mood, that Kelley's acquittal looked very good. "Let me see the rest of it, please?"

Buxani returned to the video and let it play out until the end of the incident, where the additional vids provided by the city constables showed the scene up close. Montes remained silent for most of it, save the moments where Kelley comported herself in proper marine fashion, facing down Klingons more than twice her size.

When Kelley took down the first Klingon and then used the hilt on the other, he gasped. "Damn, she's good."

"Right?" Buxani agreed with enthusiasm. "And note that she did not use lethal force."

Montes pressed his lips together in a thin line. "The result says otherwise, but..."

Buxani sighed. "Captain, this is clearly self-defense. She walked away from them and they pursued her."

"Under any other circumstances, I would agree. But the general's position is that someone needs to answer for this."

"Bullshit!"

"Way of the universe," Montes said, though his tone betrayed his lack of faith in his words.

She fixed him with an accusing glance.

"I'll do my duty," he said. "I'll take the evidence over to Golluv, who'll probably agree with you. Maybe if we tag-team this a bit, we can cut her loose and let her get back to work."

Buxani folded her arms. "I want her transferred here."

He blinked quietly at the declaration. Finally, he asked, "To Intelligence?"

"If the Liaison's out to get her, she's going to need some protection. The major's got some juice, too," Buxani said with conviction. "She responded to a threat in true marine fashion. We should promote her, not banish her. What kind of message are we sending to the ranks?"

Montes sighed. "Damn, that's a hell of an argument. Maybe *you* should be her lawyer."

Captain Golluv agreed with Gunner Buxani after reviewing the evidence later that day. The Tellarite woman did nothing to hold in her laughter. "Hell of a marine. Look at that! Took down two with little effort. First time I've seen fear painted on a Klingon's face so openly. This will humiliate them if it got out."

Montes blushed. Three marines he respected made him feel as though he gravely misjudged Kelley. Covering his shame with a clearing of his throat, he then asked, "What can we do about this?"

"What *can* we do but obey the process? We go to the general and tell her that this was self-defense, pure and simple." Golluv grunted as she spoke. "She won't like it from a political standpoint, but even the Liaison would be hard-pressed hold Kelley accountable for the death. She did her best to avoid the confrontation, and they chased her. I'll drop the charges, right now." She turned and accessed her desktop terminal.

"Thank you," he said as he watched her.

"Where she is being held? The brig?"

He smiled. "Yes. She's getting the *royal* treatment."

Golluv misunderstood. "They're abusing her?" she asked, her voice dropping to that of a growl.

"No, no. The opposite, in fact. When I left her this morning, they had her under 'heavy guard' in their NCO lounge. Pretty sure I interrupted a pre-lunch beer," he replied with amusement.

"That's because the gunny of the brig is all right," Golluv said. She quickly typed words onto the screen with impressive skill. "And she knows a real marine when she sees one. There. The orders are ready to go." She rose from her seat and reached for her uniform jacket to swung it around and fasten it.

As Montes and Buxani followed her out of the officer door, she told them, "I'll make the apologies of the government to her after we see the general. After that, you go cut her loose from confinement and return her to duty."

General Ntini's laughter leaked through the walls of her private office. Montes and Golluv stood in the ante-office with her aide-de-camp, First Lieutenant V'Lona, seated at her desk. They arrived unscheduled, and were so informed that the general had a previous, unannounced arrival that beat them to her attention to this important matter.

Golluv decided to rest up and took advantage of the plush couch that lined the outer wall in front of V'Lona's desk. Montes opted to stand, admiring the various stills and memorabilia on the walls. Included was a group shot of the general standing with several prominent members of the Federation Council, along with two former Presidents.

He wondered if the display intended to humble those who dared to bring political pressure. Whoever the Archanis Liaison had been, they had not visited here before, making threats and admonitions.

The door leading to the inner office finally opened after fifteen minutes of waiting. Out stepped the general herself, along with another familiar face.

Ntini smiled as she said, "Always good to see you, Gunny."

Owen Hardester replied in kind, "You, too, General." He nodded to Montes, then departed the office. "Captain."

Montes nodded. "Gunny."

V'Lona rose from her desk. "Captains Golluv and Montes to see you regarding the Kelley court-martial, sir."

The general's demeanor changed for the worse. "A popular topic of discussion today. Very well. Contact the G-1 and let them know I'd like a word?" After the lieutenant acknowledged the order, Ntini gestured inward with a hand. "Captains."

Golluv led the conversation and showed the general the material evidence. Montes kept his eyes on Ntini's body language. As she viewed the video on her terminal's screen, he saw flashes of admiration on her face when the pivotal moment of Kelley's triumph played out.

"Well," the general said after finishing with the footage, "No questions about what happened. Glad to see that the younger classes of marine are being taught the art of hand-to-hand combat at the MCRDs."

Montes opened his device and called up Kelley's personnel record. "General, she was the Guide of her class. She made lance corporal coming out of basic--"

"I have her file, here, thank you." Ntini cut him off with her voice. She turned her gaze to Golluv and asked, "What do you want to do?"

"General, by the book, we have to drop all charges," Golluv replied. "If Captain Montes uses this as defense exhibit alpha, not even a three-being panel would convict."

General Ntini leaned back in her seat and kept her gaze on the screen, hidden from her guests' view. "Some might say that the law needs to have their day in court, regardless."

Montes picked up on that. Clearly, the Liaison would be the 'some' she referred to. He let his mouth risk getting him in deeper. "General, I think I might tell those keen on pressing the matter to reconsider based on our limited resources. My section's been without its deputy for the better part of a day on this already, and I can't imagine that the G-6 is happy that we're wasting time on this already."

She narrowed her eyes at him while he spoke, but when he pressed on regardless, she showed appreciation for his candor. "Brave of you to tell a general that her orders are a waste of time, Captain."

Montes kept his eyes on hers. "A good marine is being jammed up for no other reason than to soothe someone else's ego, sir."

"Hmm." Ntini broke eye contact with him to lean forward and tap at her terminal. "As it so happens, yours is not a unique opinion," she said in a muttering tone. "Your point is taken. Captain Golluv?"

Golluv replied sharply, "Sir!"

"You will cut orders releasing Corporal Kelley from confinement and withdraw all charges with the Government's apologies, post-haste," Ntini said.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Golluv subtly entered commands on her PADD, then smirked. "If the general would be so kind as to check her most recent messages...?"

Another couple of taps and Ntini shot Golluv a toothy grin. "You're just too damned efficient, Captain. Captain Montes?"

"Sir!" Montes replied sharply.

"Please go get Corporal Kelley out of hock and return her to duty with my compliments on comporting herself in the best traditions of the Corps," the general said. "Just so there's no misunderstanding, inform her she'll be receiving a letter of commendation from me."

Lance Corporal Kelley never saw the inside of a cell within the barracks brig facility. Since her arrival, Gunnery Sergeant Michaela Nickleman treated her as an honored guest. The only order she received was to remain in the NCO lounge and stay within sight of the guards. That part was simple, especially since they practically waited on her hand and foot. She detailed the story of what happened multiple times, as the guard rotated on and off shift.

Going over her story served her well. She needed to hone her personal testimony, regardless. Embellishment was unnecessary; the tale did all the work. During the third time through, she understood she had a strong case of self-defense when she saw the looks on the faces of all the guards who listened to her talk. Appreciating the response for what it told her: the judges or jury would eat out of her palm.

After her discussion with Captain Montes, she wondered if the fix was in. The captain seemed hell-bent on having her plead out, serve time, and lose her rank and other signs of her hard work just to satisfy someone else's sense of justice.

The notion infuriated her.

The final meal call would come in under an hour. She wondered if they'd place her in a cell for the night to rest. Perhaps they might put her up in the guest barracks across the courtyard. She needed to remain there so that the same captain would return in the morning and likely give her some kind of ultimatum.

So, it was a complete surprise when Captain Montes returned to the brig five minutes before mealtime. As soon as he arrived in the lounge, she got to her feet and stood at attention.

"As you were, please," Montes said. "I have some news for you, straight from the general." He stepped forward and handed his PADD to her.

She accepted it and read through the orders:

Stardate 48005.71

Subject: *Federation v. Kelley* - Dismissal of Charges and Restoration to Duty

CPL Kelley:

1. Upon review of the exculpatory evidence provided by defense counsel, Captain Igancio Montes, SMC, it is the determination of this office, acting on behalf of the Government of the United Federation of Planets in the matter of *Federation v. Kelley*, that the motion to dismiss submitted by your defense counsel is supported and warranted.
2. As the convening authority, Brigadier General Ntini has reviewed the evidence and concurs with the recommendation to dismiss the charges brought against you. Accordingly, the charges have been dismissed with prejudice, effectively ending any further prosecution on this matter.
3. You are hereby ordered to be immediately released from custody at the barracks brig facility. Effective upon your release, you are to be restored to full duty.
4. The Starfleet Marine Corps regrets any undue hardship you have endured during this process. The government extends its formal apologies for the circumstances surrounding this matter.

You are directed to report to your platoon leader for further instructions or orders.

Signed,

CPT Golluv, SMC

Deputy G-6, Fourth Marine Expeditionary Brigade

Her first observation came as a correction. "They got my rank wrong, sir. I'm not a full corporal, yet."

"You showed up on the selection list, today. Yours was the second name," Montes said. "Flip to the second page, your promotion orders from the G-1 are there."

"I see." Kelley flipped between the pages and reread both sets of orders. "'Exculpatory evidence?'" She asked. "What evidence?"

Montes smiled, not bothering to chastise her for the complete drop in protocol. "Gunner Buxani, from my office, got a hold of closed circuit recordings of the entire incident from the city police."

"Fuck those guys," Kelley spat.

He cleared his throat to stave off a chuckle. "Yes, er, well, uh, she has a good working relationship with them. We used that on your behalf to get their cooperation. It sounds like they treated you a little rough?"

She set the PADD down on the table in front of her and admitted in a hushed voice, "Nothing I couldn't handle."

Montes saw what Hardester warned him about. Her eyes grew cold when she spoke about the police. He frowned and made a mental note to have a side discussion with the DCI about it, later. "After watching you take apart those Klingons, I don't doubt that."

That observation earned him a small smirk on her lips.

He continued on. "General Ntini and Captain Golluv had little choice but to agree to the motion to dismiss. The general also wanted me to pass her compliments on comporting yourself in the best traditions of the Corps. She's going to enter a letter of commendation in your personnel file."

With a smile that touched her eyes, he noticed the chill disappeared. "That's... kind of the general. Please convey my thanks, sir?"

"It would be my pleasure," Montes told her with a smiling nod.

She glanced at the screen and inquired about a particular phrase in the orders. "'With the government's apologies,' though?"

"That's pretty straightforward when we wrongfully charge a marine," he said. "However, I hope you will accept my apologies, marine to marine." He extended his hand out to her.

Her eyes dropped to his hand. With a bewildered expression, she glanced back at him.

"Um," he said with hesitation. "Something wrong?"

She shrugged. "Just never had an officer apologize to me, before."

Montes opened his mouth to reply, but the door slid open and seven people stepped inside. Three of them were Klingons. By the ranks exposed on their uniforms, he realized that the lead officer wearing a cape showed the insignia of a *HoD*; the equivalent to a marine colonel or a naval captain. The *HoD*'s escorts also held lesser officer ranks of *la'* (lieutenant colonel) and *lagh* (major). He presumed they were both staff officers to the *HoD*.

The *HoD* entered along with multiple marine officers, including the brigade's deputy commanding officer, Colonel Harold C. "House" Wicasa. He wore his dirty blonde hair in the same high and tight fashion as most other marines. Like Ntini, he commanded respect with his large, muscular presence.

Upon sight of the colonel, Montes and Kelley snapped to attention. The scrape of chair legs sounded within the lounge against the hard flooring.

"At ease," Colonel Wicasa said. "This is *HoD* Qudh, *la'* Noct, and *lagh* Mimoth. They are all members of the House of Qudh. The same House that Corporal Kelley's aggressors belonged to. He wished to address the corporal directly."

Qudh took a menacing step forward and spoke without preamble. "I am Qudh, Son of K'vel. I lead the House of Qudh. A warrior of my House met his glorious end in combat, by your hand."

Kelley held his gaze, saying nothing in response. She recognized this as a ritual, one of great importance to any Klingon House.

Qudh continued. He raised his voice, as though he spoke to a great hall rather than the intimate confines of the lounge. "He was my kin! He chose his path in battle! To die fighting is the greatest honor a Klingon can achieve. Your actions, though in defense, were those of a true warrior. His death has been declared honorable, as it should be."

Noct stepped forward at that moment, carrying a *d'k tahg*. Two Klingon symbols adorned the hilt in metallic lettering. The officer held toward Kelley with the hilt facing her. Qudh held up his hand to steady the offer of the blade so he could speak further.

"Among my people, those who prove their strength and prowess in battle against a significantly larger force earn not just honor, but a title. A title that carries the respect of one of the major Houses of Qo'noS. Today, Corporal Kelley, the House of Qudh grants you the title of '*may'wl*.' You have shown the heart of a warrior and the poise of a leader. I declare here and now, to all those who hear me: your name shall be spoken with respect in the halls of my House!"

"*May'wl*!," *la'* Noct repeated reverently, followed shortly by the *lagh*, Mimoth.

Qudh took the blade from Noct's open hand and presented it to Kelley. "You are not of our blood, *may'wl*, but you have re-proven that there are those in the Federation who bear watching."

Kelley accepted the blade, uttering Klingon words with the guttural syllables as though she spoke it all her life. Montes heard the translated version from his combadge: "I accept this honor, *HoD* Qudh, Son of K'val. I will carry this title with pride, knowing that it represents your personal esteem. I will not tarnish the reputation of your House. I declare this on my honor as a Starfleet Marine."

A rumbling chuckle emanated from Qudh's chest, and he showed off his teeth in a wide grin. "You speak well, *may'wl*." He drew his hand up in the Klingon salute, and the others followed suit. "Fight with honor. I wish you a glorious death."

With a final approving look, Qudh turned on his heels; the dark red cape carrying his House's icon fluttering under the rapid motion. Their departure had Colonel Wicasa and all the guards following close behind. After the entourage departed, the room's gravity eased as Kelly and Montes admired the blade's craftsmanship.

His curiosity got the better of him. "Is the translation correct? *May'wl* means-"

"'Battle Queen,' sir," Kelley said. She flipped the knife over and ran her fingers over the ideographic symbol. "That's what this says, here. On the other side is the icon of their House. If I show this to other Klingons, I might get a little respect. Or they might think I took it off the person who earned it. Either way, from now on they'll approach me carefully."

"It seems you've earned more than just your freedom, Corporal," Montes said with admiration in his tone. "I think the question of how the Klingons would react has been answered."

"I hope so," she said. As she spoke, she spun the blade by the hilt, getting used to the weight. "If that damned Liaison insists on coming after me, I might have to shove my title right up their ass." She tapped the icon with her title to make her point.

Montes could not help the snort that erupted from him. "You sure paint some interesting pictures."

Kelley ignored his comment. "So, now I just go back to third platoon like nothing happened?"

He paused, took a deep breath, and pondered. "Or... you might consider another opportunity. One that might put yet another stripe on your collar pretty quick."

She turned her head toward him, giving him her full attention. "I'm listening."

"Well," Montes said, elongating the vowel as he spoke. "G-2 has an open billet for a newly minted NCO. We lost one to OCS a few months ago."

Kelley perked up at that. Working for the Intelligence section opened up many possibilities, up to and including becoming a commissioned officer. "What would I have to do?"

"Whatever I tell you to do. I need someone who's smart, thinks on their feet, and can handle themselves in shitty situations."

"Situations of my own making, sir, or ones you're concocting?"

He chuckled. "A little bit of column A, and-"

"-and a little bit of column B," they finished the axiom at the same time. She nodded and said, "Understood. I'm interested, but I'd need to square things with my platoon leader and my gunny."

Montes got to his feet. "We'll take care of that for you. The nice thing about working in G-2 is that when we tell people to mind their own business, they listen. Major Ch'avannel, our boss, is not one to be trifled with."

Kelley rose as he did. "Sir, I think you'll find I'm in the same category. Where do I sign up?"

He extended a hand to her as he had previously. This time, it was in welcome. "You just did. Welcome aboard, Corporal."

"Thank you, sir." She accepted his hand cordially and shook it once before they dropped their hands down.

She asked him, "Since all the charges against me have been dismissed, I wonder if I could get a favor?"

Montes tilted his head with curiosity. "What's that?"

"Can I get that saber back? It was a gift, and I'd hate to tell Gunny Hardester that I lost it already."

He grinned. "In all honesty, I'd hate to tell him that, too. We'll get it back, post-haste."

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