

## Despite Our Weariness

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## Despite Our Weariness

by [B\\_Radley](#)

### Summary

In the aftermath of the Battle of Leelix III, the Banshees look to regroup. The new Head Border Dog looks to re-invigorate her command. Decker Sinclair moves to a new adventure as a command trainee. Croft and Chandra explore their losses and find that what's old can be new again in the realm of family. Both Shiv and Kaylin will navigate new realities.

All while trying to figure out who is who in Section 31 and in the ongoing cold war with the Romulans and their proxies.

### Prologue: Past Offers

*Sol III/Terra/Earth  
Malibu, California  
April 2296*

Jamie Blackthorne moves up the driveway to the house at the junction of a canyon, with a good view of the Pacific Ocean along Malibu. His eyes fall on the stilted, glass enclosed structure. It appears to be one complete room—the open concept that hadn't lost its popularity in the three hundred years since this house had been built.

He moves under the house and climbs the stairs. There is no doorbell, but he is sure that he is under surveillance. Given the person who had given him the instruction to be here.

The door opens. A human male, possibly in his fifties, but looking much younger, stands there. He is dressed in the remnants of a business suit, with an open-collared white shirt.

His blue-gray eyes survey Croft. His face is undistinguished, though handsome, with a square jaw and slightly cleft chin. He is slightly taller than Croft, maybe even a smidge taller than Chandra.

Croft shoves thoughts of his pre-lanka-soné, in her people's parlance, away. Thoughts of her would bring up thoughts of his grief for their even closer bond.

Thoughts of his own culpability in that closer bond's death, as well. Thankfully, that late bond's katra remains silent in his head.

"Commander Blackthorne?" the man asks.

"Just Blackthorne," he replies. "Sort of not a commander anymore."

The man gives a sharp smile. "Interesting. Exactly what Jameson McCall said that you would say."

Croft says nothing at the mention of his so-called boss.

"May I call you Croft?" The eyes harden slightly. "Or Covenant?"

Jamie keeps his expression even at the use of his codename. "You can call me what you like," he replies. "Sentinel."

The dark blonde eyebrows rise. "You're not supposed to know that," he says. He waves that thought away. "My name is Jason George. You can call me Jason, or JR," he says.

"Why am I here, Sentinel?" he asks.

The eyes flash and the perfect teeth clinch in the square jaw at the use of the 'forbidden' codename. They stare at one another for a moment, then Jason gestures him inside. He realizes that his appointment is barefoot. At his look, Jamie reaches down and takes his boots off, along with the socks.

He is soon seated on a comfortable chair across from where George sits. He sips the whisky that George had provided, as George sips a glass of red wine.

The whisky isn't bad, coming from a wine drinker. It burns in just the right way.

He sighs, waiting on his host to get on with it.

George sets his glass down on a coaster. "I'm here to offer you a job, Jamie." He smiles carefully. "A job that your bond held, before she died."

Jamie exhales sharply.

"Hell no. I won't be a Federation Free Agent," he replies.

Jason's eyes flash with anger that he knows that about T'Varilyn, who was ostensibly a member of the V'Shar's Joint Special Studies Group of the Vulcan Security Ministry

"No way, no how," he says emphatically.

### **A Closer Past: Mixed Messages**

*Starfleet Command/Sol III Terra  
San Francisco, California  
November 2296*

*"...It is the judgement of this board that Decker Jane Sinclair, vacate her rank of brevet lieutenant, junior grade and be returned to a permanent rank.*

*This in no way reflects on her service in the late events of last month, involving USS Aerfen. Her actions in leading her crew to survival reflect great credit on her and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the naval service.*

*However, she is only a few months removed from graduating from Starfleet Academy, Class of 2296. We feel that she is not quite ready to hold the rank and charge of the permanent rank of lieutenant junior grade, based on her Academy class ranking in the Officer Training Program.*

*However, her actions in both this incident and the month and a half she has been on active service with the Border Patrol, in several close actions in space and on the ground, do warrant some consideration. She is therefore released from the temporary, probationary rank of Ensign (Midshipman) and granted the permanent rank of full Ensign, with all of its rights and responsibilities."*

Vice Admiral (acting) Mary Elizabeth Decker sneaks a glance to her right at her daughter, standing rigid in her service dress uniform as the captain acting as President of the Board recites the judgement of the review of her actions at the gas giant.

*Not really*, Mary thinks. She was absolved of any further action by the official review, last month. This was just a circle jerk, a parting shot from the former Commander, SPECOPS, now in charge of the Bureau of Personnel.

The convening authority for this review.

As the three captains file out, and they are released from military decorum, she turns and hugs her daughter tightly. Decker's expression is blank for a moment, but she gives a slight smile and leans into the embrace.

"I'm sorry, Mom," she says.

Mary pushes her away. "You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm so very proud of you, my love. You've achieved so much."

"Even though I'm not an engineer?"

Mary moves her hands up to Decker's freckled cheeks. She takes a deep breath, pushing aside her own feelings. "That doesn't even cross my mind. You're carrying on a proud tradition. One that I didn't feel like I was cut out for, of command."

She sees Kim, Decker's other mother, looking at her with amazement. She'd never said this before to anyone.

Even to herself. She draws Decker in for a kiss to her forehead.

She watches as newly-promoted Vice Admiral Hunter, the new Head Dog of the Border Patrol walks up. She holds out her hand to Decker. "I'm not sure I agree with this decision. When you graduated, you were less than one percent below the top 1% of your officer graduating class in academic GPA, specialty GPA, and leadership GPA, that Starfleet has determined are the criteria for direct commissioning as Ensigns, without spending a year as Midshipman. I think they could've kept you at your brevet, or made it permanent. Your specialty ranking was actually higher than a lot of them with higher GPAs in the academic major." She gives her a pointed look. "Plus, you were Cadet Captain, so that gives you a leg up on the leadership GPA."

"Thank you, Admiral," Decker says. "But the rules are that it is a combination of academic GPA and technical specialty GPA, as well as leadership. I didn't do well enough in my academic classes." She gives a crooked grin. "Might be proof that I shouldn't be trusted with a matter/antimatter reactor."

Both Hunter and Mary share an eyeroll. “There’s that self-defecating humor again, as the southern parts of your family would say,” Mary says. “I personally think it was the psychology minor that pulled your physics major down.”

Hunter laughs. “Well, I have something that might take the sting out of being a boot ensign. There’s a slot in the Command Trainee Fellowship Selection course that came open with no other alternates available. Not quite full Command training, but it’ll give you a leg up. It starts in January, running through March. The Chief of Starfleet Education and Training agrees that given your performance, and now that you’re an actual ensign instead of a middie, it’s yours.”

Mary is treated to her daughter’s jaw dropping. “Admiral, I don’t want special treatment,” she protests.

“It isn’t. By the way, the Commander of Special Operations and the Chief of Ed and Training concur. I just need to get your CO of record to agree. I’m pretty sure I got some influence with her.”

Mary looks at Kim as both of them hug Decker tightly. Tears from all three of them dot their various uniforms as Hunter looks on. Mary can almost see the wheels turning in Hunter’s head, fairly certain as to what she’s thinking.

*And that’s how I’ll get her j.g. back with no favoritism and all above board, Hunter thinks to herself. The top graduate from this course can get advanced to that rank, as well as the top five getting selected for the CTF.*

Mary looks up to see Saavik moving over towards Kaylin Stone-Hunter, as she hugs Decker to her. Hunter and Chandra exchange a look.

Hunter isn’t sure that Chandra is fully onboard with another opportunity about to present itself.

### **A Clear Message**

Kaylin releases Decker from the tight embrace. She looks up and sees Captain Saavik standing in front of her, watching her. Decker grins at her, then moves off with her mothers.

She sees Chandra walking over as well. She turns back to Saavik. She’d heard that Saavik had been given a newly refitting *Shangri-La* defense cruiser, the *Titan*.

*No, Kaylin thinks, she wasn’t given anything. She’d earned it.*

“Captain,” she says, coming to attention and nodding in acknowledgement. The Starfleet equivalent of a salute, without a hat.

“Hello, Kaylin,” Saavik says, returning the nod. “At ease.”

She looks from Chandra to Saavik. She can tell through her knowledge of the Threads that Chandra is keeping under wraps, that she is of mixed emotions about something.

“I’m assuming you’ve heard about my new job,” Saavik says quietly.

“I have, Captain. Congratulations.”

Saavik gives the tiniest of lifts of her lips. Kaylin hides her own smile. The young lieutenant junior-grade that she had known as the first officer of their ill-fated training cruise, a decade ago would’ve never given the equivalent of a proud grin like this.

“Since she is finishing up a refit, I will be selecting my command crew. I thought I would start with a first officer.”

Kaylin feels a stab of emotion. She is pretty sure that it comes from Chandra as well. She looks at her current commanding officer and foster-sister. Her Vostus prelanke-gere, now soné. She nods, then looks away.

“I know that you have a command right now. And I know how you feel about the Border Patrol,” Saavik continues. “But I’ve talked to Chandra and to Admiral Hunter. They both feel that while it is your decision, this would be a tremendous opportunity for you to try something different.”

Saavik glances at Chandra, as if steeling herself. “I need a first officer with a different perspective. The *Titan* is going back to the Klingon border. We’ll be doing some exploration and scientific work, as a starship does, but we are there to reinforce the Khitomer Accords.

Again the slight smile, which shows a wistful quality as well. “Just like she did before there were actually Accords. When I was a junior officer aboard her.”

She grows serious again. “I also need a first officer who will challenge me, but will back me when I make a decision.” She exchanges a look with Chandra. “Both your current commander and your mother—Kaylin notices she doesn’t say ‘your Admiral’—say you are, and I quote, ‘as stubborn as the goddamned day is long’. A quality that I will make use of, quite a bit.” The expression remains even. “If you assent to being my Number One.”

### **The Present: A Couple of Birthdays**

*Sol III/Terra  
Montana  
January 2297*

Decker Sinclair walks through the door into the large cabin. She grins as she remembers what it had been called when she’d been invited for the weekend by her commanding officer.

A ‘barndominium.’

Said commanding officer sits on the couch in the large living room, a PADD in her hand, in front of a roaring plasma fire. One that gives off the warmth of an old-style wood fire without the waste of energy or impact on the environment.

Decker walks over and drops her bag on the chair opposite the couch, then starts to take off her service dress overcoat, gloves, and scarf.

Her eyes widen as she realizes that Chandra isn’t clad any semblance of uniform.

Her commanding officer is clad in the loungewear of her people, an outfit that leaves most of her body bare, covering only certain parts—a small area of skin.

Decker is careful to maintain her look on Chandra’s eyes.

She goes ahead and pulls off her tunic as well, draping it over the chair. Chandra smiles at the red undershirt of a trainee, with the white swath of a command course assignee on the straps.

“So how was your first week of the training?”

Decker smiles. She wonders if her expression actually may rank more as a cheesy grin. “It’s been great. Good number of great people in there. Good discussions. We’ll probably start stabbing each other in the back after next week’s first rankings, but so far so good.”

Chandra snorts. “Buncha type-A personalities. Any out-and-out assholes? Some of those arrogant one-percenters?”

“Yeah. But I’m a lot more confident than I was even two months ago. I can out-asshole them, if need be.”

“I’m sure you can, Deck,” Chandra says dryly.

“There is this one guy. Named Turner. He’s the grandson of a Grand Admiral. He was in my Academy class, made the top one percent, albeit at the bottom. I beat him out for Cadet Captain our senior year, but he got directed as an Ensign. I guess his GPA was higher or something. He might be my biggest competition.”

She looks away. Chandra hides a grin. “Let me guess. You and he have made the beast with two backs.”

Decker feels her cheeks flush. She doesn’t answer.

Especially as she feels a certain warmth start up around her middle.

A warmth not caused a bit by the thought of Stevenson Bailey Turner III and his arrogant grin looking down at her from the horizontal rest position. She stares at Chandra, who gazes innocently back at her, but with a decidedly hooded look.

The warmth subsides, transmitted through the Threads and the Link that she and Chandra had formed.

She hears footsteps coming from the loft. She realizes that she’d heard muffled cries from above, as well as felt the overspill.

Her eyes fall on a human woman of about Chandra’s age with bronze curls and what anyone would call sparkling brown eyes. The dark bronze curls as tousled over her shoulders; she is clad in a half-open flannel shirt that comes down just past her hips.

Decker recognizes Emma Rosewarne, one of Chandra’s Academy gang and the captain of one of her *Lancers*. Newly promoted to Lieutenant Commander.

It is the figure behind Commander Rosewarne that causes Decker’s jaw to drop.

Jamie Blackthorne, called Croft by his classmates and the member of that bond gives her the patented crooked grin that she had been warned about. He is clad only in a pair of sleep pants; she makes sure that she takes in the bare chest just as much as she had for Chandra’s and Emma’s slightly covered versions.

She looks down at Chandra, who shrugs. “Got a few things to celebrate besides your birthday on the tenth. Mine was on the first. Emma has gotten a promotion, and stud here has gotten reinstated to Starfleet as a commander, with the backdated seniority.”

Decker smiles at the other two. “I guess y’all got to celebrating a bit early. Without the ensign to complicate things.”

She feels Chandra’s hand grasp her bicep and pull her down. She reaches up and kisses Decker. Decker closes her eyes as she feels the Threads build again.

“Who said you’d complicate anything? There’s no rank among those in a prelanka-soné,” Chandra says against her lips.

Her eyes snap open at that, widening. She feels herself pulled down on the couch.

“Happy birthday, ná soné,” she manages against the lips, hoping her pronunciation isn’t too atrocious. *My bond of all.*

“É ná,” Chandra replies. *And mine.*

She surrenders to the Link, as she feels the other two pull closer behind her.

## Engineering Plans

Mary Decker watches as her chief of staff, Joelle Grayson walks into her office. There is a very distinct expression on her face. One that resembles Mary's own daughter's expression.

When Decker Sinclair is ready, willing, and able to shove her head through a brick wall for some idea of hers.

"Joelle," she say, bringing her eyes back to the orders on her screen. One that comes from the new Chief of Special Operations command. She sees another's definite hands in this, as she had already tried to shoot the idea down from the new Commander, Border Patrol.

"I'm requesting a transfer," Joelle says without preamble.

Mary drags her eyes from the schematics and narrows them at Joelle. She hadn't expected this, even though Joelle had made no secret of her disenchantment with Mary's current assignment as the temporary chief of staff to the Commander, Starfleet, Bill Smillie.

"What brought this on?" Mary asks. She reaches up and starts to rub her right eyebrow.

"I want to get back to space, Admiral," she says. "I've had enough of bureaucracy. I can't keep rolling that boulder up the hill anymore."

Mary can't exactly blame her. "Do you have a posting in mind?" she asks, sighing.

"The USS *Yorktown*."

Mary narrows her eyes. "She's no longer in commission," she says, hoping that will be the end of it.

It isn't.

"Come on, Admiral," Joelle says. "I'm not stupid. I've seen the resource allocations being sent to her. A bit much for a ship that is being 'decommissioned.'"

Mary purses her lips. "You should keep your mouth shut about things you see."

"That's why I haven't gone to anyone else but you. I want in, if she's going back into play. There aren't too many *Constitutions* or *Excelsiors* for ChEngs to play with."

After a moment, Mary nods. "I know. I was hoping to keep you awhile longer. You're damned good at what you do. But I shouldn't be selfish. The fleet needs you more than I do."

She stands up and moves towards Joelle. Joelle holds her hand out, but Mary eschews that and pulls her into a hug. "I'll make a strong recommendation to the new captain, once it's public. She may want to have her own person down below in charge of her snipes."

Joelle nods. "I know. But I think she's not breaking out with people who are engineers that she trusts and are senior enough." She grins. "If it's who I think it is."

Mary says nothing else. She has some other secret evil plans of her own for the *Yorktown*.

## A School Project

Decker moves out of the small seminar room. She sees Bailey Turner, scion of at least one generation of Starfleet royalty make a beeline for the instructor, a Tiburonian retired admiral whose skill at leadership in the Klingon War was well known.

His two minutes of fame as it were. He'd managed to take over a half-destroyed starship, saving the majority of her crew, in the face of the enemy.

He'd never lived up to his promise after that. He'd managed a promotion to rear admiral, but had never led starships again; he'd been an administrative officer on the ship. She shakes her head. Not exactly a dynamic example of leadership for this three months of training. She is still smarting from the fact that she has that silver and gold arrowhead on her shoulder, rather than the separated bars of a lieutenant, junior grade.

She snorts as she hears Turner laugh too loudly at something that the admiral says. She can't believe that she had fallen for his line of patter. Her eyes move down to his ass in the trousers of his Service Dress Alphas. She winces.

It would be one thing if it had been the Academy that she had last given into his patter.

The fact that she'd given into it a couple of nights ago was a slight problem. The night before the first rankings for this training had been posted.

She had been only a smidge of a percentage point above him, at the top.

Her mother walks in to the room. Decker smiles at her, but with the usual wariness.

"Hi, Mom," she says.

Mary senses her disquiet, she can tell. She rolls her eyes as she sees her mother checking out the same place on Turner she had just completed her perusal of. Mary turns to her. Decker looks down, blushing through her freckles.

Mary says nothing, but smirks. "You got time for a coffee?"

Decker narrows her eyes at her. "What?" Mary asks. "I can't have coffee with my daughter?"

“You came all the way from Mars to have coffee with me?” Decker asks skeptically.

“No,” Mary says, a trace of irritation in her voice, “I had a meeting with Admiral Gavek. I’m being handed another ‘priority project’ by SPECOPS, may Mike Walsh burn in bureaucratic hell when he gets here.”

Decker paints an expression of suitable contriteness.

“Have you come up with a Master Project yet?” Mary asks.

“Not quite,” she replies, her eyebrow rising. *Wait for it*, she thinks.

“Admiral Hunter needs someone to back up her flag lieutenant, who she inherited,” she says. “Specifically to ride herd on this little project of hers. It involves the Border Patrol. Walsh thinks you’d be good for this as well.”

Decker says nothing. She knows that this could be another of her mother’s schemes, but she is intrigued in spite of herself.

Later, as she shoves Stevenson Bailey Turner III’s muscular torso back on the bed and sinks on him, her mind concentrates on what she’d seen and heard from Hunter, behind the light building in her head.

At the possibilities.

### **The Doctor’s Visit**

Siobhan stares at the light as Kim Sinclair gazes into her eye through the scope. Shiv fights not to blink, even though left eye is tearing. Kim holds her breath as she focuses on the tiny tear in the cornea.

She moves back and turns off the scope.

“Am I going to lose the eye?” Shiv asks. Kim takes her hand and squeezes it

“I don’t think so,” Kim says. “I’ve isolated what is causing the spot blindness, Shiv. I think that there is a fix for it, but it may take some time. Maybe even a couple of months.”

“What caused it? Was it something that was missed after the battle?”

Kim shakes her head. “No. Your eye was healing from the glass splinter and wasn’t a concern. McCoy took it out and gave you the appropriate medication.”

“Then what?”

She exhales and looks at Chandra, then at Jaiggr Grasp, the group security chief. “Like I said, I’ve isolated something. Took me until now to do it. There is a substance on Tiburon. It was used as an execution method when they had the death penalty there. Somebody gave you a dose in the wound.”

Siobhan’s eyes widen.

“Could it have been administered any other way, Doctor?” Grasp asks.

She shakes her head. “It would have to be dropped into a wound. Historically it was administered to a small cut.”

Chandra stares at Kim. “Is this going to be fatal?”

“No,” Kim says, shaking her head. “There wasn’t enough administered. Nowhere near it. Just enough to cause problems. I’m not sure if whoever administered knew what they were doing.”

“Treatment?” Chandra asks, taking Shiv’s other hand.

“I’ve already started her on a counteracting agent that the Tiburonians developed, just in case of accidental poisoning. She’ll have to undergo it for a couple of months and wear the eyepatch, in the daytime.”

“And at night?” Chandra asks.

“Don’t say it,” Shiv says.

“She and George will get more ‘they’ time.”

“Goddamnit,” Shiv says.

“And the long term?” Chandra asks.

“I’ll have to prescribe Retinax Five, to help her re-strengthen the eye. At least she isn’t allergic to it.”

“Will I regain flight status?” Shiv asks.

Kim is quiet for a moment, then nods. She can see that Shiv isn’t reassured.

Chandra looks at her chronometer as Grasp nods and leaves. She reaches over and kisses Siobhan for more than a few seconds. Kim sees the

young officer relax, her eyes going calm.

"I've got an appointment with the brass," Chandra says. "I'll send Decker to check on you when she gets out of her class."

## Two Final Pieces

Chandra moves into the conference room. Two vice admirals stand near the large picture window. She makes sure that her tunic and pullover are straight and pin perfect. Hunter moves over to her and hugs her tightly as Jameson McCall watches.

She notices another figure, a middle-aged human male around her height, dressed in what looks like an expensive civilian suit, standing near the table. He gazes at her with dark blue eyes. She takes a longer look at his features; anyone would judge him handsome with a square jaw, cleft chin, and dark blonde hair. She makes sure that she can confirm that he is handsome.

He extends his hand. "I'm Jason Richard George," he says. He gives no other introduction. His grip is warm and strong.

Mike Walsh walks in, the full admiral's insignia on his shoulder and sleeve, shiny and new. Chandra's eyes widen as Decker follows him in carrying a PADD, a staff officer's aiguillette on her left shoulder. She gives Chandra a searching look, before seating herself behind Walsh along the wall.

"Hunter," Walsh says quietly. Chandra's foster mother gets up and points her PADD at the wall.

"As you all know, I've been working not only to build the Border Patrol up in strength, I've been looking at ways to reorganize to enhance the strength and skill of what we've got." She looks directly at Chandra. "You're going to be a part of that, Captain. You and the 17th."

Chandra doesn't say anything, merely keeps her gaze steady. All except for a brief look at Decker, whose eyes are slightly wide and her eyebrows are up.

"I've already given orders to return the Patrol to the organization before the last reorganization. It may be a bit cosmetic, but it was an organization designed around the Patrol, not copying fighter and ground attack wings."

Chandra nods.

"As the Captain (L) of a Special Operations Capable Squadron, you need to have firepower, as well as flexibility, Chandra," Hunter continues. "Your newly reorganized flotillas, composite rather than single-type, will give you that much more flexibility. Your new deputy will be able to command those flotillas, while you stand off and look at the big picture, then come in back them up with the true firepower of a *Constitution*-class."

She and Decker both start. She stares at her foster-mother. The other admirals seem to be gauging her reaction. Jason George examines his fingernails, apparently bored by all of the admiral-talk. She idly wonders what his role is in this.

"Your heavy cruiser will fulfill the roles of a starship—diplomatic, patrol, as well as some exploration and research. But you will be part of the Border Patrol and you will have an active role in leading your support cutters. That's right. I called them cutters. They are corvette-class, light scouts, but they are part of the Border Patrol."

Chandra's eyebrow rises. She looks over at Walsh, Hunter's boss. He hasn't said anything.

"Am I getting all of my ships? The ones I had?"

Hunter smiles. "You are. All except the *Comstock* herself. Your deputy will use the *Reed*, your converted security cutter with an extra officer or two for support."

"Why?"

"Because in addition to your regular duties, your squadron will support another entity. The *Comstock* will ostensibly be a Free Vessel now, at least to the outside universe. A support vessel under the control of a Federation Free Agent." She looks at George, who doesn't get up.

"The crew of the late vessel *Starlight* will be part of that crew. We'll be handpicking what we need to crew the *Comstock*, but she'll mostly be lighter on numbers. I will be poaching at least one, maybe two of your officers—one who was just promoted, and possibly one who is recuperating from an injury to her eye."

Chandra starts to get up, as does Decker. Jason George looks at her without expression, then turns to Hunter. "I thought you said that she can follow orders."

Hunter stares at him. Her lips quirk up.

"She' is standing right here. I don't know who the hell you are, Georgie, but I do follow orders. From those in my chain of command."

Jameson McCall clears his throat. "Mr. George is in charge of the Free Agents. There is only one, right now, since we lost the other one a year or so ago, and the survivor is behind the Gold Line. Our newest one and his crew may be spending time in there as well. Lieutenant Commander Rosewarne has volunteered. We haven't spoken to Lieutenant Lincoln, to be her XO, but it will be her choice. We think that she has a great deal to offer."

Chandra doesn't look at Decker's stricken face. "I know for a fact that she does. But I will tell you that you had better be careful with those who are still, as I understand it, my responsibility."

George doesn't break her stare. She continues with the eyefuck. "So what dumbass did you find to be your errand boy?" she asks after a

moment.

A wide smile comes over his handsome features. "I thought you'd never ask."

Another door opens. She sees sees Decker turning to look at the newcomer.

Chandra sees her exhale, then shift her wide eyes to her.

Jamie Blackthorne stands there, clad in a Starfleet SDA, the 'Monster Maroon.' Her eyes fall on the rank insignia on the white shoulder strap.

It is the same as hers. Three bars with only one arrowhead at the top.

The insignia of a full captain with less than three years' seniority.

"So they finally roped you in, bud," she says. She feels her heart twist in the bond. Out of the corner of the eye, she sees Decker start, as she feels the sensation shared.

Chandra can only hope that she isn't sharing too much, with the others in the room.

"Maybe I did the roping, love," he replies.

She remembers what she had read of Federation Free Agents in a classified briefing. They were all the equivalent of a starship captain and could commandeer any assets. Including her squadron and apparently, her brand-new-as-yet-unnamed-heavy cruiser.

"You keep your grubby mitts off of my ships bud, without asking, and we'll do fine."

Another figure steps in. Eleanora Cavendish looks at them both. "I guess it's my job to keep you two from killing each other," she says. "I'm your diplomatic and intelligence liaison."

Both of them turn towards them. "You? A diplomat?" both Chandra and Jamie exclaim in unison.

Hunter closes her eyes and shakes her head. *Whose brilliant idea was this?*

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