

a fountain of blood in the shape of a woman

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a fountain of blood in the shape of a woman

by [LizBee](#)

Summary

Klingon captivity doesn't quite go how Admiral Cornwell expects.

Notes

Originally posted in 2017, prior to developments like L'Rell's arc, the Lorca reveal, the Tyler reveal or the entrance of Emperor Georgiou.

Title paraphrasing Bjork's "Bachelorette" because the alternative was "The Winter of Our Disco Tent" -- thanks for that suggestion, Cactus Frand.

A thousand thanks to [personal profile] nonelvis who took time to beta even though she is very, very busy, and to Tansy for the non-graphic, non-sexual torture suggestion.

Chapter 1

1. Katrina

Selfishly, she hoped *Discovery* would come for her. That Gabriel would pull off one more improbable rescue in defiance of orders and common sense.

Discovery never came.

If the Klingon ship had a brig, Kat never saw it. She was taken to the mess hall, bound to a pillar in the centre of the room, in full view of the Klingon troops. *Humiliation*. She let their taunts wash over her and brooded, instead, on her regrets.

Her family. Daughter, parents, brother, ex-husband. She had left letters, of course, and the hope that she had said and done enough, that they wouldn't be haunted by conversations that could never happen. Phoebe was studying art history on Betazed, far away from the war. Safe.

(Was anywhere safe? Gabriel slept with a phaser; she could still feel the bruises his fingers had left on her throat.)

Gabriel. She had recorded her intentions in a log, but her cruiser was too far from Federation space to upload the files, and the Klingons had surely destroyed it as they left the Cancri system.

She had no illusions about her ability to withstand torture. Her security codes would be disabled as soon as Starfleet was aware of her capture, and her knowledge of fleet movements was already out of date. But she had something truly valuable to share with the Klingons: her insight, as friend, colleague and psychiatrist, into Starfleet's senior command, and her detailed knowledge of *Discovery*, the spore drive project and Captain Lorca.

Thirty years of friendship behind them, longer than their marriages combined. They had served together. They slept together occasionally. She knew Gabriel as well as she could know any sentient being.

Didn't she?

(Unfamiliar scars, fingers on her throat, a phaser to her chin...)

He had turned into a stranger, and that might -- ironically -- save him. For a while. But sooner or later, Kat would provide the detail that gave the Klingons the ability to destroy Gabriel, or to let him destroy himself. And the Federation's hope would burn with him.

Around and around her mind went, turning over strategies to resist interrogation, to delay the inevitable.

If she was lucky, they'd kill her before she broke.

She paid more attention to the Klingons after that realisation, but they kept their knives away from her. Twice a day she was unshackled, given food and water and marched to the head. The guards might shoot her if she tried to escape, but the rations were barely adequate, and she never had more than an hour of sleep at a time: she was too sluggish and weak to get far.

So she stayed where she was, and watched, and listened.

They had confiscated her communicator, and her Klingon was limited, but after a few days she could distinguish individuals, and guess at the gist of their conversations. Most were colloquial, and too rapid for her to follow, but she picked up enough.

This vessel belonged to the House of D'Ghor -- at least, the majority of its crew wore the armour and facial piercings common to that House. Intelligence reported that members of the House of D'Ghor were warriors and foot soldiers, and scorned ship-to-ship combat as cowardly. *Boarding parties*, Kat thought. If D'Ghor joined the war, they would see more boarding parties. More ships like the *Buran*.

The D'Ghor Klingons also scorned the House of Mo'Kai. Mo'Kai warriors made up a little less than a third of the crew complement, she guessed. They seemed much like any other Klingon to Kat's eyes: loud and quick to violence. But they kept to themselves, for the most part.

The exception came on the third day. Sometimes Klingons would stand before her and speak -- she shied away from the word "declaim", but it was the room they were really addressing -- and she, understanding one word in five if she was lucky, would attempt to look blank and unmoved, while the mess hall erupted in laughter at her expense.

She thought these two were more of the same, but they were more interested in speaking to each other than performing for the other warriors. One was D'Ghor, she guessed from his elaborate array of piercings. The other was bigger, but Kat thought he might be younger, and he listened with an air of faint amusement as his friend spoke, gesturing now and then at Kat.

When Piercing was done, his friend turned to her and said, in halting English, "You. Hand combat?"

Kat licked her dry lips.

"Katrina Cornwell. Vice Admiral. Serial number--"

"No," snapped the big Klingon. "You. Fight?"

I'm a fifty-seven-year-old desk jockey. I have socks older than you kids. What do you think?

Then she thought, *Well, you wanted to get yourself killed...*

"I can fight," she said.

Big Guy repeated this in Klingon for Piercing, who threw his head back and laughed.

"My friend say you small," said Big Guy. "Break too easy."

"I'm stronger than I look." She straightened up, as much as the restraints and her aching back would allow. "I could take your friend," she said. "And you. Easy."

Big Guy smiled and shared this with Piercing.

"No," Piercing said. His accent was thicker than his friend's and Kat had to strain to understand. "You fight his sister--" He nodded at Big Guy, "her creature. You fight..." he trailed off, searching for a word. "Veqlargh," he said at last.

"Demon," said Big Guy. His amusement had evaporated. "My sister has demon."

"Mevyap!" Another Klingon had overheard them, and now he advanced, speaking rapidly. An officer, she guessed, and probably D'Ghor, although his ornamentation was confined to a neat row of rings along his brow ridge. *Officer class.*

'Mevyap' meant stop, she knew that much. She lowered her head, letting her hair fall across her face, and listened for the word 'veqlargh', but Officer-Class's voice was pitched too low to make out individual words.

But there was no mistaking the dressing down he was giving Piercing and Big Guy. They accepted his reprimand in silence, saluted and walked away.

Officer-Class remained. Kat watched his feet as he approached her.

"Look at me," he said.

She considered disobeying, then decided against it. His gaze was hard. Cynical, she thought. Slightly amused.

"Admiral." His English was confident, even practised. Are you afraid of dying?"

Kat said, "No."

"Good." He leaned over her. "I have been reading your Shakespeare. A man of great words but no deeds to match. I am learning about humanity from his work. 'But that the dread of something after death' -- do you believe in an afterlife?"

"No."

Officer-Class smiled.

"You will," he said.

*

The journey lasted two more days. No one spoke to her again, but she felt Officer-Class's gaze whenever he was in the mess hall. Kat spent her time thinking of strategies to provoke them into killing her quickly, and tried to ignore the things she couldn't change: the smell, the heat, the hair that stuck to her damp face and the growing ripeness of her uniform.

At last, they reached their destination. She was released from her pillar and even permitted to stretch for half a moment, before the guards threw a chain around her waist and shackled her wrists to it. Her ankles, too, were shackled, and then she was marched through narrow corridors towards an airlock.

Officer-Class waited for her just outside the airlock.

"I look forward to our next meeting, Admiral," he said, his voice low. His smile revealed jagged teeth. As he turned to open the airlock doors, Kat saw a d'k tagh dagger in his belt. She reached for it instinctively, but the chain that connected her wrists to the waist restraint was too short.

Officer-Class laughed derisively and marched forward.

The airlock was lined with soldiers from both houses. Big Guy and Piercing stood with the warriors of their respective houses, bat'leths in hand. The leaders waited at the front. Kat was reminded of the old Roman triumphs, where captured enemy leaders were displayed like prizes in parades.

They were outcast houses. They need Kol's favour. They're cats dropping prey in front of their owner.

The outer airlock doors opened. The procession began.

And look what the cat dragged in.

Her vision was obscured by her hair, but this vessel -- if it *was* a vessel -- seemed larger than most, with wide corridors and elaborate details carved into the walls and handrails. She was marched across a long bridge, naked flames burning at the top of its four towers, and when she saw that, she realised where she was: the Klingon flagship, the vast cloaked vessel where this war had started.

After that, she kept her eye on Officer-Class's back, and the dagger at his waist, but her chance never came.

General Kol awaited them in a large chamber, standing on a raised dais. Behind him stood the leaders of the great houses; lining the walls, and the balconies above, were Klingons from every house.

Her captors advanced, and Kat was marched forward to stand between them, an offering to Kol. A disruptor butt in the small of her back made her raise her head. Kol looked down at her and smiled.

There were camera drones around them, she saw. What happened next would be used as propaganda within the Empire and beyond.

Public execution would be swift, at least. She hoped Phoebe would never see the footage.

Kol's speech was in clear, formal Klingon, delivered slowly enough that she could more or less follow it. A united Klingon Empire, led by a strong High Council, would rule the quadrant with an iron fist. The Federation would surrender, and even the Romulans would beg to join the Empire rather than suffer Klingon conquest.

The chamber erupted in cheers. Kat wondered how much of this was intended as a warning to the other races living within Klingon borders. Certain factions within Starfleet Command wanted to stir up dissent by providing arms to resistance movements in colonised systems. Maybe they were onto something.

Kat bit her lip, then stopped. Kol was now speaking English, and what happened next would be transmitted to the Federation.

"The Federation," he said, "claim they want peace. T'Kuvma taught us what a lie that is, the Federation's 'peace'. This human," he pointed at Kat, who straightened to attention and gave him a look which she hoped conveyed more contempt than fear, "responded to overtures of *peace* from the Houses of D'Ghor and Mo'Kai. Her Starfleet soldiers ambushed the Elders of Cancri, shooting them from behind, like cowards. *This* is Federation peace."

He spat in Kat's face. She barely flinched, too busy thinking of the implications of the lie. Starfleet would see it for what it was, but would the civilian population?

Would Phoebe?

Kol's hot saliva dripped down her face. She concentrated on her anger, because the alternative was despair.

"The admiral will pay for her crimes," Kol continued. "The Federation and all its allies will pay for her crimes. They say we are animals, brutes, that we are unsophisticated and primitive. But we have weapons they are too cowardly to use, and we will prevail. *bortaS bI'r jablu'DI' reH QaQqu' nay'!*"

The crowd cheered again, and Kat thought, *this is it, it's over*.

But Kol merely waved a hand and the audience began to disperse.

She was passed into the custody of Officer-Class and two guards. One, Kat noted, was her old buddy Big Guy. In silence, they led her deep into the ship, where the corridors were narrow and utilitarian.

They reached a checkpoint manned by two more guards. Officer-Class had to provide a retinal scan to continue. She was better at reading Klingon than understanding it, and she could see half enough of the screen to see that the computer identified him as la'Chang.

Commander Chang. Nice to meet you.

The prison deck had the eerie silence that came with heavy soundproofing.

Chang said, "I've seen your propaganda. I know what you fear. But there's no honour in torture for its own sake."

"I've seen the vids from Qo'noS. You make your prisoners fight each other to the death."

"Humanity at its most typical. Our prisoners choose their pain." They came to a stop outside a set of nondescript doors. "Inside this cell, there are five Starfleet officers, rations and a knife. What happens next..." Chang smiled. "If you survive the next few days, we can have an interesting conversation about superior Federation morality."

The doors were opened, and she stepped inside.

She caught a glimpse of a bearded man, an operations insignia and wide blue eyes before pair of hands closed around her throat.

For a second, Kat panicked. *It's the second time in a week I've been choked by a fellow officer.*

That thought made her angry, and then her training took over. Exhausted and underfed as she was, she was in better condition than the prisoner. He went down quickly, muttering, "We don't need you. We don't have enough food for the ones already here..."

Kat straightened up, taking in the faces of her fellow prisoners. Three humans, including her assailant. One Bolian. She couldn't see her fifth cellmate. The only light source was in the centre of the room; the walls were in shadow. The prisoners were in varying states of disarray, but all looked utterly defeated.

She moved into the light, letting them get a good, long look at her rank insignia before she said, "I'm Vice Admiral Cornwell. What the *fuck* is going on in here?"

The profanity seemed to shock them as much as anything. The Bolian lieutenant pulled himself to attention, wincing, and said, "Klingon prisons are ... difficult."

"Really? Seems like you're making it harder for yourselves. Who's the ranking officer in here?"

A human ensign pointed to the furthest, darkest corner of the cell. "There," she said. "He ... doesn't talk."

He was a commander. George something, she thought; she knew his face from somewhere. Served on the *USS Katherine Johnson*. He lay in a foetal position, not responding to his name or the hand she put on his shoulder. His eyes were open, but his pupils were pinpricks in his pale irises, despite the limited light.

"How long's he been like this?" she asked.

"Since I got here." One of the human women had joined her. She had been badly beaten recently, and her chin and jacket were encrusted with dried blood. She wore a medical division insignia. "I think ... a week? The food is irregular. It's hard to tell." She glanced nervously over her shoulder at Kat's assailant, who had pulled himself into a sitting position. "I'm Lieutenant Reyes, Admiral. Analyn Reyes. Nurse. I ... you gave the commencement speech when I graduated, ma'am, when you were commanding Starfleet Medical."

Good. An ally.

"Nice to meet you, Lieutenant," said Kat. "Any idea what caused this? Something in the food, maybe?"

"No ... no one else is affected. I don't think -- Lieutenant Commander Douglas has been here the longest." Reyes twisted a strand of hair around her finger. "I don't talk to him. Unless I have to."

"Huh." Kat straightened up, marched over to her assailant. "You're the next in command?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Consider yourself relieved." She turned her back on him, praying he wouldn't take the opportunity to bring her down from behind. He didn't, and she returned to the centre of the room. "And you?" she asked the Bolian.

"Lieutenant Crem. Admiral." He belatedly straightened his uniform. It, too, was marked by blood stains.

The ensign stood. "Ensign Sam Nanogak, Admiral." She couldn't have been much older than Phoebe. Straight out of the Academy into a prison cell. "*USS Katherine Johnson*. Engineering."

"You served with George?"

"Commander Clements, ma'am. But ... I don't know what happened to him. They move us around."

"Keeps us from forming alliances," added Reyes. "They watch us, I think. We'll be split up in a couple of food cycles."

"Then you keep going. Until there's nowhere else to move you, because they have Starfleet officers in every cell, and Starfleet officers do *not* succumb to this manipulative bullshit."

Douglas stirred.

"They have spies, too," he said. "Klingons who look human. Even smell human. Believe they are human, some."

Crem snorted. "Then you can certainly trust *me*."

"Can I?"

"Enough," said Kat. "We maintain the chain of command. We trust each other. We don't," she fixed Douglas with a hard gaze, "beat up fellow officers. And we try to escape." She spotted something gleaming in the corner opposite. Douglas followed her gaze, but she moved before he could.

The dagger was heavy, and wickedly sharp. One edge was serrated, and there were remnants of blood in the grooves.

"They armed us," she said. "That was their first mistake."

*

The boredom was dangerous.

Divided evenly, the food turned out to be almost adequate, if tasteless. Kat ordered her little crew to start physical training, as much as their injuries would allow, but the heat combined with limited water meant she was reluctant to push them too hard.

The rest of the time, she concentrated on treating their injuries with the limited resources available, and taking reports from her cellmates.

They all had much the same story: captured -- in battle, on away missions, scooped up in escape pods -- and brought here. Prisoners were rotated regularly; Douglas and Crem had shared a cell twice before this one.

"We're old friends," said Douglas, and his smile didn't meet his eyes. But he seemed more stable now someone else was in charge. Kat just hoped he stayed that way.

"Sometimes they make people fight," said Reyes. "Not me, but my CMO -- when they brought him back, it was like he had been savaged."

"Hand to hand combat with a Klingon?" Kat asked.

"Or something," said Douglas. "I've seen it, too. Half her face had been ripped off."

"'Veqlargh'," said Kat. "Any of you heard that word?"

Blank faces.

"What does it mean, Admiral?" Nanogak asked.

"Demon."

"Is that what happened to Clements?" asked Crem.

He remained unresponsive; Kat claimed an extra measure of the water ration for him, grinding his share of the food into a paste. Reyes fed him. Duty steadied her; if they survived this, she was at the top of Kat's mental list of officers needing commendations.

"There are no external injuries," she said. "There are signs of internal bleeding, but nothing life threatening. He may have suffered head trauma. Hard to tell."

"It's easy," said Douglas. "He's given up." His eyes fell on the dagger in Kat's belt. "And you're wasting food and water on him."

"And you'd better be grateful, Lieutenant Commander, because I'll do the same for you if I have to."

He fell silent.

Another meal cycle passed.

Kat wanted to pace the length of the cell, but it wouldn't do for the others to see her restlessness. She had managed a little sleep and a little exercise, and she was done waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Boredom. Is dangerous, she reminded herself again. Soon they'd be fighting amongst themselves for lack of anything better to do.

"How'd you end up an admiral?" Crem asked suddenly. "Begging your pardon, ma'am. But you're a doctor, aren't you?"

"I'm a psychiatrist," said Kat. She'd had their stories, why not hers? "When I became chief medical officer on the *Liu Yang*, I moved into the chain of command. I did the training, and found I enjoyed command. And I was good at it."

Gabriel was the first officer on the *Liu Yang*. It was the first time they served together since the Academy, and he oversaw her initial training. She was promoted to captain when they gave her Starfleet Medical, and he gave her a bottle of twenty-five-year-old scotch to celebrate.

After two years, she stepped down to accept a posting as first officer of the *Constellation*, at a reduced rank. And four years after *that*, she had her own starship, the *USS Lamarr*. Six months ahead of Gabriel.

I could have had the Buran. He might be the one sitting here now, and I'd be...

On *Discovery*? Recruiting convicts and prisoners of war and sleeping with a phaser under her pillow? She liked to think she had more self-awareness than that.

"Gonna take more than a few weeks of therapy to clear us for duty after this," she said.

"Admiral?" asked Crem.

"Just thinking out loud."

"I like the bit where we're getting out of here," said Nonogak.

"I think I'm going to apply for command training," said Reyes. "I'm tired of being scared."

"I'd recommend you in a heartbeat," said Kat.

The secret to command that you were still scared, all the time. You just knew what to do with the fear: keep it private, channel it effectively, don't let on to your crew that you're shaking in your boots.

Instead, she said, "How you coming with the transporter pad, Ensign?"

"Slowly, Admiral," said Nonogak. Kat had tasked her with weaponising the little transporter pad where their food arrived. Even with Crem's help, it took the better part of a day just to get access to the magscrews. "These things are rigged to overload if someone messes with them."

"They'll stop feeding us before that," Douglas warned. Again.

"We'll eat you first." Crem looked up from his work and smiled. "It's not cannibalism for me."

"Enough," Kat snapped. "We can't--"

Footsteps. Outside. Heavy boots. Two Klingons or more.

"Around and around we go," Douglas mumbled.

"Wherever you end up," said Kat, "remember your duty. Survive and resist. Don't let them tear you apart."

"Aye, ma'am," said Reyes. Nonogak just nodded mutely, her dark eyes wide.

"Yes, Admiral," said Crem.

She pulled the dagger from her belt.

"And let's see if we can't take a few of them down first."

The doors opened.

There were two guards, and they were taken by surprise. Douglas went for the first's throat, of course; Nonogak for the eyes. Crem took the second one, slamming her against a wall as Reyes kicked her feet out from under her.

The third Klingon was Kat's old friend, Commander Chang. She launched herself at him, driving the dagger at the point where his chin met his neck.

He staggered back beneath her unexpected weight. It took more pressure to pierce the skin than she expected, and she remembered her History of Medicine classes, a lifetime ago, and watching footage of actual metal scalpels sliding into flesh. A trickle of pink blood ran down his neck.

All this happened in ten seconds or less. Then Chang rallied his strength and threw Kat across the room as if she weighed nothing. She slammed into the wall, and something in her knee cracked as she hit the floor.

The knife landed half a metre away.

She forced herself to her knees and began to crawl, but Chang was too quick. His boot landed on her outstretched hand, and he knelt to retrieve the dagger.

"Well done," he said. He touched the wound on his neck and gazed at the blood on his hand in something akin to delight. "I'm impressed, Admiral." He turned to survey the rest of the cell. Crem, Reyes, Douglas and Nonogak had been subdued. Crem was bleeding from a cut to his forehead, and Nonogak was clutching her arm to her chest, but there were no other signs of injury. Only defeat.

"I think," said Chang, "it's time to move on to the next phase."

Walking was agony. Kat guessed that her patella was fractured. She could feel it swelling, but she gritted her teeth and tried to keep up.

"Carry her if you have to," Chang called over his shoulder, and a guard grabbed her beneath her shoulders and lifted her. *So much for dignity*, she thought, but then she nearly bit her lip to keep from crying out at the pain.

They were separated at the checkpoint. Nonogak looked like she was fighting back tears. Reyes' jaw was set. Douglas and Crem seemed resigned.

"You fight well," Chang said. "And you inspire your people. Those are important qualities in a leader."

Kat said nothing. *Name, rank, serial number.*

"And you were once a healer," he continued, rounding a corner, "which makes your valour particularly impressive. I was under the impression that Federation doctors ... what is the phrase? Ah, yes, 'do no harm'." He chuckled.

They reached another checkpoint, this one crewed by four guards. Chang had to provide both a retinal scan and a handprint to pass.

Beyond the heavy doors, the corridors became wide again, though the decor remained plain. *This is the infirmary*, Kat realised. The halls were wide to accommodate gurneys, and here and there were identifiable pieces of medical equipment.

She shivered, despite the warmth. She didn't think she was here to have her injuries treated.

And she had never seen a hospital so empty.

"Starfleet officers take inspiration from their leaders," Chang was saying. "Starship captains are almost revered."

A door slid open and Kat entered a large, dark chamber.

"Lights," Chang ordered, and she realised they were standing on a mezzanine overlooking a small room. There were bloodstains on the floor.

Her guard put her down and she gripped the railing so tightly her knuckles turned white.

"How are we to destroy the mythos of the starship captain?" Chang asked. "I've spent years studying humanity to find the answer. Your people. Your literature. Your languages. I *must* understand you."

She didn't mean to speak, but she found herself mumbling, "Here I thought you just liked the sound of your own voice."

She regretted it at once. *Name, rank, serial number.*

But Chang just laughed.

"I'm pleased you fell into our hands," he said. "General Kol wanted a Vulcan, but they're such dull types. What a piece of work is man." Guards were appearing below. Chang nodded to one, who saluted and disappeared beneath the mezzanine. "Let me show you my work."

The guard reappeared, leading a short, stocky human. Douglas. He clutched a bat'leth, his jaw tight, looking all around the chamber. Eventually his gaze went upwards, and he met Kat's eyes.

"No disrespect, Admiral," he said, "but I'm beginning to wish I'd just strangled you."

Chang gave a signal. Another door opened opposite the mezzanine and a figure emerged.

Female. Average height for a human, which, Kat saw, she was. Mostly. The right arm was a prosthetic, gleaming black synthetic metal, ending in wicked claws like a Klingon's hand.

...it was like he had been savaged.

Half her face had been ripped off.

Kat said, "Veqlargh."

The veqlargh didn't look up or around. She circled Douglas, head tilted, watching him. He brandished the bat'leth, but stepped back.

"Please," he said. "I can't--" His voice broke. "I just want to go home."

She advanced. He raised the bat'leth and brought it down hard, but she grabbed the blade in her prosthetic hand and twisted, hitting him in the face with the handle.

Kat forced herself to watch.

It was over quickly.

Chang's applause echoed through the chamber.

The veqlargh looked up at him, and Kat saw her face for the first time. Her hair was cropped short, more grey than black, and her eyes didn't match; the left was the pale blue common to certain Klingon houses. But she knew that face.

"The Federation flatters itself that it is the most technologically advanced empire in the quadrant," said Chang. "But the human terror of genetic manipulation has seen you fall behind in that field. The work was already underway when General Kol took command of this vessel. There was enough material for a viable clone. Even limited memory reconstruction. And, of course, genetic augmentation. A monster to strike terror into the heart of the sturdiest Starfleet officer."

She met Kat's eyes, and for a second, she thought there was a stirring of recognition.

"Don't be concerned," said Chang. "We're moving into the operation's next phase. There's no need for you to be killed and eaten."

"Captain Georgiou," Kat whispered, but from the woman below, there was no response.

Chapter 2

2. the dead woman

She remembered dying.

Metal piercing her chest. Blood flooding the back of her throat, the taste of it in her mouth. *Michael*.

"Well?" Lursa asked when she woke up. "What do you recall?"

"Death. Nothing else."

And Lursa had smiled.

"Good."

For the first days of her existence, she was blank, like an overgrown infant. She floated in her tank and watched Lursa and the others at their work, until the tank was opened and she was permitted to take her first, unsteady steps.

Then Lursa infused her with language, and the tests began. Cognition. Visual acuity. When she passed those, Lursa implanted more information, and the tests were repeated, along with new ones. Logic. Abstract reasoning. Tactics. Weapons. Combat.

She didn't pass all the tests. Her right arm had a deformity. Lursa cursed the degraded tissue samples and had the surgeon replace it with a prosthetic. A training accident claimed her left eye.

"All warriors have scars," Lursa told her.

And there were no more accidents after that.

She trained with the warriors daily, sparring one, two, three at a time. And, sometimes, they sent her to fight human prisoners, although those were small and weak, limp with terror at the sight of her face. There was no honour in those battles, but Lursa said they were necessary.

"We have our duty," she said, drawing a blood sample. "This is yours."

Lursa was not the only scientist, but she was the leader, and the only one who spoke to her as if she were a person. The others called her "it", or sometimes, "the veqlargh".

"Am I a demon?" she asked Lursa.

"Only to the Federation."

She didn't understand, until she did.

Lursa had a brother. A twin, in fact, unusual among Klingons. He visited the laboratory once, the day General Kol expelled House Mo'Kai from the High Council.

They brought her a human that day, and told her to leave him alive. Lursa's brother watched her fight, his face solemn, his eyes unhappy.

He, too, spoke as if she wasn't there.

"Your work," he said to Lursa, "it's wrong."

Lursa smiled a little, as if this was an old debate, and continued testing the reflexes on her prosthetic hand.

"We can't all fight on the front lines, brother."

"You're a skilled warrior."

"I'm a better scientist." She looked up at him. "Or are you ashamed of me?"

"Never. But..." He would not look at them. "This project is ... distasteful."

"Is that fear I hear in your voice, brother? A whisper of superstition?" Lursa grinned. "Do you still have nightmares about the veqlargh coming for you in your sleep?"

He scowled, and she realised for the first time that Lursa and her brother were very young.

"The dead should remain that way," he said, but with a hint of bluster which did not quite conceal his real concern.

"We all serve, Mogh," said Lursa. "Even fools like you, who value honour more than victory."

He forced a laugh, and Lursa joined in.

When he was gone, she said, "Am I dead?"

"You are a clone of a Starfleet captain. You were killed in battle by T'Kuvma the Unforgettable himself, the day the war began." Lursa

squeezed her shoulder. "You should be honoured."

"Who was I?"

"No one," said Lursa. "It was your death which made you great."

*

The lab deck was a warren of corridors and bleak, sterile rooms. She had no quarters, but slept, when she needed to, in a small room which hummed whenever the cloaking device was active. Her free time was limited, but Lursa encouraged her to spend it in study.

Knowledge came easily to her, and she wondered if that was a legacy of her former life, or if it was a gift from Lursa, along with her physical strength and stamina. She read the history of the Empire going back a thousand years, memorised the chief families of the Great Houses, studied the mining facilities on Praxis.

She did not look up T'Kuvma, or the first day of the war, or the name of the human he killed. She was a weapon for the Empire, and that was enough.

For now.

She was woken from her sleep cycle by voices: Lursa, and a male, stentorian, commanding.

Their words were indistinct, but she sensed they were talking about her. She wanted to slip out of her room and listen, but she had been programmed to obey.

With the greatest of effort, she sat up.

Put her feet on the floor.

It took a long time, and when she finally reached her doorway, the argument had ended. But she returned to bed feeling like she had achieved something.

The next morning she broke her fast with gagh and bahgol, and the stranger returned. He regarded her the same way she looked at a bowl of gagh, and in his presence, even Lursa's gaze seemed to pass through her.

"la'Chang," Lursa said, "this is the project."

"It eats our food?"

"Eats our food, speaks and reads our language. She may appear human, but her heart is Klingon."

"She'."

"You commanded me to train her. I do not train an object."

She did not relax at those words, but they pleased her.

Commander Chang put her through more tests: bat'leth sparring, mok'bara forms with his honour guard. After that, he put a hood over her face and made her reassemble a disruptor, then put her in the learning bay and made her identify starship types by warp signature.

Then he had her brought back to the training room, and watched from above as she fought and killed a Starfleet prisoner.

"Well done," he said when the Tellarite was dead.

To Lursa he said, "House Mo'Kai is lucky to have a scientist of your skill."

"Sir."

"Ujilli made contact with General Kol yesterday. He and Dennas, Daughter of D'Ghor, have requested Kol's favour."

"He sees sense at last."

"He sees the only alternative to defeat." Chang turned on his heel. "I am ordered to rendezvous with Dennas and Ugilli at Cancri. If they keep their word, I shall return with your next subject. Be ready." He paused in the doorway, looking back at them. "As for this one ... I think her power over our prisoners will be increased if she knows who she is."

Lursa's jaw clenched, but she saluted.

"I obey, la'Chang."

*

"Memory implantation is dangerous," said Lursa as she prepared for surgery. "We could lose everything you've learned so far, and for nothing."

"You don't want me to remember."

Lursa hesitated.

"Right now," she said, "you are pure. Your purpose is pure. You know who you are."

Do I?

"Ia'Chang thinks you're the veqlargh, a tool to scare weak humans. I created you for more than that."

"Then I won't let you down."

Lursa squeezed her hand.

"Good."

3. The woman in Philippa Georgiou's body

When she woke up, it was to the memory of the taste of blood.

Michael.

Who was Michael?

"Well. What do you recall?"

"Death," she said. "Nothing else."

"Good," said Lursa.

It was, at first, true.

Her life came back to her in fragments. Fingers on her neck and the floor rising up to meet her. The twitch of a Kelpien's threat ganglia. Sand beneath her feet. Jasmine tea. Red wine. First contact. A photon torpedo striking a raider's hull on her orders. Incense at a funeral. The smell of her infant son's head. Nasi lemak. Her first ship. Her first journey into space, looking down and seeing the lights of Kuala Lumpur. Her grandmother's telescope and wayang. The sky in monsoon season. *Home.*

Distant memories. They belonged to someone else.

A woman with brown skin and dark eyes, watching as she died.

Michael. What have you done?

Lursa put her through a fresh battery of cognitive and psychological tests. She answered them as neutrally as she could, and Lursa seemed pleased.

"Well," she said at last, "we haven't lost anything. You remember nothing else?"

My name is Philippa Georgiou. I was the captain of a starship. I had children, once. I spoke five human languages, and I was learning Vulcan. I've killed six of my fellow officers since you woke me up, and maimed four more.

She had a Klingon heart, and a purpose.

"Nothing," she said.

"Good." Lursa stretched. "Go and rest. We'll resume your training tomorrow."

She gave her a rough pat on the arm and left the laboratory.

In her room, she retrieved her PADD and took a deep breath.

"Computer," she said, "access records: T'Kuvma the Unforgettable. Final days."

Klingon, she noted, came automatically. She tried to imagine speaking any other language, but the words died on her tongue. Her prosthetic hand clenched.

The official accounts were detailed. There was even video, which she did not access. T'Kuvma had set out to unite the Empire through war, and in death he had succeeded, and Kahless himself would sing songs of his glory in Sto-Vo-Kor.

His death had come at the hands of a human Starfleet officer named Michael Burnham.

The PADD shattered in her artificial hand.

*

Her perspective changed by the moment. Lursa had seemed almost a mother, but then she looked again, and the Klingon girl couldn't be more than twenty-five. She was being mentored -- or raised -- by a woman young enough to be her daughter.

Philippa had had children once, but there were gaps in her memory. She remembered their births, their funerals. Her daughters were named Amaka and Iyora.

She couldn't remember her son's name. She couldn't remember how her family died.

She threw herself into physical training. Lursa's genetic manipulation made her as strong as any Klingon, and her size made her more agile.

And if she was training, she wasn't thinking.

In the lab deck's mess hall, Lursa said, without looking up from her PADD, "I hear the soldiers enjoy sparring with you. You give them a challenge."

"Some of them." She sucked the flesh from the pipius claw and wiped her mouth. "I took down three this morning. Weak petaQpu. Give me more."

"I'll speak to the sergeant."

"Veterans. Not raw boys from the provinces."

Lursa smiled and made a note of it. Then she said, "All the windows are doors. No door is a wall. Conclusion?"

"No wall is a door. You never gave me a name."

"Would you like me to call you 'veqlargh'? Try this: some boqrats are prey. No prey is a pet. Conclusion: some boqrats are not pets. True or false?"

"True. What is my place in this war?"

"You are to serve the Klingon Empire."

"Am I human?"

"You contain Klingon DNA as well as a human's. My family's DNA. You are my sister." Lursa gave her a penetrating look. "The memory graft worked, then."

"Somewhat." The best lies came from truth. "I recall ... pieces." *There are pieces missing.*

"la'Chang will be pleased."

"You're unhappy."

"A variable has changed." Lursa stood up. "I had a message from my brother this morning. Dennas and Ujilli have a Federation prisoner. An admiral. She is to be your..."

"Replacement." She exhaled. "Am I to die?"

"la'Chang is pleased with you. He will advise General Kol to send you to the front lines. The effect on Federation morale could be ... startling. Unless you see yourself as human, now. You may not wish to kill your own kind."

"No," she said. "They're not my kind."

*

Lursa sent the new results to la'Chang as soon as his ship was within range. He arrived on the lab deck within an hour of his return to the flagship.

"Your new subject is in holding, as you requested," he told Lursa. "Pay attention to the feeds. I want this one's personality preserved."

"I obey."

When he turned to her, he looked straight at her, assessing.

"Captain Georgiou," he said in English.

"la'Chang," she replied in Klingon.

"The memory implants were only partially successful," said Lursa, but Chang cut her off before she could say more.

"I will speak to Georgiou alone."

Lursa had no choice but to obey.

"Perhaps, Captain, it's time for a change of scene."

She had spent her life on the lab deck. Above decks, the flagship was ancient and magnificent.

Chang brought her to the great chamber near the bridge, the space reserved for meetings and ceremonial combat.

"Do you remember this place?" he asked.

"I died here."

"You did."

She circled the place where she had fallen.

Chang said, "How much do you *really* recall of your life?"

She kept her face still.

"Fragments. Moments. Smells." She kept her gaze on the place where she had died, but she was aware of Chang in her peripheral vision. "I ... understated the extent of my recollection to Lursa."

"I guessed."

"She worries my loyalty to the Empire will be compromised."

"Is it?"

"I died a human," she said. "I was reborn to serve the Klingon Empire."

Chang smiled.

"You won't have to fight prisoners for much longer," he said. "General Kol has been following your development. You'll be on the front lines as soon as the next project is underway. Lursa is a capable scientist, but her vision is much too small. Any genetically augmented human can beat prisoners -- but *you* were a decorated Starfleet captain. No one knows the enemy better."

"I'm to lead troops?"

"Eventually. We'll start with boarding parties. The survivors will tell Starfleet what they saw. Rumours will spread. And with them, fear."

"Starfleet's veqlargh."

"Precisely. General Kol has plans for you, Captain Georgiou. You will bring him the head of the woman who killed T'Kuvma."

*

I am Philippa Georgiou. Captain. Serial number SC0025-0128SHN. I commanded the Shenzhou. I was mother to Amaka and Iyora and--

Her son. She remembered brown skin and a solemn little face, and coming out one afternoon to find him asleep in his father's arms while Ami and Iyora played first contact in the garden outside.

She couldn't remember his name.

They're dead. My family are gone.

And she, second officer on the *Franklin*, had dedicated herself to capturing the raiders who attacked Starbase Forty-Four. She brought them to justice and earned a promotion, and dedicated all her strength to resisting the urge to succumb to bitterness.

The Klingon part of her whispered, *You should have ripped out the raiders' hearts and kept their skulls as trophies.*

She traced the lines on the palm of her prosthetic hand. Less distinct than on a natural hand, but she had learned to distinguish them. Lursa wanted her to be a weapon. More than a tool, but less than the sum of her parts. A Klingon in a human's body.

Chang ... she was an asset to Chang, valuable for now, to be discarded as soon as her usefulness was over.

He wants Michael's head.

Michael Burnham was ... an absence. A name. A tilt of the eyebrow, a tone of voice. She remembered feeling great fondness for Michael, respect, even love. But she remembered nothing of the woman herself.

I am not Philippa Georgiou. I wear something like her face, that's all.

She was human, but Klingon, dead but reborn. Programmed to obey, to fight and to kill.

I will serve the Empire. I have a purpose here.

The part of her that was Philippa Georgiou whispered, *You are more than programming. You are not the veqlargh.*

She did not sleep that night.

*

Chang assigned her to a squad and gave her the freedom of the ship. The squad was commanded by Lursa's brother, Mogh, and his displeasure

at her presence was palpable.

"Do you fear me?" she asked as they drilled in the flight simulator.

"I fear only dishonour." He frowned at his scanner. "Federation starship, heading--"

"I see it."

Her photon torpedo disabled its warp drive. The boarding pod was activated.

As they checked their weapons, she said, "Lursa spliced your family's DNA into the human tissue samples. She considers me her sister."

Mogh fumbled with his blade.

"She should not have presumed," he said when he had recovered. "There is no honour in a war fought with corpses."

"That's the only way war is fought," she said, and for a minute, she felt like Philippa Georgiou.

*

She was summoned to kill a Starfleet prisoner.

She told herself that it was her duty to the Empire, nothing more, but he was a scrawny, ragged man, so afraid of her that he practically allowed her to pluck the bat'leth out of his waiting hand.

She killed him quickly and painlessly, and told herself that it was out of pity, not compassion.

Then she looked up at Chang, and met the eyes of the woman beside him.

Human. Grey with exhaustion and pain, braced against the mezzanine railing. *The admiral. My replacement.*

The admiral eyes were wide with horror. Fear of her. Fear of her future. Fear for the Federation.

"Captain Georgiou," she mouthed, and as her legs gave way beneath her, Philippa remembered.

*

Starbase Yorktown. A backwater outpost just beginning its expansion to become the base of all Federation civilisation in the sector. Commodore Paris hosted a conference attended by -- oh, anyone who was anyone in Starfleet, or Federation colonial government.

Philippa had captained the *Shenzhou* for three years. Katrina Cornwell was newly promoted, commanding the science vessel *Lamarr*, but everyone knew she was on a fast track to the admiralty.

They had barely been introduced before they were interrupted by a colonial governor, a lifelong civilian, who had a number of suggestions to improve the running of Starfleet vessels. He was convinced of his genius and cheerfully oblivious to social cues, and as his monologue passed the fifteen minute mark, Philippa and Kat had made eye contact over their empty glasses and--

That was it, really. They were adults, they didn't roll their eyes or pull faces. But they looked at each other and shared the same thought: *This has gone on long enough.*

They put their glasses down, made excuses and fled, in separate directions, and reconvened five minutes later in the bathroom, where they shook with silent laughter until their sides were aching and concerned ensigns were asking if they were okay.

They never saw enough of each other to become close, but they shared a drink if they found themselves in the same sector, and followed each other's careers. Kat attended the memorial service for the dead of Starbase Forty-Four. Philippa attended Kat's investiture ceremony when she was promoted to rear admiral.

Now she watched her friend collapse, to be carried away to Lursa's laboratory, and she knew where her loyalties lay.

Chapter 3

4. Philippa

The first step was waiting. Admiral Cornwell's injuries needed treating, and la'Chang wanted to interrogate his new prisoner at last.

"Use truth serum," growled Lursa. "If you want her personality intact, there's no point altering it with unnecessary trauma."

Chang bristled, but Philippa could see that Lursa would win this battle.

While they were distracted, she slipped out to ready her squad's raider.

"Weapons drill," she told the sentry, but he was used to her by now, and just nodded.

It was a mid-sized raider, with space for up to eighteen -- soldiers and crew -- and heavily armoured enough to ram a starship with only minimal casualties. She could fly it alone, if she had to, but if she had her choice--

"What are you doing?" Mogh asked behind her.

"The Starfleet admiral is being questioned," she said, her voice even. "She might have valuable intelligence. We should be ready to move out."

"You should not have acted alone," said Mogh. "As your squad leader, I will be held responsible for your actions." He sighed, and added, "And as your brother ... I should know what you intend."

"My little brother." She smiled, and he shifted.

"Before the war," he said, "you commanded a Federation starship."

"Yes."

"You must have been experienced." At her inquiring look, he added, "You are very old."

You're just very young, Mogh.

"What do you want to know?"

His voice was barely audible. "What did you do when your mission is dishonorable?"

"You mean, sending a veqlargh against the Federation?"

He said nothing.

"Starfleet officers are bound to refuse unlawful orders," she said.

"Do they?"

"It rarely comes up."

Acting in concert, they went below decks to perform visual checks on the weapons lockers.

"la'Gorkon has resigned from General Kol's staff," said Mogh. "He's on his way back to Qo'noS. There are rumours he is starting a movement against Kol."

"That's treason," Philippa whispered.

"Is it treason if it saves the Empire? Gorkon is young, but widely respected. Others will follow him."

Will you?

She did not ask.

*

Chang summoned their squad that night. He was in a jovial mood, drinking blood wine and stalking the observation deck as he looked over star charts and reports.

"T'Kuvma's murderer serves on the *USS Discovery*," he said. "The so-called ghost ship is the Federation's strongest weapon against us. General Kol wants the ship intact, its captain and navigator alive."

"And Michael Burnham?" she asked.

"Dead is acceptable. Alive is better."

She nodded.

"You will go to the Kortar system with the Third Fleet. Kortar Four is heavily populated and rich in topaline. Starfleet will have to defend it, and the only ship fast enough is Discovery. You leave in six hours."

The squad saluted and left, but Philippa lingered.

"Admiral Cornwell would be a valuable distraction," she said indifferently.

Chang considered it, then said, "No. Lursa's work takes priority. She's administering the first infusion of retrogenes now."

"Very well."

He clasped her shoulder. "Set your teeth, and send darkness to all that stop you."

Philippa blinked, and Chang laughed.

"Shakespeare, Captain. When you return, I will reacquaint you with your culture."

She swallowed her first response and said, "I'm honoured, la'Chang."

*

Her squad would be drinking and carousing until it was time to depart. She returned to their raider and armed herself with a knife and a holster and a couple of hyposprays from its rudimentary medical station.

Then she returned to the crew deck and followed the noise until she found her squad. They had more or less taken over a secondary mess hall, and welcomed her with hot blood wine.

It was the work of a moment to detach the sedative from the hypo and discharge it into the communal jug. Diluted and shared, it wasn't enough to knock them out, but it left them incapacitated, and that was all she needed.

Lursa was the only person working on the lab deck, humming to herself as she examined Kat Cornwell's vital signs. The lights were low, and she didn't sense Philippa in the shadows. The hypospray hissed against her neck, and she collapsed into Philippa's arms.

I'm sorry, little sister.

Kat lay on a biobed, stripped to her standard issue tank top and underwear. Philippa found her pants and boots and looked at her chart. She was stable; the interrogation drugs had left her system and the first infusion of Klingon retrogenes had been a success, and Lursa's notes indicated she was thinking of bringing the next treatment forward.

Philippa found the stimulant and injected it. For a few seconds nothing happened. Then Kat sighed and opened her eyes.

5. Katrina

A synthetic hand closed over her mouth.

"Don't scream."

Katrina resisted, but the veqlargh was stronger. She spoke carefully, as if she had forgotten how to form words in English.

"You're on the Klingon flagship. You've been interrogated and injected with Klingon retrogenes, but Lursa hasn't started the mental reprogramming. Commander Chang has set a trap for the *USS Discovery*. I need to get you out of here."

She released Kat, who took a long, deep breath and said, "Philippa?"

"It's good to see you again, Kat."

"You're a clone."

"I know."

"You killed Lieutenant Commander Douglas."

"Yes."

"How can I trust you?"

"Admiral, *Discovery* is compromised. We need to move."

She took hold of Kat's shoulders and helped her sit up. Her hands were warm, even the Klingon prosthesis, and gentle.

Once upright, Kat was struck by a powerful headache and a wave of nausea. She leaned forward, breathing through her nose, until the worst had passed. The veqlargh watched, and it might have been a trick of the half-light, but her eyes, mismatched though they were, seemed as intelligent and compassionate as the real Philippa's.

"You said I was interrogated?" Kat asked.

"Under drugs."

"Shit. I thought Klingons didn't do that."

"It's not preferred. Admiral, we don't have time for this."

"I know, I know."

At least, she found when she stood up, the only trace of her knee injury was a dull ache, and the headache was receding. And most of her uniform was on hand. She dressed and followed Philippa to the door.

"You might want this." Philippa pressed a disruptor into her hand. "Don't fire unless it's absolutely necessary."

They reached the raider bay without incident. The raider itself was under guard, but Philippa seemed unconcerned.

"Wait here," she told Kat, and advanced from the shadows to have a long, loud conversation with the sentry. About the prospects for the hunt, Kat thought, and she was struck by how dramatically Philippa's body language changed when she spoke Klingon.

Then Philippa pulled a knife and cut his throat. Kat was already on her feet, sprinting across the raider bay even as the sentry's body hit the floor. Her head still ached, her knee twinged and her stomach churned, but she was conscious of a strength and speed she hadn't possessed since she was a high school track champion.

Then the lights went up, and a disruptor bolt landed inches from her foot. She dodged and rolled, but a heavy Klingon boot stopped her.

Applause echoed through the raider bay. Commander Chang marched forward, flanked by guards. Behind him, bleeding and handcuffed, was the soldier Kat had dubbed Big Guy.

Philippa was still fighting Chang's troops, but she went limp when she saw Big Guy, her face falling.

"Mogh," she said, and asked a question in Klingon. Big Guy shook his head, gazing at the ground, his fury and despair in his face.

The conversation that followed was in Klingon, but Kat understood the gist: Big Guy -- Mogh -- had allowed Philippa to escape, was himself a traitor, and would suffer the fate of all such. Philippa didn't believe it, but Mogh denied nothing.

They were escorted to the prison deck, to another cell with one central light source, a transporter pad to receive food rations, and nothing else.

This one, at least, was empty. Kat wondered how long it had been since poor old Douglas had tried to strangle her, and if the rest of their cellmates were still alive.

No sooner had the door locked behind them than Philippa rounded on Mogh with a tirade of angry Klingon. How could he be so stupid? Why didn't he sound the alarm when he realised she had drugged the others? Had he perhaps suffered a head injury?

Kat was reminded of nothing more than herself, telling her younger brother off for one of his many bad decisions.

And then she realised something which should have been obvious.

"I understand you," she said. "You're speaking Klingon, and I understand you."

"Lursa must have implanted language along with the genetic graft," said Philippa. "Good. That makes it easier."

"How is that good?"

It probably explained the headache, which had disappeared entirely. Kat thought of the evenings she'd spent with her aides, trying to get her tongue around Klingon vocabulary. All that time, wasted.

The rest of it...

"Tell me about the genetic graft," she said, and she was quite proud of the way her voice didn't shake at all.

"You only received the first dose," said Philippa. "You'll notice improved strength and stamina, perhaps faster reflexes. A taste for rare meat."

"A better sense of humour," Mogh grunted, but Philippa held up a hand to hush him.

"Are you okay, Kat?" she asked.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Death," said Mogh.

"That's not funny."

"I wasn't joking."

"Mogh," said Philippa, "*why* didn't you sound the alarm when you realised I drugged the squad?"

"I knew what you were doing. I thought it ... honourable." He scowled, staring at nothing in particular. "I thought to use the confusion to stage

my own escape."

"You were defecting."

"To the Federation?" Kat asked.

"To Gorkon," said Mogh.

"The Empire's on the verge of a schism," Philippa told her. "It's an--"

"Opportunity," Kat finished. "We're stuck here."

"I know." Philippa looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, Admiral."

Kat waved it away.

"You know Chang. What will he do with us?" she asked.

"Reprogramming, I expect. He was very insistent on restoring my memories, retaining your personality. Lursa will finally get her way."

"The mission will go forward without us," said Mogh. "*Discovery* will be captured. Chang will give its captain to my sister."

And Gabriel would become the next Starfleet officer to be transformed into a killing machine for the Klingons. Along with *Discovery* and the spore drive. Klingon genetic science was far more advanced than the Federation's. Mogh's sister could probably churn out fresh navigators in her sleep.

Kat's fist left a dent in the wall.

"We can't let this happen," she said.

"I agree," said Philippa. "What are your orders, Admiral?"

*

Last time Kat had been in one of these cells, she had ordered Ensign Nonogak to dismantle the transporter pad. More as a way to pass the time than anything else, but there was a chance they could have pulled some usable parts from its guts. If it didn't overload and fry them all first.

This time, Philippa thrust her prosthetic arm straight through the pad, shattering the transparent aluminium as if it was glass.

It overloaded at once, sending wild tendrils of plasma up Philippa's arm, sizzling where it met flesh. With a visible effort, she kept reaching. Sweat streamed down her face, and Kat had to resist the urge to tell her to stop.

Eyes closed, teeth clenched, Philippa managed to say, "I've got it!"

Then she fell backwards, the power relay aglow in her clawed hand. The overload redirected itself, blowing out the door. At the same moment, the relay exploded and Philippa screamed.

Kat saw spots.

When her vision had returned, klaxons were sounding, and Philippa was staring at the space where her prosthetic arm had been.

"Move," growled Mogh. "We have less than a minute."

They scrambled.

The guards were already mobilising. Philippa launched herself at the lead, ducking his disruptor shot. But her missing arm threw her off-balance, and she fell short, compensating by sweeping him off his feet with a low kick. Mogh backed her up, seizing the fallen guard's disruptor and shooting the second, then kicking that guard's fallen disruptor back to Kat. She shot the third guard at the same moment Philippa broke the neck of the first.

It took less than ten seconds, and now they were armed. The corridor was filling with smoke, despite the fire suppression system. *Ship's internal sensors must be lighting up like a Christmas tree.*

"This way," said Mogh.

They took out six more guards on the way to the checkpoint, two groups of three, and acquired a handful of knives and daggers. Philippa claimed a two-pronged dagger, a more practical weapon than a disruptor rifle for a woman with one hand.

There were six soldiers at the checkpoint. Kat and her team paused at a crosswalk, concealed by smoke and the haze of the fire suppressant.

"If we shoot them," said Mogh, "our location will be revealed and we'll be overwhelmed."

"I can take them," said Philippa.

Kat didn't point out that obvious: that Philippa was still pale and clammy from the shock of losing her arm, badly off-balance, and even if she was in peak physical condition, she would struggle to defeat six Klingon warriors in hand-to-hand combat.

She just said, "Not alone. That's an order, Captain."

"Six against three are good odds," said Mogh.

"On my mark," said Kat.

Philippa didn't wait. Mogh was right behind her.

Kat shook her head and started after them.

She was pushing sixty. She had two knives, a rough idea of Klingon anatomy, and the strength and stamina that came from an infusion of Klingon genetic material.

And maybe something else (putting her knife through a guard's throat, rejoicing in the smell of his blood). Was the Klingon propensity for violence nature or nurture? She could write a paper (grabbing a fallen guard's bat'leth and ramming it into his colleague's back before the man could shoot Philippa). Or be its subject.

Philippa grabbed the last remaining guard and shoved his head at the retinal scanner. The checkpoint computer was unsealed, and she cut the guard's throat and dropped him to the floor. Mogh opened the prisoner records.

"There are thirty-two Federation prisoners," he said.

"And the raider bay?" Kat asked.

"Twelve soldiers." He opened the remote transporter controls. "Preparing to--"

He was interrupted by an angry growl as a seventh guard appeared. Kat and Philippa reached for their weapons, but from behind the guard came a disruptor bolt, and he fell.

"Lursa," Philippa breathed.

"Brother." Could a Klingon be shell-shocked? Lursa lowered her weapon, looking appalled and angry and afraid all at once.

"You can't stop us," said Mogh.

"la'Chang has ordered our execution," she said. "I killed the ones he sent for me." Her jaw clenched. "I won't let him destroy my family."

"Come with us," said Mogh.

"To the Federation? My work is anathema there."

"To Gorkon. Eventually."

She hesitated.

"We're wasting time," said Kat. "You want to live long enough to make plans? Come with us. Mogh, energise."

They beamed onto the raider.

The raider bay's guards were beamed into the cells.

Mogh had put them on the raider's bridge. He went straight to the helm. Philippa took weapons.

They had planned for Kat to take the ops station, but now they had Lursa.

So, wearing half her uniform and a coating of Klingon blood, Kat descended the ladder to address the Starfleet personnel they had rescued.

They went to warp before they had even cleared the flagship's shields.

Freedom.

*

Freedom had a smell.

Thirty-six people crammed into an alien ship designed for half that number. Life support was stretched enough without adjusting the environmental controls to something more comfortable for humans. The replicators produced only Klingon food. The medkits weren't calibrated for Federation species. And the prisoners' conditions ranged from hungry and scared to catatonic.

"You should kill that one," said Lursa, watching Kat take Clements's vitals.

They were hiding in an asteroid field, running silent, waiting for the last of their pursuers to give up and move on. The crew quarters were cramped and dark.

"You'll never get anywhere with humans with an attitude like that," said Kat. "Keep him cool," she told Reyes. "Make sure he's hydrated. That's all we can do."

"Yes, Admiral," said Reyes. She glanced over at Lursa and said quietly, "Admiral ... it's been three days, and I've only seen you sleep for a

few hours."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead, Lieutenant."

"There are rumours about what the Klingons did to you."

"You don't want to listen to gossip."

"Crem says they turned Captain Georgiou into some kind of eugenics experiment." Reyes looked Kat in the eye. "I trust you, and I'll support you. But we're days away from Federation space. We should know who we're dealing with."

*

"There are spaces in my memory."

Lursa and Mogh were sleeping. Snoring, in fact. Kat was at the helm. Philippa sat on the floor beside her, knees drawn to her chest, back to the main viewer.

"I remember pieces of my childhood. The Academy. I was always cold in San Francisco, and the air was too dry. But sometimes it seems like it all happened to someone else." She smiled bleakly. "Which, of course, it did."

"Believe it or not, your self-awareness is reassuring," said Kat.

"Is it? The missing pieces worry me. I've lost so many ... important things."

"Tell me."

"My son. I can recall his face, but his name's just," Philippa waved her hand. "Gone."

Kat tried to imagine forgetting Phoebe's name. Her mind rejected the possibility outright.

Phoebe had accompanied her to the memorial for Starbase Forty-Four. She had worried that twelve was too young for such a bleak, solemn event, but Phoebe insisted. She kept her hand in Kat's through the whole ceremony, but if she regretted attending, she never said.

"Debare," said Kat at last. "His name was Debare Pierre Georgiou Alabi."

"Oh," said Philippa softly.

She covered her face with her hand and shook with silent tears.

*

They crossed the Federation border the next day. Kat put the raider on autopilot, and she, Philippa and the Klingons went belowdecks.

"We're a day out from the Koltar system," Kat told the assembled ex-prisoners. "We believe the Klingon Third Fleet has been assigned to attack Koltar Four as part of a trap for the *USS Discovery*. I've sent an encrypted warning to Starfleet Command, but they may not get it in time." Or believe it.

"So it's down to us," said Ensign Nonogak.

"This raider was designed to ram and board," said Philippa. "And that's what we'll do."

"Everyone who can fight will do so," Kat said. "Weapons are the one thing we have plenty of."

Mogh stood to attention. "I will teach you to fight like Klingons." He had spent the morning practising his English. "We have surprise on our side."

"Admiral," said a lieutenant who had been captured in a skirmish on Sherman's Planet, "we're not exactly a powerful fighting force right now."

"I know," said Kat, "but it's imperative that we keep *Discovery* out of Klingon hands."

It was too much to hope that *Discovery* simply wouldn't respond to the attack. This was an insignificant region, and Starfleet vessels were few and far between -- likely *Discovery* was the only ship that could arrive in time to save the population of Kortar Four.

And, knowing Gabriel, any report of a trap for *Discovery* would be tantamount to a formal invitation.

She wondered if she had told Chang that in her interrogation.

"Do you really think we can hold the Klingons off?" asked Lieutenant Crem.

"Alone?" Philippa asked. "No. But like Mogh says, we have the element of surprise. And he and I are familiar with Klingon hand-to-hand combat tactics." She made her way through the crew quarters, looking at faces, letting them see her. "Under normal circumstances, we could limp to a starbase and congratulate ourselves on a job well done. But we have a duty -- to the four million people of Kortar Four, if nothing else."

A cadet who had served on the *Hypatia* said, "A few weeks ago, you were killing Starfleet officers for the Klingons."

Kat felt Mogh bristle, but she put her hand on his arm to steady him. Philippa just gave the cadet a sad smile.

"I know who I am, now."

"The good news," said Crem, "is that if we die, our Klingon friend here can bring us back. More or less."

"Shut up, Crem," said Nonogak.

*

"Michael Burnham is serving on the *Discovery*," Kat told Philippa.

"I know."

"How do you feel about that?"

Philippa pulled a disruptor down, checked its components, replaced it and grabbed the next one. Kat didn't push.

"I'm not sure," Philippa said at last.

A very silly thought had been floating around Kat's head for the last day. "You're not ... subconsciously programmed to assassinate her, are you?"

"I hope not."

Behind them, Lursa snorted.

"No," she said. "But only because that did not occur to la'Chang."

*

Four hours out from Kortar. Kat was too keyed up to rest, so she paced the engine room and checked and rechecked the knife sheaths at her wrists, hips and ankles.

"Stop."

She hadn't heard Lursa come in, but a knife was in her hand before the Klingon had finished speaking.

Lursa looked approving.

"I've been distracted," she said. "I should have been monitoring your condition since the gene graft." She held up her tricorder. "Sit." In clumsy English, she added, "I will not hurt you."

Kat allowed Lursa to scan her.

"Is your brother teaching you English?"

Lursa went back to Klingon. "And my -- Philippa." She studied her readings. "Starfleet will put us in prison. It wouldn't do to be unprepared. Your heartbeat is accelerated."

"Anticipation."

"How do you sleep?"

"Little and lightly."

"And your appetite is normal. I've seen you eat."

"Normal? I'm always hungry."

"Normal for a Klingon."

Kat leaned over her shoulder to study the results.

"Is this permanent?" she asked.

Lursa gave her a look that said, *Well, obviously*. "Of course." Wistfully she added, "I suppose your Starfleet won't let me continue with the gene grafts."

You'll be lucky if you aren't charged with war crimes, with Philippa and I as exhibits for the prosecution.

Instead, Kat said, "Why did you use your DNA for this? Out of all the Klingons in the Empire? Why not the..." she tried to think like a eugenicist, "the strongest, or the smartest? Or someone important? Why not T'Kuvma himself?"

"Foolishness." Lursa stood up. "My family, we were nothing but minor scions of an unworthy House. But my parents and my sisters are dead. I ... missed them."

Kat reached out and took her hand.

*

They were almost too late.

The Third Fleet was in pieces, scattered throughout the system's asteroid belt, fragments orbiting Kortar Four and its moon. Only one bird-of-prey remained intact, engaged in battle with the *USS Wu* among the gas giants on the system's edge.

But *Discovery* was burning. A raider, twin to the one they had stolen, was attached to her saucer section.

"What's *Discovery*'s status?" Philippa asked.

"Shields at thirty percent," said Lursa. "Warp drive offline. Hull breach on deck four."

"Signal them," Kat said.

This was the hard part. The next hard part. She had encoded the signal with her command codes, then, as insurance, added a parallel transmission. No encryption, just one word: *Perseids*.

"*Discovery* is hailing."

"You're up," said Philippa.

A raider this small had no holocom system. *Discovery*'s bridge appeared on the viewscreen, and Kat heard Philippa draw a breath: three former *Shenzhou* officers were looking out at them.

Kat had arranged the comm system so that only she was visible to *Discovery*. Anything else was a distraction.

Without preamble, she said, "Captain Lorca, I have thirty-five armed soldiers ready to defend *Discovery*. I need you to lower your shields long enough for us to ram that raider on your hull."

Gabriel hesitated.

Burnham said, "Captain, the bird-of-prey is two-point-six billion kilometres away."

Mere minutes to *Discovery*, if they saw an opportunity. Gabriel had to trust her. If he was still capable of that.

A million years ago he had put his hand around her throat and held a phaser to her head. She was a different person, now.

I need you to see me, Gabriel.

The moment stretched.

Then Gabriel turned to his tactical officer and said, "Ready photon torpedos and drop shields. Get it done."

Thank you, Kat mouthed, and cut the connection.

On a ship this small, there was no need to activate the comm. Mogh just raised his voice and shouted, "Take your places. Ramming in five -- four -- three--"

"*Discovery* shields are down," said Lursa.

"Initiate drop," Philippa ordered.

They landed on the enemy raider with a sickening metal crunch. The ship was still shaking as Kat slid down the ladder and grabbed a disruptor.

She turned to Philippa.

"Mission is yours, Captain."

*

Mogh and Lursa took point on the enemy raider. It held two guards, easily taken out. Then Philippa moved into the lead and they emerged through the hull breach into *Discovery*, and chaos.

Fire. Fire suppressant. Klingons. Starfleet.

Too damn many Klingons, Kat thought, while Philippa cut a swathe through them. More than the crew complement of the raider. They must have broken through *Discovery*'s shields long enough to beam an extra boarding party in.

But they weren't expecting to be attacked from behind. Nonogak shot three before a warrior knocked her off her feet and pulled the disruptor from her hands. He raised it to shoot her, and Kat took aim, but Reyes shot first.

"Thanks," said Nonogak.

"Don't mention it," said Reyes.

Close quarter fighting. Practically a brawl. Gabriel's new chief of security caught her eye; in a moment, he had joined her.

Taking aim at a soldier, he said, "Captain didn't mention you were bringing a couple of Klingons along."

"Tell your officers not to shoot them."

Tyler looked like he *really* wanted to argue, but his attention was caught by something else: Philippa Georgiou, ducking under a Klingon soldier's bat'leth, rising inches from his face, and shooting him.

"Is that--"

"Captain Georgiou."

Philippa discarded her phaser, claiming her enemy's bat'leth, unaware of the three soldiers behind her. Kat set her disruptor to overload and threw it at them, pulling Tyler down to shield him from the explosion.

"Captain didn't mention that, either."

He offered Kat his phaser, but she shook her head and pulled the knives from her hip sheaths. She advanced, conscious of the enemies around them and the lieutenant at her back, and for the first time, she understood why people talked about blood *singing*.

Cut. Thrust. Stab. She wasn't trained in knife combat, but she was strong and fast, and the cuts she received just made her feel alive.

And you had one gene graft. Imagine how Philippa feels.

Philippa was a whirl of energy, in one place then another, leaving Klingons dead or maimed in her wake.

It was almost enough.

They were down to just half a dozen Klingons, but most of the Starfleet personnel had fallen. Tyler lasted the longest, until a warrior slashed through the tendons behind his knees then picked him up and threw him away like a ragdoll. He landed with a crash, still conscious, but far away from the fray, or any convenient fallen weapons.

Lursa, civilian that she was, fell next. She screamed as the bat'leth took her leg, then fell back, dazed, watching the pool of magenta blood spread around her.

Mogh was shot -- stunned, thank God, and she couldn't believe she was grateful -- by a Starfleet officer.

And then it was just Kat and Philippa.

Philippa was trained and conditioned for this. She took lead, while Kat acted as back-up, and though they were surrounded, their enemies were diminishing--

Discovery shook. Photon torpedo fire.

The bird-of-prey had defeated the *Wu* and come back for *Discovery*.

Then an alarm sounded, and the ship's computer announced a black alert.

Everything shifted. Then returned.

Two more black alerts. Two more spore jumps.

(Kat's knife slid through Klingon armour, penetrating skin and organs, and as the soldier shrieked in anger, Philippa's bat'leth separated her head from her shoulders.)

Then *Discovery* stabilised, and, through the haze of blood and sweat, Kat heard Gabriel ordering all security personnel to deck four.

The last Klingon body hit the deck, and applause rang out from the smoke.

"Oh, well done, Captain." Chang emerged from the swirl of smoke and coolant. He was bleeding from a minor head wound, but otherwise seemed uninjured. *He's been watching us*, Kat realised. *Evaluating*. "Very well done, indeed."

"Stand down," Kat told him. "Your boarding parties are defeated. You have no means of escape."

There was movement in the smoke. *Discovery* officers.

Chang ignored them, and her. All his attention was on Philippa.

"You tell yourself you're still human," he said. "But you are, at heart, a Klingon." He tilted his head. "Or perhaps, deep down, you always were."

Philippa threw herself at him, pushing him against the wall with the edge of her bat'leth to his throat. Kat followed, grabbing Philippa's wrist. Starfleet uniforms surrounded them.

"Give us space," Kat snapped. "Philippa, don't."

Philippa stared at her, blind fury in her mismatched eyes.

"I said, *stand down*, Captain Georgiou, that's an *order*."

Philippa blinked and exhaled in something like relief.

"Yes, Admiral," she said.

Chang laughed.

"'Kindness'," he said. "'Nobler ever than revenge.' Pretend all you like, Admiral, neither of you are human any more -- not the humans the Federation wants. 'taH pagh taHbe.' Shakespeare is better in Klingon--"

Kat lashed out without conscious thought, and Chang's words were swallowed by a cry of agony and rage. Philippa released him, and he staggered forward, clutching his empty left eye socket. Blood poured between his fingers, and as he crouched, Chang was laughing.

Kat moved backwards, shaking, until she bumped into someone. Turning, she found herself inches from Gabriel.

"Kat," he was saying, though the sound was coming from a great distance, "Kat, you're okay. You're okay."

She put her hands up, stared at them, then shuddered and wiped the sticky vitreous humour on his shirt.

"Get your damn eyes fixed," she whispered, and she laughed and sobbed until someone produced a hypospray and sedated her.

6. Philippa

When *Discovery's* chief medical officer finally released her from sickbay, she was given private quarters, fresh clothes -- a standard-issue jumpsuit, no rank or insignia -- and a personal guard.

Precisely who the guard was meant to protect, she decided not to ask. In Captain Lorca's shoes, she would have done the same thing.

It was strange, being on a Starfleet ship again. She needed to rest, but it was too cold, too quiet, too...

Alien.

She slept for a few hours.

She woke up early, and hungry, craving nasi lemak with sambal hot enough to burn her sinuses, and sweet, milky teh tarik to wash it down.

As she dressed, she realised she was thinking in Malay again, and Mandarin, and Hokkien and French were just a breath away.

Am I home?

She was a clone. She had never visited Malaysia, or Paris, or San Francisco. Her memories had been stolen from a dead woman.

And her face. For the first time since Lursa had woken her up, she looked into a mirror.

And it was ... her. One-armed, with one blue Klingon eye, hair grey and short. But she knew that face.

"Hello," she whispered.

There was a message from Captain Lorca, asking her to see him in his ready room at her earliest convenience. She decided to eat first.

It was 0630, and the mess hall was full of alpha shift crew grabbing breakfast before they went on duty. Huddled around one table were a dozen familiar faces: y'Roen, Detmer, Saru and more. *Shenzhou* crewmembers. Michael stood on the edge of the group, shoulder stiff, hands behind her back.

The conversation was so intent that they didn't even notice Philippa enter.

Except for Saru. His throat ganglia twitched and extended, and Keyla looked up, meeting Philippa's eyes.

The room went silent.

Michael's face was unreadable, except for her eyes, which were wide and liquid. *She could never hide the emotion in her eyes*, Philippa thought, and she stepped back, reeling, because she was looking at Michael and *remembering*, long conversations over plomeek soup and air bandung, chess games and arguments and the first time she got Michael to laugh.

She turned and walked out.

*

"We're three days out from Starbase Yorktown," Lorca told her. "Can't do more than warp five, towing the *Wu*. Once we dock, you, your Klingon allies, the prisoners, you're all Commodore Paris's problem." He gave her a lopsided smile. "No offence, Captain."

There were no seats in Lorca's ready room, and he kept the lights low. Kat had told Philippa a little about *Discovery's* captain, but her omissions were revealing.

"None taken," she said mildly. "Do you know what will happen to Mogh and Lursa? Defecting to the Federation was not their first choice."

Lorca shrugged. "Above my pay grade," he said. "But I can tell you one thing -- they won't be injected with human DNA and used against their own people."

She managed a smile.

"You, on the other hand," Lorca said, "the way the war's going, they'll probably give you a ship."

"That seems unlikely."

"I don't know. Looks to me like you're our new superweapon. Admiral Cornwell's making her own recommendations -- but she ripped a man's eyeball out yesterday afternoon, so I don't know if Starfleet will listen."

Lorca pinned her with a sharp, cold look.

"Just promise me one thing," he said. "Don't go poaching Burnham. I got her out of prison for a reason, and I need her on *Discovery*. As long as I'm in command of this ship--" He broke off, then changed tack. "She helped start this war. I need her with me to finish it."

*

Alpha shift had come on duty by the time she left Lorca's ready room. As she stepped out onto the bridge, Keyla rose from her chair, and Michael and Saru stood to attention.

"Captain," said Michael.

Philippa swallowed.

"As you were," she said.

*

Lursa and Mogh were housed in tiny shared quarters. Better than the brig, or Klingon troop barracks, but not comfortable.

"It's cold," said Mogh, when she visited. "And the food has no flavour."

"And we have to sit," said Lursa, waving her crutch, "not that we all have the choice, and wait to find out what happens next."

Lursa's leg had been cut off below the knee. No prosthetic was forthcoming yet; Philippa suspected that *Discovery's* doctors could easily provide one, but security concerns overruled them.

Likewise, Philippa still had to make do with one arm and one Klingon eye. Starfleet wanted to see her as she was.

Let them, she thought.

"Admiral Cornwell is going to recommend your parole," she told Lursa and Mogh. "She wants to send you as envoys to Gorkon."

"So the Federation can watch as Klingon fights Klingon?" Lursa asked.

"So we all survive," said Philippa. "I don't know what comes next. But we're family. I won't let you come to harm."

*

When she couldn't put it off any longer, she visited Michael.

She was greeted at the door by a young cadet, who froze when she recognised Philippa.

"I," she said, "you--"

Michael appeared behind her.

"Tilly," she said gently.

"Oh," said the cadet. "Yes. I'm ... going to go take a walk. Maybe a long walk? Maybe grab a meal. Or two." She paused in the doorway and flashed a blinding smile at Michael. "Have fun!"

Then she was gone, and Philippa almost wished she had stayed.

"Say something," said Michael. "I killed T'Kuvma and started a war. Tell me you're angry, or disappointed. Tell me I let you down."

"All these things are true," said Philippa.

"I left you behind."

"If you hadn't, I wouldn't be here."

Michael flinched.

"Captain," she said, "what do you want from me?"

"When you came aboard the *Shenzhou*," Philippa said, "I gave myself the task of teaching you to be human."

What an ego I had...

But Michael nodded.

"Now," Philippa waved her hand in frustration, "I'm not that person anymore. I can't just slip into her life as if the last seven months never happened. I was programmed to be a weapon, but--"

Michael's eyes were bright. "You need to be more," she said. "I understand. You once told me you had seen a life of loss, yet chose hope."

"Making the choice is the easy part. But finding my path--"

Michael took her hand.

"Captain," she said, "I would be -- proud -- honoured -- I--" She drew breath and, with a visible effort, recovered a measure of Vulcan calm. "Let me help," she said.

end

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