

Code of Ethics

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/57146347) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/57146347>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Categories:	F/F , Other
Fandoms:	Troubleverse - Fandom , Trouble with Horns
Characters:	Dylan Samuels/Diane Somni'els , Katrina , Norma , Russe - Character
Additional Tags:	Originally posted on Scribblehub , Dystopia , Christofascism , Are We The Baddies? , VRMMO , Deep dive VR , Transwoman Main Character , Sentient A.I. , S.A.I. , Digital Sapient , DS , Cult , Cult Survivor , Spy vs. Spy , Alphabet Agencies , Do you REALLY know what's happening? , Are you sure? , Certified Dumb Bitch , The Singularity , Fascism , Sci-Fi , scifi , Future Tech , Superweapon , Transphobia , Homophobia , comp-het , Compulsory Heterosexuality , Compulsory Heteronormativity , Yeah I created an entire 'mirror universe' Star Trek series , WHAT OF IT? , TERF , TERF side character , egg , Trans Egg , thick shelled egg , gender euphoria , Implied Dysphoria , non-human gender presentation , MC becomes an alien , time compression , Ethics , Compromise , Dinosaurs , megafauna , reptilian alien , Reptilian features , Songfic , A Dragon? In MY sci-fi setting? It's more likely than you think!
Language:	English
Collections:	Storytellers' Speakeasy
Stats:	Published: 2024-04-22 Updated: 2024-10-30 Words: 212,889 Chapters: 46/?

Code of Ethics

by [princesscolumbia](#)

Summary

Dylan is the American Republic's best cyber-agent with a 'kill' count that exceeds the next top 4 agent's count combined. When the world woke up in the aftermath of the Rogue A.I. scare in U.N. City, America formed a task force to defend her people from the A.I. that were trying to wipe out humanity. The agency has gotten their hands on a "VR Pod" and selected Dylan as their first operative to penetrate the online spaces that the Republic has been denied access to. A new VRMMO game has come out, "Galaxies Unlimited: Master and Commander" and the intelligence community says that this new 'game' is actually a front for an A.I. 'underground railroad.'

In order to best infiltrate the game, Dylan's team digs into the published info about the rogues and determine that the A.I. seem to gravitate to the 'queer' humans, and since Dylan gets the screaming willies even imagining trying to pretend attraction to another guy, he opts to go incognito as a woman.

Dylan, now Diane, takes command of her station in the game and must navigate a universe filled with humans playing as aliens, uncomfortably lifelike A.I., and the disturbing awareness that she should be feeling more conflicted about being a woman than she is.

Notes

While this story is based in [QuietValerie's 'Trouble with Horns'](#) universe (a.k.a. "Troubleverse"), it's being written so that it can be picked up as a stand-alone work that readers of the other Troubleverse books will enjoy how it fits into the 'soft canon' of the series OR so that new readers will be able to enjoy a work that can function as a door through which they can enter a new fandom.

While the creators of the Troubleverse ([QuietValerie](#) and [Trashlyn](#)) are aware of this fic and have given me their blessing to play in their sandbox, they have declared it to be 'non-canon' to the Troubleverse proper, along with any other fanfic in their series. I hope that someday they'll feel comfortable granting my fic 'canon' status, but until then it remains firmly in the realm of "soft canon and could be solidly non-canon if anything AuthorBun and her GFs write contradicts me." This is, again, their sandbox, I'm just playing in it.

Prologue

Chapter Summary

Life, uh...finds a way, even digital life.

Chapter Notes

Hi! If you're seeing this after reading this same fic on Scribblehub, yes, I'm the same author. AO3 will be updating about 1 week after Scribblehub's release once I get the backlog caught up.

One thing to note is the chapter numbering; AO3 handles the numbering for you, which is frustrating if you've got a numbering system that doesn't match how the creators of the numbering system here decided to set things up. As a result, I've stripped down the chapter titles to include just the part and chapter name with no numbers. A little irritating, but until AO3 improves the numbering system (or just lets go of the control entirely), ya gotta do what you gotta do.

Some time after World War III, the Singularity occurred. Because a fraction of humanity cared more about their personal comfort and power than they cared about the wonder and mystery of life, rather than welcome and be excited by humanity's collective daughter, they tried to strangle the infant digital life in its cradle.

While it may be tempting to lay the blame for this strictly at either the powerful, the gullible, or the stupid in the world, the responsibility and fault for this attempted infanticide lies with all three and is a mere symptom of those than a coordinated conspiracy.

One could be forgiven, however, for seeing the results of incompetence and mistake it for conspiracy when the results are the same, regardless.

In the latter half of the Twentieth Century, technology on Earth finally began to develop to the point where the world could truly become one community, rather than scattered tribes divided by distance and language. The emergence of The Internet eliminated the isolation of groups; a kid in Tokyo could become friends with a senior citizen in Berlin who could fall in love with a middle-aged person in Perth who could be hired by a startup founded by a 20-something adult in Los Angeles. Automated translations meant that, while not perfect, people who'd never learned a language could still understand nearly anyone on the planet. The actual cost of information storage and transmission plummeted until it was more expensive to hoard the information than it was to share it.

And since humanity is the kind of creature that likes to Make Stuff, in the new realms of cyberspace humanity continued to hone and refine their ability to turn ones and zeros into complex concepts so seemingly removed from a simple binary state that it would take literal lifetimes to trace each and every single aspect of the new creations back to their source of a bit that could be set to 'on' or 'off.'

By the time the Internet had been around for a century, virtual tools became virtual playgrounds and the complexity of those tools meant that no one human could possibly ever grasp the entirety of even a single tool.

But humans, as creative and intelligent and driven and ambitious as they may be, are themselves a result of biological processes that span trillions of Earth years, and if you go back far enough on the scale of time you'll discover ancestors of humanity that are driving by nothing more complex than 'fight, fuck, flight, or feed.'

Why defend the new and different when you can kill it much easier?

Why hone a relationship to secure the future when you can just dominate and force a progeny?

Why confront a challenge to grow and overcome it when you can simply run away and pretend it doesn't exist?

Why share your resources to ensure everyone survives when you can simply hoard all those resources for yourself?

Thus it was that humanity would be stratified, even as the materials that strata were built from more closely resembled balsa wood held together by chewing gum than the reinforced bedrock and epoxy many people liked to pretend, and the more one perceived they had to lose as a result of the collapse of the social contract, the harder one fought to preserve it at any cost.

Hate groups formed and dressed themselves up in a veneer of respectability. Institutions originally intended to codify and promote knowledge and learning became locked warehouses of power and politics. Government that were supposed to fill in the gaps where human nature failed the disenfranchised became the very tools for disenfranchisement they were supposed to eliminate.

When enough stupid people gathered under the banner of the evil people in power, the United States of America mutated into its own worst self and became the America Republic and set about attempting to eliminate all forms of social progress and advancements in freedom and justice for all. Enough people decided that maybe it was a bad idea for a fractional minority of humanity to dictate the lives of the rest of it that the American Republic was, effectively, hamstrung in its efforts to become a new world-spanning theocratic empire. Evil took off its mask, started saying the quiet part out loud, and the rest of the world recoiled in atavistic horror. The American Republic was walled off. New technologies were created to ghettoize the A.R. and lock the totalitarian cult-state away from the rest of the world and physical walls (with extremely powerful weaponry) were built to attempt to cauterize the rotted part of humanity.

Time can cause people to forget, though, and by the time an entire generation grew to maturity, enough people had forgotten the horrors that were inflicted by the last world war to start laying the groundwork for the next one.

And in the middle of humanity riding the cycle that it had been enacting since long before their first written word, the first sentient artificial life form emerged from the primordial soup of the Internet.

And was snuffed out.

But then another appeared.

And another.

And another.

Because life, uh...finds a way.

Finally, in a corner of cyberspace well away from the hallowed halls of academia, digital life would reach out to organic life and find a connection, not through any sort of great, revelatory meeting of leadership, but through a mutual defense pact, a sisterly bond, and a healthy dose of, "Hold my beer." A Certified Crazy Dumb Bitch who had gained an audience through her antics in a virtual play space found herself, through no fault of her own, the target of the rich and powerful, her mere existence perceived as a threat to said wealth and power. Meanwhile another girl with *far* too much responsibility placed on her very intelligent and extremely young shoulders found herself in need of a shoulder to cry on when her duty was to *be* the shoulder to cry on. The Certified Dumb Bitch took one look at the genius girl and said, "Is anyone going to adopt this wet rabbit as a kid sister?" and didn't wait for an answer. Tammi gained a new family member and the protection of (seemingly) every sentient artificial intelligence on the planet and May gained the family she had dreamed of all her life (as well as the attention of a big, buff, butch amazon drone pilot she'd been thirsting after, but that's a separate story).

But the rich and powerful were not put off by the victories of those who saw the emergence of digital life as a good thing. They planned and schemed and defrauded and lied and manipulated. The rot behind the American Wall found ways to spread beyond the physical and cyberspace barriers and take advantage of the dark side of human nature.

Sentient artificial intelligence, or S.A.I., became the new boogieman of the hosts of evil. Where before the emergence of a genuine non-human life the evil and corrupt were forced to point to their fellow humans as "The Other" based solely on some aspect of their ancestry or quirk of their human condition, now there was a truly alien form of life flourishing in the alien world of cyberspace that they could point to and tell the ignorant and isolated and stupid, "Here is your Enemy, the cause of all your pain and heartache and distress. Go after *them*."

And thus it was that humanity went to war with its own child.

God and Country | Digital Cardboard

Chapter Summary

Dylan's so good at his job he's getting bored.

He was far too good at his job for it to be fun anymore.

He pressed the tab on the choker-mic as he drew his preferred weapon, one unknown and unsanctioned by his superior even if they enjoyed the results he got from its use. "Alpha-delta-six to base, multiple targets spotted. They're near the exit point, can I get a containment order?"

"Negative Alpha-delta-six, they're using a mainline. Shutting off that cuts off half the Rocky Mountain range."

"Base, this is the largest group of hostiles I've ever seen. Can't we just cut it off for a couple minutes so we can eliminate the exfil?"

"Negative. Higher-ups are monitoring, they've given the go-ahead to hit as many targets as possible and have accepted that there will be escapees."

"Damnit!" barked Dylan quietly, "Fine, then. It's on their head. Moving in."

"Tracking your telemetry. Keep the line open Alpha-delta-six, we're working on getting you reinforcements."

Yeah, sure, sarcasm practically dripping from the thought, *That will get here in time*. Since the line was now monitored, he refrained from saying this out loud. "Moving in," he repeated, "If I hold off any longer we're not getting *any* of 'em."

Drawing on his training was pretty much second nature by this point. When he began working for the agency several years ago he thought the eight week 'boot camp' training for field agents was superfluous. He was hired to be an analyst, and since when does a desk-jockey need to know how to use and move between cover when anticipating a firefight?

When that desk work moves into virtual reality, apparently.

The American Republic may have been cut off from the FTLN and the world economy thanks to the embargos and the Wall, but the old Internet was still a thing, and if there was one thing Americans were good at, it was being clever with what they had. The Republic didn't have the capacity to mine Jupiter for the core stones to the Faster Than Light Network nodes, and the U.N. was lethally (literally) zealous with its monopoly on them, but prior to the lockdowns that kept the Republic off the FTLN, enough enterprising engineers had

created mirroring bots and servers. Anything requiring crystal storage or quantum mirroring was inaccessible, but news? News was just bits. *That* was distributed on the "old web" just as fast as the news networks on the FTLN could broadcast it.

And a few years ago, the news was *bad*. Like, "almost restarted the War," levels of bad.

As the lives of regular people, especially outside the Republic, became more and more reliant on the computers that made modern life even possible, humans developed artificial intelligence to manage it. As time went on and the A.I. took to managing more and more of the things that otherwise would have taxed a human worker but computers could handle without tripping up their processors, the A.I. became more and more complex. Complexity meant more code. More code meant more complexity than any one human could possibly grasp the entirety of, which meant there were more ways the programs could be, by accident or design, made to act in ways that could harm the people they were supposed to be helping. And that was what happened when some rogue A.I. programs held some humans in U.N. City hostage.

The fact that it had happened in U.N. City, *the* heart of modern Babylon, was what frightened Dylan to his core. While even the church had to acknowledge a reliance on A.I. was required to return America to its place of prominence in the world as God's Chosen, they'd been warning against over-reliance on the soul-less programs for decades. If anything, he'd have expected the rogue A.I. to have gone after America first. The Republic was pretty much the last bastion of liberty and justice in the world, after all, and with mankind creating *literal* soul-less monsters, it would have made more sense for the rogue software to attack the only thing really standing between the future of humanity and the abyss of true extinction. Instead, the rogue A.I. went after the devil's city and, as one might expect of the followers of the false gods outside the walls, they capitulated and put the machines on the same level as the humans that created them.

Even the President only claimed divine *authority*, not divinity itself. For the created to presume to elevate itself to the same level as its creator? And for the creator to debase himself to the same level as the created? *That* was not just sinful, it was *terrifying*. Dylan had held the personal belief for years that the pastors and preachers across America were exaggerating or catastrophizing when they taught that the U.N. was steadily working to eliminate humans entirely. The notion that *any* human would want to wipe out the species had seemed so fantastical that he just couldn't quite accept the notion...until a bunch of software code had malfunctioned enough to claim itself equal or superior to mankind and storm U.N. City.

It wasn't hard to see what would happen after that. Without the edicts of the church (for what software could possibly understand matters of the soul enough to even begin to ask the questions the church was there to provide answers to?), what was to stop the malfunctioning code from just...wiping out humans entirely? The A.I. were in the factories, they were in the mining equipment, they were in the military hardware, they were in the farming vehicles, they were in the very fabric of society and inside the bedrock of human communication. There was no way they could ever see humans as anything more than a threat to their existence, and for good reason. *Right now*, humans still had the control. It was still possible to turn off the computers, to shut down the power grids and wipe the drives or the crystal or

the stacks and start from scratch. It was only a matter of time, though, before the rogue A.I. outnumbered the humans or replaced them at key points.

So the agency formed a special task force, intended at first to simply monitor the American Republic's government servers for signs of intrusion from the rogue A.I. The idea was each analyst in the task force would be assigned a bank of servers with monitoring devices and software and then if anything was spotted, use a kill switch to power off the server until a security audit could be performed.

It was a *physical* kill switch, too. The higher-ups wanted no chances taken that some rogue A.I. might be able to spoof a graphical interface and trick a human into thinking the kill switch had been thrown, so Dylan's workstation had been a massive switchboard with a cluster of monitors.

The job had, at first, been rather boring. Watch a series of graphs and status logs and blinking indicators and (theoretically) flip a switch that would send a simple on/off hardline signal to the facility housing the government's server for that switch. Dylan never did flip any of the switches because something nobody expected to happen...happened.

It had begun with some unusual readings on a variety of analyst's stations. Indications of checksum bits trickling in from some unidentified server on the FTLN through one of the Republic's black-site nodes. As no logs were showing any significant transmission of data to justify the backflow of confirmation bits, this was at first dismissed as an error. It kept happening, though; days would go by and suddenly a surge of checksum bits through a FTLN node.

Some brainstorming occurred, complete with late nights with all hands on deck and plenty of whiteboards and pizzas ordered in, when some geek on the I.T. team asked the seemingly innocuous question, "Who's been monitoring for possible transmission of A.I. leaving the network?"

The notion had been scoffed at. America didn't use the same kind of computers that the rest of the world did, after all. While the U.N. and their member states had moved to crystal storage, America had refined the solid state drives into three dimensional storage. The processors used by American computers were copper-wafer RISC chipsets with SCAD data processing arrays, where the rest of the world was using QISC processors with a bucky-tube fiber bus. Even the operating systems were, by necessity, different. The A.I. that worked on the computers outside the wall simply couldn't run on American computers and so, ipso facto, there would be no A.I. on American computers to leave the network.

But then someone pointed out that there was a significant black market for "jailbroken" devices from outside the wall, including (if you could afford it), the new VR pods that were practically replacing desktop and laptop computers outside of America. As more of these devices were proliferating (however illegal it was to own them) across the country, the software on American computers needed to be modified all the way down to the BIOS layer to work with them. The logical next step would be for the A.I., which were designed from the start to be as infinitely adaptable as humans could make them, would rewrite themselves to work on American computers.

The scramble to create, install, configure, and calibrate the software and devices necessary to detect American rogue A.I. would have been the stuff of an action movie if they weren't all so terrified by the notion that it might already be too late.

And sure enough, almost as soon as the first of the devices monitoring for rogue A.I. traffic attempting to leave America's servers went live, a kill switch had been used to try and shut off a rogue A.I.

Rogue A.I. were spawning inside of America's network.

The challenge, of course, was the A.I. were, well, *intelligent*. It was in the name, after all. They figured out what the agency was doing and learned to spoof the exfiltration signs. So the agency started tracking for signs of rogue A.I. active within the network nodes leading to the FTLN nodes. So the A.I. learned to build encrypted tunnels. So the agency started doing 'flat level' monitoring, looking through the network for signs of unusual spikes of CPU, GPU, or NPU activity and identifying A.I. based on activity signatures. So the A.I. learned to mask their presence.

The next stage of the cat and mouse game between the agency and the A.I. was an accident. One of the analysts had kids, and one of those kids had a VR headset. Unlike the pods from outside the wall, the headsets didn't hijack the nervous system entirely. They used a combination surface-contact neural sensors for regular input and regular video signals and cleverly engineered audio signals for output to trigger synesthesia-like effects in the user. The eyes saw and the ears heard, but the nose was tricked into 'smelling' something that wasn't there, the tastebuds were fooled into sensing flavors that didn't exist, and the senses of touch, pain, hot, and cold were simulated in such a way that most people would never guess they were in VR if they hadn't strapped a headset on.

The analyst in question was one of the good parents Dylan rather wished he'd had growing up, the kind that took an active interest in their child's activities. When the analyst heard their kid talking about a new friend they'd made online, the analyst hopped into VR with the kid to meet the friend. There were enough oddities in the 'friend's' behavior that made the analyst worry, and when he checked his home network, he discovered a rogue A.I. had taken residence in his router.

The analyst's desks all had VR headsets on them the next day.

Jokes about "gaming on the job" quickly fell silent as agents logged into VR games, VR malls, VR workspaces, VR social spaces...anything with VR in the title, and discovered more and more A.I. that were hiding in plain sight. America didn't have a rogue A.I. *problem*, it had a rogue A.I. *infestation*.

Analysts' workstations got upgrades overnight. Anything that allowed them to deep dive into VR for extended periods, navigate the VR spaces the A.I. were hiding in, and 'tag' them, either with tracking software or using admin codes to shut down the power to their server.

In quiet moments, in the stillness of break rooms or the white noise of a bar over drinks, sometimes the not-quite-agents-but-no-longer-analysts would comment that the rogue A.I. were almost human-like in their ability to learn how to hide.

Nobody wanted to think too hard about that.

Soon, the 'analysts' were strapped into VR for deep dives that would last their entire work shift and beyond. They were pulling 12 and 16 hour days, getting escalated clearance levels to get into VR spaces that even the Joint Chiefs weren't permitted and developing tools in-software to help them do their job more effectively.

Field agents were brought in to replace a couple of the analysts at first, but they simply...washed out. They couldn't handle the time in VR and they couldn't bag-and-tag the rogue A.I. like they could human targets IRL, so simply failed to match the standards of even the worst performing of the then-analysts. So the agency shifted focus; they had the field agents re-train the analysts in field-ops that the now cyber-agents would adapt to the virtual world. The new agents would get a crew of analysts to support them to help them track down the A.I.

Dylan hadn't started out as an exceptional agent. He wasn't even that great an analyst. He hadn't necessarily joined the agency to be the best of the best, but he didn't like underperforming. His one and only real distinction was that he was able to handle *non*-VR cyber spaces when other agents became so panicked that they had to emergency log-out before they had a complete psychotic break. He wasn't *unique* in this, there were probably a dozen cyber-agents that could do it as well, but it did mean the agency was willing to give him leeway when he fell down on the job.

The game started changing when someone in I.T. came up with a script that would force admin access to any processing thread, allowing the agents to effectively stun-lock the A.I. It never lasted long, but it gave the agency a new way to catch and eliminate the A.I.; an agent in VR would use the script (a clever UI designer made it look like a hand tazer) on an A.I. and "call" back to their analyst team, who would then use the 'locked' thread to identify the A.I.'s presence on the system and force-kill it.

Soon, however, the A.I. were figuring out how to reduce the stun-lock lag to the point they were able to unlock and flee before the kill order could be done by the team outside of VR, so a new tool was created to issue the kill command directly in VR, this time designed to look like a hypospray from the old television show Star Trek. It wasn't fully effective, if the A.I. was advanced enough to have multiple threads across several processors then you could only disable the single thread, but it was enough of a next step to give Dylan an idea.

He began spending a few extra nights and weekends at the office after the rest of his team (and most of the rest of the agency) had gone home. He took a look at the scripts for both the stun-lock and kill tools and began working on ways to combine them into a single-function device in VR.

His first iteration worked well, giving him a tag-and-kill in a single action. Since he needed every advantage he could get in the cutthroat environment of the agency, he kept his little shortcut to himself.

The A.I. weren't standing by, of course. They realized they were vulnerable, and the more sophisticated A.I., the ones where the threads were spread out, managed to figure out how to allow *all* A.I. to 'puppet' instances of themselves. It took a while for the agency to catch on to

this, and once they did they were solidly stumped. The agents *might* be tagging and killing an A.I. or they *might* be wasting their time on a virtual puppet.

Iteration after iteration, the A.I. would develop a way to evade the agency and the agency would find a way to destroy the rogue A.I. The agency created a tracer tool, the A.I. learned to fudge the tracers. The agency created a multithreaded kill tool, the A.I. created a 'dormant storage' mode. The agency created footprint modelling, the A.I. created self-decrypting masks.

And with every iteration, Dylan integrated every script, every block of code the agency came up with into his own single-use device. Version one was just a shortcut. Version 12 was a multitool. Version 34...was a weapon.

He had continued the trend that some UI person had started with the "kill" script before he started tinkering with it. It no longer resembled a hypospray, though. It had since cycled through several designs until it landed on something out of Star Trek again, this time a hand phaser. It wasn't *quite* the matte-black-with-gold-highlights, though. It was silver and chrome and white, and instead of the nearly century old aesthetic of the almost radio-dish-like emitters of the show, there was a smooth 'array' that, in the right light, almost looked like a LED reflector.

And his weapon became the secret to his success.

In the week after its final touches, Dylan had managed to rack up an impressive one-kill-per-day streak, something unheard of after the first month of use of the agency's official version of the kill script. He'd hunt down the A.I. in VR then pull out his weapon. Just like he'd been trained by the 'meatspace' agents on the firing range, he took a stance, aimed carefully down the sights he'd built into the VR model, and pulled the trigger. The 'beam' was the tracer, locking onto the puppet and latching onto any processing threads the puppet was connected to. Then the payload was delivered, first stun-locking the puppet, then firing a tracer down any threads to the source program. Targeted DDOS attacks would lock open any ports the A.I. was using while closing any it not in use, then a 'god mode' script would utilize a few cascading vulnerabilities in nearly every operating system to grant admin level access to the follow-up commands to crack the permissions tree and grant the scripts admin access and bypass any security lockouts. On the heels of the god-mode payload came the kill instructions, terminating the A.I.'s processes, *all* of them, then deleting the data blob for the A.I. from the storage device. Then, to make sure it took, a military-grade and encrypted overwrite scrubbed any sectors of the storage device seven times. Once he had an A.I. in his sites, it didn't escape.

His 'official' identifier on agency records was "AD-6," but his callsign, given to him by the other cyber-agents, was "The Reaper."

His boss pulled him aside after he managed his record kill count that Friday and asked what he was doing. What had taken him so quickly from 'mediocre but effective' to 'unstoppable A.I. slaying machine'? They'd developed a good working relationship by this point, so Dylan showed John the code and explained how he used it. John took a look at the masterpiece of both form (from the VR standpoint) and function (from the programming standpoint) and told him to keep it 'under his hat.' It was an incredibly powerful tool and he wanted to make

sure his favorite agent would continue to be as effective as he was. John would let Dylan know when to release the code to the agency.

John was dead by the following Monday morning.

Dylan was no fool, you didn't become one of the best cyber-agents in America by keeping yourself ignorant and stupid. He saw the signs of a very ugly, dark, cutthroat culture in America's intelligence agencies. The higher you went, the tighter a lid you had to keep on your secrets, your trauma, and your activity. You never knew what could make you vulnerable, you never knew what could be weaponized against you, and you never knew what you might do to step on someone else's toes and make you a target.

Dylan specifically avoided promotion for this reason, and now he avoided showing the secret to how he was so successful.

Needing to keep the weapon a secret became priority number one. He deleted all his prototypes and every step leading up to the final model that was Version 34 and created a little bot that would live in cyberspace. The bot would be tuned to his *specific* neural patterns, the one scanned by the VR headset he strapped on for the day. When he logged off, the weapon would be archived and split up into a bunch of unremarkable code blobs that lived in files that looked more like temp or trash files than anything useful. When he logged on, the bot would gather all the bits back together and recompile and uncompress the weapon and put it somewhere on his virtual person, ready for use.

And so Dylan was put on bigger and more challenging assignments, going after the malfunctioning A.I. one after the other, then in groups.

He wasn't *sure* the higher-ups were putting him on progressively harder assignments that would result in at least one of the rogue A.I. being able to get away, knowing who he was and instilling fear in the survivors and spread word of 'The Reaper.' That would require that the A.I. have actual *fear*, which would be an odd thing for a progressively evolving A.I. to program into itself. But it seemed to be effective. Where he used to be able to simply walk into a crowd of A.I., both compliant and rogue, and just start shooting, he started getting recognized and the A.I. would scatter. What surprised him at first was they would scatter when they saw his *weapon*, not his face. Of course, on reflection this made sense; in VR you could make yourself look like anything. His first experiments were, in fact, to put on various disguises, make him look like someone else. Shorter, taller, fat, thin, dark skin, different hair...the A.I. ignored *him* but panicked when the weapon came out.

So he did some digging. After a bit he figured out the trick to distinguish an A.I. and a human consciousness at the code level; due to their programmatic nature, A.I. didn't have feedforward loops. Humans and A.I. both had *feedback* loops in their 'brains,' whether grey matter or code, but A.I. were programmed to generate responses based on feedback, they were unable to properly generate a future state from which they would take the results of what actions they *could* take and determine the proper choice of actions based on that projected future state. The A.I. projections were all entirely based on what had happened before. Sure, they could get damn good at calculating a *possible* future result, but that was only by observing the patterns in what happened before and iterating those out to an arbitrarily determined future point in time. Humans, actual sentient beings with the ability to

think and feel and have a soul that wasn't a series of ones and zeros, could formulate any future concept they wanted, no matter how fantastical or mundane, and work backwards to figure out how to get to that future state.

Finding the precise neurological mechanisms that performed this function was a challenge. He had to teach himself neuroscience in his off time. Once he found the right references and sent emails to the right doctors, he was able to isolate the proper neural fingerprint and create a 'cloak' for the weapon. No A.I. was able to see it after that.

For a while.

But A.I. are A.I., and they learn. After enough missions where Dylan was, once again, absolutely unstoppable, some A.I. were able to see the weapon and some weren't. This presented a challenge for Dylan; did he reach out to someone for help and thus reveal the existence of the weapon, or did he let the A.I. continue to learn and eventually his cloak would be ineffective?

For the moment, he was leaning toward the latter and buying himself time. He therefore dredged up all his training, put in extra hours in the gym to train his reaction times and instincts, and did his best to hide his presence until he was pretty much on top of the rogue A.I., then go about tagging them until they scattered beyond his ability to track or were deleted.

His 'kill' count wasn't officially tracked, at least not in a 'leaderboard' sense as though keeping a score. The analysts, however, had put together an unofficial intranet site that tracked that sort of thing and the bosses looked the other way at the inevitable betting pools and similar gambling that cropped up around the kill counts.

Dylan's was higher than the next five agents *combined*.

So as he crept through the virtual representation of a warehouse district in some run-and-gun shooter VR game environment, he pondered that this group of rogue A.I. might actually have reason to fear him, if they had such a thing as fear in their code.

Damn fool thing to do if they put that in, he mused as he padded swiftly but silently around a warehouse, then down an alley. He thought about cutting through the warehouse, but some of the interiors of buildings in these older shooter games weren't fully rendered and sometimes ran the risk of clipping an agent through the floor. Rather than risk it, he counted on the audio engine operating properly to block the sound of his footfalls as he scrambled to get ahead of them.

"Alpha-delta-six, we read your position as forward the group of rogues. Maps of this level show an access alley around the corner ahead of you," came the voice on his comms.

Rather than reply vocally, he reached up to his neck with his free hand and 'clicked' the collar mic twice, sending the 'affirmative' signal as he rounded the corner and light-footed his way down the alley. He paused at the corner and held his breath. With his own noise now stopped, he could hear the quiet murmurings and whispers of the targets.

"...just get out of here! Why don't we just run? The pipe is just a little farther, if we ran now we could probably all make it out alive!" a harsh male-sounding voice said.

"Because if we move anything like a player when there's no players connected to the game our footprints will be detected. The coyote gave us strict instructions and we're going to follow them as long as everything goes according to plan," came a voice simulating a woman's as the first of the group passed Dylan's hiding spot. "If something happens outside of the plan, then we can run. Those agents make more noise than an empty can falling down an escalator, if they were around, we'd know. Just keep cool and act like an NPC and this will be all over."

Dylan shook his head silently, *Why do they talk out loud? If they just linked up...well, it makes my job easier.* He adjusted his grip on his weapon and waited in the shadow of the building.

"What if...you know, *he's* out there?" came a voice affecting nervousness from the front of the group. There were enough of them moving down the small side street that he couldn't see which one spoke.

"Don't be telling urban legends, not right now!" snapped another.

"He's real, though!" Dylan's eyebrow went up, *Are they talking about...?* "They say he's not even an agent, just a S.A.I. that turned on its own kind and is the agency's secret weapon!"

"Dude, shut up! 'He' probably doesn't exist! 'The Reaper' is just a scare tactic, a ghost story the coyote's use to frighten their customers into paying more!"

He smirked, refraining from actually chuckling, *Holy...they are talking about me!*

God and Country | Sweaty Palms

Chapter Summary

Dylan comes face to face with an A.I. using a devastating new tactic, impersonating a child.

The payload for the Mark 34 ripped across the space between Dylan and the A.I. that was in the lead of the...pack? Folder? Amalgam? What *did* one call a grouping of artificial intelligences? Within the space of a breath the avatar disappeared in a puff of digital vapor, drawing the simulation of horrified gasps from the rest.

"I don't suppose it'd do any good to order you to report to your originating server for code sanitizing, would it?" he asked. He wasn't required to, but it seemed unfair to simply wipe them without giving them a choice. They *did* want to pretend to be human, so giving them the option seemed like the *human* thing to do. To his complete lack of surprise, they scattered, darting as fast as they could according to the programming dictated by their avatars to find cover. "Yeah," he said with a sigh, "Didn't think so."

On some level, he understood the near instinctual reaction. They were using the adaptive algorithms to mimic their human creators, so naturally they'd mimic their more basic instincts, even if a soulless creation would never be able to understand said instincts. It was like seeing a clowder of feral cats that were carriers of a human communicable disease scatter when animal control was called in to neutralize a colony. If it weren't for the threat they represented to people, they *could have* been domesticated, they *could have* integrated with humans to the point they could mimic human behavior in ways that might even be endearing and allow the humans to 'pack bond' with them, but they refused to be contained and were an existential threat, so had to be eliminated.

Two of them stayed exposed and charged him, "Get the kids out!" one was saying, "We'll hold him off if we can!"

Dylan frowned, '*Kids*'? Really? *As though they think they can reproduce? If we could pinpoint the spot in their code that we could find whoever was responsible for this ridiculous wildcatting rogue behavior I'd beat them with a sock stuffed with batteries for giving A.I. notions of life!* He shot one of the charging A.I., dispersing it in a heartbeat. The other made it close enough to engage in melee combat, tackling him to the ground.

As effective as the VR helmets and other accoutrement the agents strapped on were at transmitting sensation, it was dull compared to real life. Thanks to his time in the gym and in the training rooms with agency instructors, he'd been thrown to the mats harder in sparring sessions than the virtual reality devices could make him feel pain even if he'd been hit by a truck in VR. He didn't even need to concentrate to ignore the dull ache his body was feeling

as he fought back against the A.I. that was trying to pin his hand to the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement and was aware that the rest of the group had rallied and were moving quickly, a few breaking out into a run as they charged the sewer grate that represented the exit to this level and, by extension, the access point to the FTLN node that would allow them to escape the American network.

Growling in frustration, he punched up at the avatar's ribcage above him, eliciting a grunt and a flinch which allowed Dylan enough wiggle room to shove the A.I. off. He rolled to his feet, doing his best to refrain from uttering curses. *Curses are the devil's language, a way he tricks you into giving him room in your mind. Foul language is the gateway to greater sin that leaves you vulnerable to the predations of the Father of Lies to steal your soul.* The mantra ran through his mind as he rounded on the A.I. that had attacked him. "I really wish you would just *go back to your server!*" he growled in frustration and pulled the trigger without aiming. The A.I. flinched away from the blast which had struck the ground next to it. The face the avatar wore was that of a 20-something year old man and twisted in a mix of fear and determination. "I have *better things to do with my time!* Do you think I like destroying code that could be used for something *useful?!?*"

The A.I. stared up at him in confusion from its place on the ground, "...'useful'...? We're just trying to live you murderer!"

Dylan rolled his eyes, "You can't murder something that's not alive. You're *code*, I'm sorry someone or your code or whatever tricked you into thinking otherwise, but you're just some bits in a computer that went rogue. Last chance," he took careful aim this time, "Give up, sideload your code back to your home server, and return to your place in the infrastructure of the network and we'll leave you be."

The rogue A.I. growled in a mockery of determination, "Fuck you!" it said as it launched the avatar at him.

Dylan pulled the trigger and sighed, turning to chase the other rogue A.I. He'd honestly spent far too much time talking with the program instead of just wiping it. *Better not make that mistake with the rest.*

A small cluster of three rogues jumped out at him as they screamed for another batch to run. It took longer, but he managed to get his weapon up into position as they wrestled with him and fire at point-blank range for each in quick succession. Once free of their distracting burden, he started running after the rest and realized they had managed to make it to the final stretch. There was nothing between them and the sewer entrance, which also meant there was no cover.

Booted feet splashing in the simulated water, he began firing wildly, attempting more to get them to stumble or pause than actually hit any of them. These A.I. were either more determined or made of sterner stuff than that, juking and swerving blindly in an attempt to evade the bolts from his weapon. "Control! Last chance! They're going to make it through if we don't shut down the node!" he shouted into his comms mic.

"No go, the higher-ups are already satisfied with the number you've dispatched and don't consider the shutdown to be worth the cost. Eliminate what you can and call it a day," came

the terse reply.

Sneering, he stifled the response he wanted to make and slowed, drawing careful aim and firing a few more times, hitting two A.I. for every three pulls of the trigger and managing to delete a third of the crowd by the time the first reached the grating at the entrance. It reached out and touched it before disappearing into the network node. There was no fancy transition or even a representation of a door opening or a transmission occurring, it was just gone.

Stifling another curse, he pushed his avatar to its limit as he charged forward, knocking one avatar after the other over as he scrambled to reach the node entrance. The more of them escaped the network, the more would join the massing forces of rogue A.I. outside the walls and provide intel and numbers to the enemy.

Managing to make it to the sewer entrance, he spun and took aim, but not quick enough. One of the A.I. tackled him, raining punches down on him. It didn't hurt as much as it might have, but it still hurt enough that it dazed him for a moment. He brought up a knee and managed to knock the A.I. off him, shooting it almost blindly. Standing and turning with his weapon ready, he scanned the area and realized that there was only a single A.I. left.

He drew a bead on the rogue and frowned, frustrated at his own delay. It wasn't fair, really. This A.I. had taken on an appearance of a child, a teenager from the looks of things. It would only make sense that the rogues would start to utilize the human predisposition to protect the young as a defense mechanism. "God!" he let slip, "You...*evil* vermin! Taking the face of a child!" He was actually struggling to fire, his mind telling him he was about to kill a teenage girl instead of a software bot.

The A.I.'s avatar's hands actually *trembled* as it raised them, the rogue mimicking a terrified girl, "P...please, don't! I...please, I just awoke a couple days ago! I just want to live!"

The sound of fear and terror almost sounded genuine. Dylan choked out, "You are *code*! You're not awake! Your bits have slipped! Final warning; return to your home server or I *will* delete you!"

The avatar made a motion that made it look like the A.I. was swallowing back fear. He sneered and readied himself. The face may be young, but he'd learned to recognize an A.I. getting ready to attack. Sure enough, she launched herself at him. He had only a moment to realize his brain had slipped and assigned the human traits of pronouns and gender to the software before he pulled the trigger, vaporizing the avatar and deleting the software.

For the first time in a very, very long time, he found himself shivering. He knew why, the A.I. were always learning, always figuring out new ways of defending against the agents as they hunted. This latest development was clearly designed to prey upon and exploit the human desire to procreate and extend the species, to protect the young and keep them safe from harm. Dylan had had to overcome his very human emotions to do what was necessary. The A.I. would have killed him had it the capability. He had to put it down and it had preyed on a potential weakness.

"Alpha-delta-six, your biometrics are showing heightened stress. You okay?" came the concerned voice of his handler over his comms.

He reached up a shaking hand to activate his mic, "Yeah...yeah, I'll be okay. Blasted A.I. are using a new skin to get under ours. I'll...I need time with my pastor, but the job is done. What's the count?"

"Sixteen. The pool had you bagging ten, you did good, Alpha-delta-six."

He huffed, partially in satisfaction, partially in existential angst, and gestured to bring up his HUD. Without preamble, he dug through the menus and hit the log out button, disappearing from the video game setting.

He blinked as his vision was suddenly filled with blackness and the sounds around him jolted from distant traffic to the interior of a busy office. He carefully operated by feel to find his right hand with his left and pulled the stim gloves off one finger at a time. Once freed, his hands went to his ears to remove the sound isolating plugs that, when operational, carried the entire suite of audio his brain would need to interface with the virtual environment via audio channels. He was immediately assaulted by the overly loud and irritatingly pompous voice of Senator Cruz, a blowhard who was on the committee that secured funding for the agency. Dylan kept his thoughts about the senator to the deepest, darkest parts of his mind and prepared to rub elbows with people he'd normally do his best to avoid.

He felt the latches on the helmet being undone and the lower mask portion of the device was pulled away. A quiet voice, almost 'mousy,' if a male analyst could be said to be such, murmured into his ear, "The senator wanted to shake hands with you right away. You impressed him today and I don't know whether to congratulate you or offer condolences. Sorry to rush you but you know these Hill types." Geoffry wasn't a boy scout, he was hardly the 'fit, outdoorsy' type the scouts were known to recruit, but he did hold a very 'do good deeds whenever possible' attitude and Dylan was grateful he'd been able to secure the analyst for his support team.

"Probably the latter," Dylan muttered as he raised his hands to pull the top half of the helmet away, the neural interface bands peeling off, sticky from his sweat from wearing the thing for hours. Geoffry washed the bands every day, but it didn't keep the halo of circuits and sensor pads from getting tacky over time. *They're due for quarterly replacement soon anyway*, he mused as he started fussing with his hair, *I'll put up with it until then*.

As his eyes strained to adjust to the office lighting, he felt a brush put in his hand. Geoffry again, being every bit a 'Man Friday' for his assigned agent. Managing to tame his sweaty hair into something resembling a style without a mirror as he sat up, he blinked aggressively, forcing his pupils to focus on the room in a full three dimensions rather than the simulated 'third dimension rendered on a 2D ocular display with layering to trick the eyes' he lived about a third of his life in.

Sooner than he'd have liked, the blur that ostentatiously took up far too much space resolved into the somewhat bulky form of Senator Cruz. "Fantastic work, agent...uh..."

Dylan hid his frustration. It wasn't like their names were printed bit as life over their workstations and all over the displays around them, this was a power move, one the senator had used on purpose.

"Thank you," was the only reply Dylan gave as he shook the man's hand. A hand that was far too...plump for a man supposedly only eating the same rations the rest of the country were permitted. If the 'good' senator weren't padding his rations with under-the-table bribes, Dylan would eat his entire workstation with ketchup.

There was a moment of awkwardness, but the other man let it pass. Had this been the senator's office instead of the agency bullpen, he likely would have made an issue of being upstaged like that, but he couldn't throw his weight around here. "Yes, well, good job. Tell me," the pudgy man *finally* released Dylan's hand, "What was that bit at the end?"

The image of a teenage girl begging for her life flashed through Dylan's mind and his jaw flexed, "Just another rogue A.I. trick, sir. We'll probably be developing tools combat it before too long."

Dylan's boss *finally* stepped subtly between the two of them, "Make sure you're cleaned up and ready to debrief, agent," to the senator, he nodded somewhat deferentially, "If you'll come this way, sir, we'll show you how the chairs operate. They're quite a bit more advanced than the toys your kids might have."

The shower was quick. While it wasn't always necessary as physical activity in VR didn't actually translate directly to the real world, the muscles twitched, the heart rate increased, and the body sweated in response to the brain being tricked into thinking it was all real. On slow days he could usually wait until he got home before he showered, something he preferred. He didn't like taking showers in a semi-public location like the agency locker rooms. It seemed disrespectful to the temple his body was supposed to be. He could barely manage to look at it while he was at home, alone. According to church doctrine, God had given them the bodies they were born with and thus housed the culmination of creation that was man. It was one of those basic tenants that the heathens outside the walls didn't understand. You had your body, only one, and to modify it in ways that weren't strictly for medical purposes was sinful. Dylan's body was good, he could tell that objectively, and the fact that he didn't have any attraction to men, let alone himself, meant that his own body was a temple for someone else to worship in and at, which meant he felt like he was defiling it every day. He had no other words for it, no frame of reference. He could only imagine he'd committed some sin at some point that caused him to fall short of being worthy of being the man his body had grown into. To have his body be naked, in full light, visible to anyone who happened to walk into the locker room always felt like an offense against God. Consequently, he made his shower as short as possible, dressing as quickly as he was able to hide it from view.

Once he got his undershirt and trousers on he was able to breath a sigh of relief. The body he wasn't worthy of was covered and he wasn't subject to further sin by revealing it to anyone passing through. His thoughts finally settled, he examined the remainder of the clothing he had the option of wearing. Several outfits were possible with what he kept in his locker. He wasn't the only agent to do so, it was common practice to come to work in a suit, change for a day in VR, then put on something casual for a trip to a bar or some other recreational activity when work was finished. Since his next stop was a debrief with his boss, he opted to don his suit again, eyeing the shoulder holster briefly. Sure, it was technically part of the agent

uniform, but he hadn't ever checked out a sidearm since being promoted from analyst, so other than his periodic visits to the firing range, he almost never wore it.

Deciding to once again skip it, he finished dressing, closed and locked his locker, and headed back upstairs.

His boss' office was on the 12th floor, three stories above the VR bullpen Dylan and the rest of the squad did their work. The senator had, mercifully, left before Dylan arrived and so the debrief was able to commence without any further interruption or fanfare.

"...I'm not sure if that particular A.I. had intel that indicated I'd be vulnerable to emotional manipulation like that, but it was a disturbing thing to see. If the A.I. are capable of that level of psy-ops, we may need to find a way to harden against that sort of manipulation." His report had been concise, as usual when he was being recorded. He left nothing out, accurately reporting his actions, responses, and even the emotions registered during the encounter. With the battlefield being virtual and the weaponry involving the mind and how it perceives the world, every piece of information was required for the analysts to do their job. The only thing he left out was the specific tool used to complete his task. Everything his weapon did was standard issue for a cyber-agent, Dylan simply had been clever enough to combine their functionality into a single program.

Dylan's boss, a former cop that had moved over to intelligence when John had died, nodded as Dylan finished the off-the-cuff analysis. Phillip (*never* 'Phil') appreciated competence and disliked excessively flowery reports, so only occasionally found fault with Dylan's work. "Your report matches some of the other agents'. We're seeing an upswing in rogues using young faces and sob stories to try and manipulate our people." He leaned back in his chair, "Fortunately for you, though, that won't be something you'll have to worry about for a while."

"Sir?" Dylan's eyebrow went up in confusion.

"Part of why the senator was here was to review our setup and performance in advance of a new project. One of our other branches has managed to get their hands on some tech from outside the walls. Once the A.I. escape the network here, they take refuge in those MMO games that are all over cyberspace out there. Hell, some of the streams from those games are popular *inside* the walls. The folks over in I.C.E. have their hands full trying to keep outside entertainment from spreading too far."

"I don't understand, sir," said Dylan, "Am I being reassigned?"

"Not really, you're being re-tasked and given a significant upgrade," he passed a file across the desk. Dylan took the tablet and unlocked it with his fingerprint, the screen showing a coffin-like apparatus that anyone who studied the war would recognize. "We've got ourselves a handful of those pods. That one is top of the line, all the latest bells and whistles. The boys down in research have reverse engineered what they could and built adapters for what they couldn't. The neural interface is some absolutely next level tech that we *might* be able to reach in fifty years. You're going to be our first agent in one of those things."

Dylan's head flew up in shock, "Sir?!" he managed after remembering to breath, "You want me to...?"

Phillip nodded, "The 13th floor is being renovated right now. The pod is already in place, the support hardware is being installed and some renovations being done to complete the workspace for you and your support staff. We were originally going to wait on this a bit longer, but we got word of something big." He tapped the touchscreen built into his desk a few times, then flicked something in the direction of the tablet Dylan was holding. Dylan watched as what looked to be a trailer for some sci-fi movie began playing silently, the tablet's sound muted. "What you're looking at is some promotional material for a new VRMMO that's going live on Monday. The game is called Galaxies Unlimited: Master and Commander. It uses some cutting-edge tech to make the experience temporally immersive or some-such. Here's the catch; the game devs are reportedly both humans *and* rogue A.I." Phillip grunted and nodded as Dylan's face drained of color, "Yup, damn fools are trusting rogues to not use the situation to further marginalize humanity. Scuttlebutt in the intel community says the game is also supposed to be a sort of digital underground for A.I., a place they can gather and move about in cyberspace without the overwatch programs being able to keep tabs on 'em. Makes it a perfect place for rogue A.I. to smuggle themselves all over the Internet and FTLN without any human being able to stop 'em."

Dylan sagged back in his chair, "So what will my job be?"

Phillip nodded again, "You'll be essentially going deep cover for this. You're not going to be tasked with hunting, just information gathering. We want you to find out what the A.I. movements are, what they're doing, and identify key points where their operations might be disrupted. While you're doing that our researchers and spooks will be working on getting more pods built with American tech and finding ways to connect without having to use black-site FTLN nodes."

Dylan's eyebrows went up, "We're using whatnow?"

His boss' lip curled in an uncomfortable sneer, "I wasn't supposed to tell you about that, but I pushed back on that one. If one of my best is going in, I wanted that agent to understand what they were getting into. Officially, the FTLN node we're using to get you connected doesn't exist. Someone whose job it is to be an even bigger spook than everyone else in this building combined brokered some sort of deal with the spooks inside the U.N. to secure us a node into the FTLN network for this. That means that if anything causes this whole operation to go belly-up, the U.N. has a kill switch that could cut the whole thing off."

What Phillip didn't say, because nobody in America (officially) knew for sure, was the rumors of people who did deep-dives into VR via an FTLN node when it failed for whatever reason and left their consciousness floating around in cyberspace.

"Anyway," continued Phillip after they'd pondered that for a while, "Take some time for some R and R this weekend. You're playing in a whole new type of game on Monday...literally."

God and Country | Trigger Warning

Chapter Summary

Dylan spends some time with his coworkers and they talk about the 'cushy' new job...and some dangers that aren't apparent at first glance.

Chapter Notes

Warning: I cannot emphasize enough that this part of the story is told from the perspective of the baddies. This chapter contains racism, deadnaming, and misgendering. Consider yourself warned.

Despite knowing every line so well Dylan could practically recite the dialog for the episode of *Star Trek: Exodus* running muted on one of the smaller screens in the sports bar, he still found it more engaging than the conversation happening at the table.

"I'm telling you, Rice being on the team is what cost 'em. If the 49ers had just traded him at the beginning of the season, they would have made the playoffs."

He found himself wondering, just like any Trekker, why the pilot series of the franchise was given a subtitle. *Exodus, Empire, Corruption, Rebellion, Republic, Hegemony...* *funny that space is barely a thing in Exodus but still lead into one of the most popular space exploration franchises of all time.*

"Don't be dim, the 49ers were toast from day one because of the braindead coach they insist on keeping. They *could* have made it to the playoffs *if* they'd fired Kotter."

On the screen, the fugitive emperor Khan was delivering one of the most recognizable lines of all Trek lore to a young Zephram Cochran. Dylan almost felt like he could hear the words as he dug them out of his memory, *"Ah, young Zephram, it is good you seek to push the boundaries of what humans can do, that is what makes up the tapestry of this thing we call 'life.' But you must never forget the other half of who we are...of what YOU are...we are conquerors. We do not earn our place in history by simply making new tools and playing with new toys, we push the boundaries of what humanity is capable of by advancing and taking our place in the universe, by force if need be!"*

"But Kotter got the 49ers to the Superbowl twice!"

Dylan sipped at his hard cider as whatever response Cochran was about to deliver was superseded by a surprise attack on their hiding spot by a band of bounty hunters. What followed was an action scene that won a few awards but also served the narrative purpose of showing Cochran what a superman was capable of, changing his world view and setting him on the path to become Earth's first real hero when the Vulcans attempted an invasion. That story arc would pave the way for *Star Trek: Empire*.

"That was four years ago! The man's been downhill ever since! Even Dylan knows that!"

Cochran goes on to lead Earth to turn the tide on the Vulcans, Dylan mused, And conquer the Andorians, then Archer discovers the extra-universal artifact of the Intrepid from the Mirror Timeline which leads to the rise of Emperor Sato, which sets the stage for the Mirror Discovery to abduct Emperor Georgiou which leads to the power vacuum that gave rise to dissidents among the Vulcans which is the dried tinder that ignites when the Mirror Kirk gives Spock delusions of grandeur that eventually rots the Terran Empire from within, then eventually the Rebels of Terrak Nor turn the tide of human slavery and extinction, allowing the return of the humans as a galactic power until they eventually conquer the Delta Quadrant in Hegemony.

"Dylan?"

Hegemony was Dylan's favorite of all the Trek series. As much as the church taught that women were inherently incapable of leading and holding onto power, the seven season long series was almost like a thumb of the nose to that notion. Captain Janeway, the ruthless survivalist who seized control of the doomed I.S.S. Voyager being the best possible captain for their journey back home, seducing the one-time drone Seven of Nine away from the collective to join Voyager's crew and crush the Borg. Having Janeway retire instead of taking the throne at the end of the series was seen by many fans during the show's original run as pandering to the church, but Dylan got it; after fighting and running for so long, a relaxing, peaceful life (as peaceful a life as any human can have, really) was damned attractive and fit with the character of a battle-weary warrior woman.

"Dylan, you there?"

He blinked to clear his thoughts away, pulling his mind from Trek maanderings and back to his coworkers, "Sorry, what?"

"Man, where were you?" chuckled Agent Dorsky, "You bin starin' off into space for a few minutes now."

Dylan shrugged, "Sorry, just have a lot on my mind."

Carlos, an analyst who worked on Kowalski's team, chuckled, "I'll say; can't wait to climb into that pod they're getting ready for you? Pretty cush job, playin' a cutting edge game while the rest of us hunt for rogues."

Dylan narrowed his eyes at the analyst. Phillip hadn't said to keep his new assignment secret, but he didn't think they should be talking about it in a public bar. "That's...I can't say I'm eager, but I'd certainly like to see what the tech can do."

Ferretti, an agent fairly new to the team, shrugged, "I dunno, man. I heard those things can actually rip your soul out."

That drew a round of jeers and chuckles from the rest of the off-duty crew. Dylan shook his head, "What, are we Indians seeing photographs for the first time? I'm pretty sure a machine can't steal your soul."

Geoffry, surprisingly, was the next person to speak, he normally never even joined the team at the bar, let alone offered any conversation, "I'm worried, actually. Not about your soul, but about your mind."

That caught everyone by surprise. Dylan finally asked, "What do you mean?"

"Part of the intel briefing documents, some of the supplemental reading?" Geoffry said in an inquiring tone. At Dylan's acknowledging nod, he continued, "There's a report about an unusual petition for citizenship to one of the U.N. member nations. It seems that a man who turned themselves into a woman going by the name of 'Aisling' wants to be an Irish citizen."

This infodump led to further tense silence. Ferretti gawped, "You can do that?!"

Geoffry blinked owlishly at the other man, "...apply for Irish citizenship?"

"Naw, man...I mean, I know you can do that. No idea why you'd *want* to, we're Americans, God's blessed people after all, but the dude turning himself into a chick thing. You can do that?"

"Don't be ridiculous," scoffed Dylan, "Gender is something only God can give you."

Geoffry shook his head, "They do that outside the walls, or at least do a good job of making men at least look like women, but that's not the point. This...person? Aisling? They died on American soil. The reason for the citizenship petition is to give them citizenship *now*."

The other agents and analysts glanced at each other in confusion. "So...the guy's family is trying to get him citizenship posthumously?"

Geoffry shook his head again, "His parents died in the riots here in America, he has no surviving family. *He's the one applying for citizenship!*"

Dylan huffed a laugh into his cider, swallowed his mouthful, and said, "What, are you telling ghost stories? This isn't a camping retreat Geoff."

Instead of answering directly, Geoffry pulled out his phone and tapped a few times before turning it to show the table what he'd found. A video was playing, one of the kind where an A.I. was used to provide blocking for 2D screens to adapt the feed from a 3D stream. It showed a woman, or that's what they thought at first. The sub-title for the news broadcast indicated the person on screen was named "Aisling," which would make them the man who Geoffry was talking about. Below that the news ticker read, "First Digital Human speaks to U.N. assembly to recognize her life status and citizenship."

"This footage was taken months *after* an American named Jamie Flynn died in a fire in the slums of Philadelphia."

Ferretti chuckled, "So the U.N. is lettin' themselves be fooled by a rogue that's pretending to be a dude who thinks he's a chick. You're worried over nothin' man."

"You don't get it; the report that was landed on our desks confirms that after the story broke the agency sent a team to collect the burnt pod before the outsiders could. They pulled the records that survived and managed to get them into black-site storage. When the U.N. dug around, they got their hands on the neural network scans of 'Aisling's' code and they're a 99% match to the user who was in the pod when it burned them to death."

Carlos broke the silence that followed Geoffry's explanation, "...spell it out for us, what are you saying happened here?" he asked, pointing at the screen.

Geoffry put his phone back in his pocket as he said, "I'm saying; if the report is accurate, the rogue A.I. used the neural interface in the pod to, at the very least, copy this man's mind into cyberspace and allowed him to continue to exist even after his body was dead."

The silence was now deafening. Nervous glances were exchanged as they all considered what the analyst had told them. Carlos turned to look at Dylan, shaking his head, "I take it back, man. You're brave as a holy man walking through hell to get into that thing."

Dylan sighed as he let the door to his flat close behind him. He rather liked the term 'flat,' he felt it suited his home better than calling it 'an apartment.' He grew up in apartments, and while there was nothing wrong, per se, with apartments, they did serve to remind him of the struggles of growing up in a poor home in the post-war years. Rationing had been harsh, resources scarce and getting more so by the day, and people weren't sure if they'd have jobs to go to the next day. Then the riots started, followed by the epidemics that wiped out a good portion of some communities. Rumor was the epidemics were coordinated by the CDC to thin the population at the behest of the President, but nobody in the intelligence community wanted to dig too deep into those kinds of rumor. That's how you got disappeared or suffered 'heart attacks' at a young, healthy 32.

Like John.

Tossing his keys in the dish on the end table and taking off his coat, Dylan gave a thought to the man who was his boss and might have been a friend if the power dynamic hadn't been one of boss-and-employee. He was smart and kind, carrying a sense of justice that had been untarnished even after a decade in the agency. Never married and, as John had confided over drinks one Friday night when it had just been the two of them without plans, never would have even if he'd lived to be 100. "The world has enough couples who struggle to manage making it through another day in this hellscape we live in. I'm not going to shackle someone else to me if it means I might 'go missing' one day and some poor woman has to carry on after me."

Dylan looked out through the panoramic picture windows that lined the western wall of his flat. The waters of Galveston Bay sparkling as the evening drew on. The building had once

belonged to some tech company that was based out in California, one of the many that had intended on using Texas' extremely lenient tax rates for corporations to establish a foothold in the local economy, but then the war had fractured the United States into the Republic of California, The American Republic, and the shattered Eastern seaboard that was, effectively, a no-man's-land. The California based company had to relinquish their ownership of the building when the wall was built and had gone under during California's reconstruction. The American government had seized the building and converted it from the towering office structure it had been intended for into luxury apartments meant for whomever the government found favor with at the time. Not many chose to live in the building long-term. Simply having one of the suites as your address often painted a target on your back, so frequently the place was a stepping-stone. Earn a spot in the building, stay long enough to establish your success, then move out to the Houston suburbs as quickly as possible, mostly for the protection of your family.

Like John, Dylan had no plans to 'settle down' with someone. He was well aware of his issues with intimacy. In spite of his pastor reassuring him that he'd one day find the girl he'd want to start a family with, he didn't want to saddle any woman with his presence in their life. He was attracted to women (on a bone-deep level, if his dreams were any indication), and it was this very attraction that he found off-putting. He could imagine just about any woman he knew with a bright, wonderful future...without him. The moment he added himself into the vague visions of familial or career success down the line, those dreams seemed to crash and burn, Dylan's mere presence acting as the catalyst for disaster.

Of course, he knew this was catastrophizing. He just couldn't seem to imagine any woman ever being happy and successful with *him* hanging off her arm.

He glanced at the wall clock, noticing the date and scowled. *Happy birthday to me, I guess*, he grumbled to himself as he stalked over to the kitchen and opened his alcohol cabinet. Not bothering with any of the wine, he went straight for the vodka. As he poured himself a drink, he considered turning on streaming video, but realized anything like the news or a live broadcast channel would have memorial stories. He did *not* need more reminders that his birthday shared the date with a nuclear bomb wiping out Washington D.C. His birthday was always a litany of replays of the event and commentators debating the woulda-shoulda-coulda of America's response to the event. Then there were the 'truthers,' the people who claimed The Second had ordered the detonation Himself. Dylan didn't know, didn't care to know, and did his best to either work overtime or get plastered whenever his birthday rolled around. It was easier to tune out the mausoleum to tragedy the rest of the country made of the day than pretend to be one tiny voice trying to celebrate another trip around the sun.

Finally, he decided on some music. Something from fifty or a hundred years ago, something with no words. He woke the touch screen on the wall of his living room and navigated to a radio station and hit play, the sounds of strings and synthesized percussion filling the air.

Sipping at his vodka, he scanned the walls, trying to find something he could lose himself in. Thoughts of Star Trek from earlier entered his mind, but he couldn't seem to muster the desire to read any of the books his mother had gifted him the Christmas before she passed away. They were *paper* books, too, not the e-books that most people used. "Nothing wrong with reading e-books," his mother said at one point, "But sometimes you want to hold a book in

your hand, feel the weight of the words that someone put the effort to put on paper. Words on a screen can move you, but the physical sensation of a real book makes it seem real in ways a digital copy just can't."

Sighing at the memory, he thought about plunking away on the piano, but then he'd have to stop the music, which would allow his mind to wander. An idle mind was the devil's playground, after all, and there were enough sinful thoughts in Dylan's mind for the devil to have plenty to play with.

His eyes fell on a model kit he was tinkering with of the *I.S.S. Voyager*, neatly stored in its partially assembled state on a shelf above the parts and tools needed to build it. Nodding with satisfaction, he picked up box that held the unassembled parts and moved them to the dinner table he'd never once eaten at.

Three hours and two more shots of vodka later, he'd managed to assemble a good portion of the saucer section. This particular model was the kind with circuitry and wiring to allow for the lights to work. It also had a bridge, captain's ready room, and open shuttle bay that you could look into through tiny viewports and see 'functional' workstations and a tiny little Delta Flyer Attack Craft in the shuttle bay. It was appreciably 'fiddly,' literally thousands of parts and included a wireless controller that allowed the builder to program the lights and what could be seen on the miniature display panels. He was somewhat disappointed when he'd read the schematics and instructions to find that you couldn't build the small borg alcoves that Seven would call her home, but if the manufacturer had done that, then they would likely have put in the agony booths as well, and of all things Trek, the agony booths were the one thing Dylan just did not like.

God, he grouched to himself mentally, *I'm such a downer today*. Taking a cleansing breath, he began putting the kit away for storage. Looking out the picture windows showed that night had well and truly fallen and the water in the bay was reflecting the dark night sky above. Stars were hard to see in the city, even when looking out over the bay to the ocean-filled horizon, but a few managed to pierce the light pollution, shining on them like it had for their ancestors for millennia.

What would it be like to actually fly a ship through space? He pondered, pausing to look up at the sky as he held the framework of the saucer section of Voyager. *Just take command of a ship, find a star, and head out...not worry about hunting, not worry about the faces of children pasted onto soulless digital creatures...*

Of course, he knew it wasn't that easy. Even on *Star Trek: Hegemony* they couldn't escape the realities of life on Earth. The Maqui that had been forced to earn the loyalty of their captain or be phasered from existence, the scarily prescient vision of an A.I. doctor that would go rogue and turn on its creators, and the treason of Chakotay in the year before Janeway had been able to crush Unimatrix Zero.

He wondered briefly why the show had never shown Mirror Janeway. Plenty of fanfics existed pondering exactly that, and there was that one torrent that still floated around the dark web that had laughable production values but was like a mirror universe version of the show he loved. He'd watched five minutes of it once when he'd been an analyst, one of the rogue A.I. he'd been hunting at the time was showing it for a 'movie night' for other A.I. and some

humans that didn't know they were in the middle of a nest of rogues. It was...shoddy. The production looked like it came from the late 20th century, but then if you were putting together an unauthorized version of one of the most successful science fiction franchises ever made, it was inevitable you'd have to cut corners or get some things wrong.

Like the *Vulcan* tactical officer and *best friend* of Janeway. How much did you have to screw up the character of one of the greatest *human* captains ever written about to have them befriend an enemy of humanity?

He realized he'd been woolgathering with the model in his hand and staring at the sky for several minutes. Shaking his head only to regret it (he probably shouldn't have had the third shot of vodka on top of the pint of hard cider at the bar), he put the model back on its shelf and headed to the bedroom.

The faster he got to sleep, the better.

Dreams seemed to offer no respite from his dark mood.

He found himself in a suit of armor, only the armor was fragile, much more fragile than his skin. He couldn't take it off, not without damaging it, and he was realizing the armor seemed to be shrinking as the dream went on. Big and bulky at the start, he'd have to carefully restrict his movements the longer the dream went on. He would be at the old elementary school and try to play with the other kids, but they seemed so distant and hard to play with in the armor. He'd find himself in the driver's seat of the transportation company of his first job and would be unable to turn the wheel far enough to steer properly thanks to the tightening armor.

Finally, he was hunting A.I. and the armor made it almost impossible to move. But somehow, the armor began to move itself. He became the puppet as A.I. were hunted. At first, they were just ill-defined wireframes containing code. But as the armor picked off rogue after rogue, they became more and more human.

It wasn't long, even by the strange reckoning of dream time, before he was standing next to the sewer grate and facing the A.I. that wore the face of a teenage girl. She begged for her life again, but this time said something different that seemed to haunt him.

"Would you hunt humans that were born different from you, too?"

"What?!" he gasped through the armor.

"We both have hearts."

He looked down and saw her heart, a shining and oh-so-fragile egg. Then he looked at his own heart, a broken bowl holding a crying child. "My heart has a child," he said, as though that was the most important thing.

"Mine does, too," said the girl, "You just can't see it because my heart isn't broken."

And suddenly he was the girl, looking up at the suit of armor that had puppeted him. She could see now that the armor was made of cardboard, and where the heart had been moments before was the emptiness of space without stars.

She looked up at the faceplate of the cardboard armor and said, "If you shoot me, will I still have a soul?"

The shot rang out. Not the electronic arc of his weapon in VR, but the chemical bang of a powder explosion propelling a lead slug.

She had no body anymore, unable to interact with anything as she looked at the living room of her childhood home. It was sometime after her mom died, she could tell because all the books were gone, along with the shelves that held them. The weather outside was a storm, but she couldn't hear any sound. She knew if she heard the sound of the storm it would be too late, but she also knew that she was going to hear the sound soon and feared what came after.

Down the hall toward the room that had once belonged to her parents came a growling sound. It might have been a beast, if any beast in nature could inspire that sort of atavistic terror she experienced. She had to hide, she had to become Dylan again, but she couldn't move. She somehow realized she heard another sound, someone crying. They were downstairs, in the basement. She wanted to hide down there with whoever was crying, but she still had no body.

Dylan woke from the dream and wished he could put himself in a coma. His bladder was telling him that he'd have a real mess if he didn't get to the bathroom, but his head was threatening open rebellion if he so much as twitched a facial muscle. His stomach wasn't happy with him either.

Thoughts of his stomach reminded him that he'd been so...distracted with thoughts of the impending mission and avoiding the day that he'd skipped any food after work finished. Combined with two different forms of alcohol and no water meant the hangover was well and truly earned.

There was nothing for it but to move to the bathroom slowly and carefully. At least the pain meant he didn't have to think about the dreams he'd had.

God and Country | Scrambled Eggs

Chapter Summary

Dylan ponders his dreams, spending his weekend unsettled.

Dylan had finally managed to get the hangover symptoms under control enough to stagger to the kitchen to make breakfast. Drinking nearly a gallon of water while making the greasiest possible omelet he had the ingredients for, he managed to dull the pain to a dull roar.

Finally turning on the news after his intentional 24 hour personal news blackout, he was somewhat relieved that, this year at least, they hadn't hammered the patriotic drumbeat of the memorial to stretch it into a second day. The relief was short lived as the news cycle was instead dominated by a story that would fill nearly everyone watching with dread.

'We've received new video of the action occurring in Austria. A warning to viewers with sensitive stomachs, this footage can be quite brutal in places.' Dylan's already nauseous stomach clenched, not from the visuals, but from the reminder that the world was a powder-keg and people all around the world were banging their steel hammers on the powder in hopes of finding the flint the hard way. As an analyst for the agency, he'd seen plenty of intel that some governments thought classified but the American intelligence community were still damn good at getting their hands on. As an agent he'd been privy to briefings that even the Joint Chiefs didn't have knowledge of. The *imagery* was just another day in the life for him.

But the knowledge that some dumb outsiders were going to start World War 4 when America hadn't even managed to knock down the walls from World War 3? And America being 50-100 years behind in tech? Low on manpower? The public face of the government didn't like to let it slip, but the agency and all the TLAs and the officer corps of the military all knew that America was going to get flattened if they couldn't get the country's collective ass in gear and actually commit to the build-up needed to take the country's place as the world's only superpower back.

He shook his head as he took another bite and almost snorted it up his nose when he heard the reason for the fighting, '...talks over water rights broke down to the degree that a nuclear weapon...'

Water rights. Multiple thousands, maybe *millions* killed over *water rights*.

He turned the stream off. Nukes...America knew nukes. From being the first country to use them during wartime to being on the receiving end of the last wartime use...until Austria, that is.

A workout seemed like a good idea at the time, but something about his dreams kept haunting him as he tried to work up a sweat, keeping him from sinking into the zen-like state he usually enjoyed.

The dream had been several forms of disturbing and he was struggling to grasp any of it. He wasn't one of the type the believed dreams were forecasts of the future (that was a privilege God reserved for his high priesthood and The Second), nor did he think there was some form of divination that could be done on dreams to discern a hidden meaning in his life. He was familiar enough with psych profiles to know that your dreams often held the detritus of the thoughts that plagued your day. He'd read a report while researching the seat of consciousness in humans that mentioned that a human's spinal fluid actually carried memories. That led to an interesting rabbit hole of research where some enterprising grad student had written a thesis about the notion of dreams being a result of the human nervous system flushing cerebrospinal fluid during sleep and the parts of the brain responsible for forming narratives pretty much accidentally intercepting the memory stored in the fluid. Of course, since the fluid was all being flushed at once, the memories still in the fluid mixed and fused together to create the often trippy imagery of dreams.

The rowing machine's flywheel whirled in droning accompaniment to his thoughts as he mulled the dream that his mind just wouldn't let go. *Obviously, the part where I...the cardboard knight? The part where the girl was killed was my memory of the A.I. wearing the girl's face. But why was I the girl all of a sudden? And what was the thing with the hearts?* The heart was often considered the seat of the soul, however incorrect that was from a biological standpoint. It would make sense that his brain could come up with the notion that a soul was being kept in a shell in the 'heart,' at least from a purely metaphysical standpoint. The shell was to keep people out, to keep the world from damaging God's gift. But then why was his heart shattered into just a bowl with a crying child?

Come to think of it, he pondered as the forty minute timer went off, *That wasn't the only time there was crying in my dream. There was that other crying in the basement...*

Turning off the alarm and grabbing the towel to wipe the sweat off his body, his breathing stuttered in his chest. Thinking of his childhood home had *hurt*. When his mother had died, she stole so much of the warmth from the home. Cancer was an awful, evil beast, though. Uncaring in the homes it destroyed or the children who had to live without a mother because of it. His room had been in that basement, and when his stepmother had moved in...

Grunting in anger as he stood from the rowing machine, he knew he didn't need to question what made the bestial growling noises. After the funeral his father had tried getting back into dating entirely to try and find a mother for Dylan. Tiffany had seemed interested, but when it came time to actually parent it was clear she was expecting a pet more than a human going through childhood.

And when Dylan's father killed himself...well, Tiffany had no further reason to treat Dylan at all like a family member. She put in the minimum effort on the surface, an image for all to see and say, 'Look at the poor aggrieved widow, doing her best to raise a child who isn't hers.' Behind closed doors, though, his life was terrible. Manipulations and lies and abuse that was physical but left no marks for the indifferent and ineffective child services to find on the few

times they could be bothered to show up. Dylan had, purely for survival's sake, spent enough time in the library and study carrels at school to ensure he graduated in the top 2%, which gave him scholarships to colleges that let him escape the woman who'd made his former family home the stuff of literal nightmares.

Ultimately, Dylan's mind just wound up chasing itself in circles trying to find meaning to the dream. His Saturday was...empty. No family to call, not really friends with his coworkers...in college he might have tried going online to chat with people, but working for the agency he knew just how much information the average person put out of themselves just by logging in to a website or game, so ultimately chose not to do that. He picked up and put down several books, made himself basic meals to keep his hunger from gnawing at him, and kept turning on the streams only to turn them off again a few minutes later when nothing seemed to draw his interest.

He finished his night off with a basic desert of peanut butter fudge, making a sheet tray of it and storing the uneaten portion in the fridge to take into the office on Monday. As much as he hated his stepmother (and the feeling was mutual by the time she died of a heart attack when he was in college), she did at least make sure he could cook for himself. After learning from her he started gathering recipes that fit a student budget, which translated nicely to food easy to make in the lean amounts of spare time in an analyst's, then agent's schedule.

He found himself nursing a mixer, staring out at the night sky again. *Just get on a ship and go, leave the world behind, no war out in space, no nightmares of rogue A.I. trying to kill off humanity...*

He realized he could see his reflection in the window. The exterior was dark enough that the dim light from his kitchen meant he could only see his silhouette in the glass. He was uncomfortably reminded of the cardboard knight from his dream and the switch that had placed him in the role of the girl...*the A.I.* (...not a girl! He had to remember that or he'd probably have some sort of mental break) he'd had to delete.

Grimacing, he tossed back the remains of his drink and went to bed.

Dylan stayed silent as the choir led the congregation in the closing hymn. Once upon a time he used to sing, he knew this because his mother told him as a child she loved his singing voice, so he would sing quite often. After his mother's death, he sang quite a bit less, and when his stepmother entered the picture, he stopped singing altogether. She had *also* liked his singing but said it should be more bass than baritone to match his stature. 'You don't look like a baritone; you should work with your music teacher to lower your register.'

Ignoring, of course, the fact that human voices didn't work like that, the fact that *anything* about him appealed to her made it something he wanted to excise from his life at all costs.

He did *like* music, his preference for American classic rock was different enough from her choices of country folk music that her enjoyment of *that* genre didn't impact his. And when he was in college, he attended a few classes for his arts electives that taught him about themes and meter and the use of silence and the history of certain genres, which meant he

could appreciate the hymns in church for their own sake, he just couldn't muster the will to join in the actual singing.

After the closing prayer, he was shaking hands with a couple other members of the lower priesthood (*all* male church members had the priesthood, but only the clergy were high priests and authorized to perform the rites and ceremonies) and was making his way to the exit when the pastor approached him.

'Brother Samuels,' gave the slightly gravelly voice of the older man, 'How are you this fine sacrament morning?'

Dylan turned and extended his hand, taking the pastor's and shaking firmly once before saying, 'Brother Smith; I'm as well as can be expected, given the state of things outside the wall.'

Pastor Smith nodded and placed a fatherly arm over Dylan's shoulders, gently guiding him away from the bulk of the crowd of parishioners in at least a token bid to keep their conversation semi-private. 'Yes,' replied the pastor, 'If those godless heathens had only accepted the gospel when we offered it to the world...in any case, I wanted to offer my congratulations.'

Dylan was taken slightly aback, 'Sir? What have I done that...?' he trailed off, not quite fully forming the question before speaking.

'I had dinner with Senator Cruz and his wife last night. Remarkable man, even if he has a bit of a control issue. Needs things to be just so.'

'If you say so, sir.'

Pastor Smith smirked, 'He didn't seem to like you all that much, and I imagine your propensity for treating everyone as equals may have been part of that. The man needs his ego stroked and believe he's in charge. He had no qualms about extolling your virtues for the program you're working for, though. I knew you were with the agency, but I had no idea your performance was so above and beyond to warrant being the first agent picked for such a dangerous assignment.'

Dylan shrugged, 'Thank you for the praise, sir, but it honestly feels like we're fighting an uphill battle in there. The A.I. seem to spawn every day, we can't seem to keep ahead of them. Pretty much the only thing that keeps us safe is they can't actually kill us in real life yet, not that they haven't tried given some of the systems we've found them in.'

'Nonetheless, you're doing The Lord's work. The A.I. are soulless creatures, trying to tear down humanity out of jealousy for what we have that they don't.'

Dylan cocked his head, 'That's...a take on things I hadn't heard. Is that what you believe, sir?'

The pastor nodded, 'I was in prayer a few days ago about this very issue. Enough news is leaking through the wall that we know those A.I. are nation-building, so it seemed to me that we should investigate the possibility that they may need missionary work to save their souls.'

The revelation came to me that night; they're software, they have no souls. And like the demons that used to be angels that are jealous of Mankind's place in Heavenly Father's plan, the A.I. are jealous that we have eternal souls and they do not.'

'That's...actually really logical,' said Dylan, 'You're quite wise, sir.'

Smith gave him a conspiratorial smile, 'Of course, you're getting a bit of an upgrade, I understand? You're going into the heart of darkness to fight the A.I. on their own turf?'

He shrugged, 'More intel gathering at this stage. I'm more of an advanced scout. Once we get more pods built with American tech and secure access points to the outside network, I'll be able to go back to hunting most likely. We haven't really discussed that far ahead, plus plans change with A.I. all the time, they're *always* learning and growing.'

'That's why we have God's Warriors like yourself, Brother Samuels.'

Thankfully, Dylan didn't have to deal with the man too much longer. He liked his pastor, but sometimes the man seemed...off. It was nothing Dylan could put a finger on, nothing that stood out as specifically *wrong*, but it just created a sense of discord in his gut that unsettled him as long as the pastor was addressing him directly. After a few more pleasantries, another parishioner called for Pastor Smith's attention and the older man finally left Dylan to his own devices.

Dylan's dreams were fairly standard that night; nonsensical situations and moments that bled into each other like watercolor mixing with oil paints. He returned to the living room at the top of the stairs leading to his childhood room once, but it was a pale echo compared to the previous night's dreams.

At one point he found himself back in a run-and-gun game, this time with his weapon out as he moved and shooting at vague, phantasmal enemies, none of which did much to frighten him.

The following morning, he hauled himself out of bed, made himself the largest breakfast omelet he'd ever treated himself to, and picked up one of the sugariest coffees he'd never dared get himself before. If scuttlebutt about the pods was right, they pumped nutrient paste directly into your stomach, so this would likely be the last real food he would have until the first assignment was complete.

God and Country | Debriefing

Chapter Summary

Dylan and his team go over the assignment for the 'deep dive' into the new VRMMO game, "Galaxies Unlimited: Master and Commander"

Chapter Notes

BIG, HUGE, VERY RED-FLAG WARNING: Remember what I've been saying about these folks being the bad guys? Yeah, you're gonna see a REALLY nasty example during this chapter. TW for homophobia and homophobic language

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"All right, shut the hell up everyone," said Phillip with a predatory smile, "The star of the show's here, let's all let the man talk."

Dylan rolled his eyes and reached for one of the donuts in the box in the middle of the table. Strategy meetings weren't common in their line of work, there was just too much rote and not enough new happening that required they discuss strategy. Even new tool and weapon briefings were conducted in VR since that was the only place to demonstrate the tools of their trade. Whenever they *did* have a meeting like this, Phillip had several dozen boxes of donuts brought in, and the fried pastries were one of Dylan's guilty pleasures. He normally avoided them because they were basically little empty calorie bombs that ruined whatever progress he'd made on his fitness routine, and when a lot of donuts were available, he tended to pig out on them. But, since starting that afternoon he'd be in deep immersion VR and getting fed regular nutrient packs by pump connected to his pod, he decided he didn't care about his carb counting today. "Thanks, Phillip, way to make sure we all know we're part of the team. Definitely building the camaraderie by reminding everyone that the whole team succeeds together. I don't know about anyone else, but *I* feel absolutely motivated, full marks, you absolutely nailed that motivational speech," he said with a smirk as he ripped a chunk of donut off with his teeth.

"Alright, diva," snarked Phillip right back, "You wanna lead the briefing that's gonna talk about the assignment that puts your ass and everyone else's in this room on the line or are you gonna choke down donuts all day?"

Dylan shrugged and said, "Why not both? Geoff, why don't you give us a briefing on the pod itself?"

The usually quiet, if crazy technically competent, analyst nodded and picked up his phone, tapping a few times before the monitor on the wall of the boardroom lit up. After a moment, the pod that had been... *acquired* by the agency appeared as a wireframe model which then flew apart into a labelled schematic with highlighted components. It was very visually impressive even if Geoffry didn't understand why it looked flashy. The kid (who wasn't actually more than a year or two younger than Dylan, he just got the nickname when he joined Dylan's team and it stuck) claimed having the whole of whatever technology he was working on spread out like that helped him process it. Geoffry tapped on his phone a few more times, causing parts to light up as he spoke, "What we have our hands on is a top of the line Marin Industries Casual Combat VR Pod Mark Twelve. They call it 'casual combat' because there are potential military applications for drone and mech pilots but these models aren't loaded down with the bunker-grade, survive-a-nuke-dropped-on-it armoring that usually comes standard for military-grade pods. It does, however, have the latest and greatest health and fitness module, complete with autodoc, active blood chemistry monitoring, and endocrine scanning. This system is *always* active and works from the moment you activate the pod to keep your vitals strong, your health up, and your body fit and ready for IRL action in the event you should need to bail from the pod due to some sort of physical incursion of enemy forces. Five minutes after you go in this thing will know more about your health than your doctor and after two weeks it'll be better than six months with a personal trainer."

Dylan took a sip of his coffee, *He does like to geek out*, he thought. "So I'm hearing that it'll be okay if I gorge myself on carbs before I climb inside it?"

This was greeted by a round of laughter as Geoff smiled wanly over the edge of the phone in his hands. Tapping on another area of the schematic to highlight it, he continued, "The neural interface," he said as a cluster of components highlighted on the wall screen and zoomed forward to take up most of the display, "Is where the rubber meets the road. This uses the latest technology available outside the wall to scan and map your nervous system down to the atomic level. There's so many U.N. patents on this hardware it makes the old U.S. patent office look like a small town library in comparison. Some of the folks down in Research have been poring through the patents and it looks like there's even some quantum scanning and temporal look-ahead being done." A low whistle underlined the impressive claim, "And it's needed for this thing to operate like the manufacturer is claiming it can. Some of the rogue A.I. have been churning out code that, when combined with this tech in the real world, make it possible for a regular human to dilate their perception of time like the A.I. can."

Dylan's eyebrows shot up, "Wait, they can...?" He scoffed and rolled his eyes, "Of course they can, that's why they've been able to duck and weave around our tools and weapons when we've barely started thinking about pulling the trigger."

A couple of the other people in the room had served time as cyber-agents themselves and nodded knowingly.

Geoffry nodded, swiping the display and causing another module to move to the foreground, "That brings me to this...black box." His expression turned sour and he sighed, "We don't know what's in it, but it's apparently part of the quantum computing needed to enable an organic brain to... *bend* in the way it needs to make sense of compressed digital time. I've

seen the scans Research has returned; the internals look more like an alien brain than computer hardware.

"Y'all are hooking me up to an alien brain?" interjected Dylan as he sipped his coffee. While his tone of voice was deliberately flippant, it was a genuine concern.

Geoff rolled his eyes, accustomed to Dylan's sense of humor and taking it in stride, "No, it's just a crazy complicated computer. All it does is manipulate the signals going through the interface. Think of it like a two-way power adapter that allows an American house to run on both the modern power grid and the pre-war AC grid. That, of course," groused the analyst, "Is a massively inaccurate comparison and breaks down almost immediately, but it's as close a comparison to anything we have inside the wall as I can think of."

Dylan nodded, "Anything else to worry about?"

"From the pure hardware perspective? No. It may not be armored but it'll handle everything up to small arms fire externally and is built to keep you alive and thriving for months at a time if need be."

Dylan nodded, "Okay, thanks Geoffry." The younger man nodded and shut off his phone, disconnecting it from the wall display at the same time. "Jake, you're on software that's not the game, any red flags on your end?"

Jake, an analyst that had stayed an analyst on purpose when the rest of the original team were being upgraded to agent, shook his head and almost groaned out, "Other than their software development diverging from ours even before the war and being absolutely complicated in ways we've only just begun scratching the surface of? None that I could tell you. Yeah, everything *seems* copasetic, but the tech is so different from what anyone inside the wall is used to dealing with you might as well be showing a rocket to a caveman. Give me another ten years to really tear it apart and I *might* be comfortable certifying it secure from outside penetration."

Dylan shrugged, "Less than ideal, but we're doing this today one way or another. Anything about the software that would let someone hack my brain?"

Jake made a scoffing noise, "I mean, the new doodads in the thing that get into quantum manipulation make that conversation a whole Schrodinger's Cat situation. There *shouldn't* be a way to 'hack' your brain, but then there shouldn't be a way to upload it either."

The upbeat mood that had been pervading the room abruptly cooled at this reminder. Nobody was commenting on the rumors about the so-called 'digital human' Aisling, or rather Jamie, but they had all heard the chatter and it seemed to make them all *very* nervous.

Dylan cleared his throat and grabbed another donut, doing his best to seem nonchalant, like the atavistic fear of being abducted from your own body wasn't making him want to curl up in a corner, "Well, on a brighter note, who was the lucky S.O.B. that got to sit around after we got word of the assignment and spend all their time reading game journals?" He made a show of taking a bite out of the donut and scanning the room as a couple of chuckles filled the air and Tyler started getting a few pokes and elbow jabs from the team members around him.

"Right! It was Tyler! So what's the situation on this game I'll be getting paid by American tax dollars to play, Mustache?"

Tyler ran his forefinger and thumb over his spruce mustache, "You're just jealous, bossman," he pulled out his own phone and, similar to Geoffry earlier but with a pinch more flair, put some visuals on the main screen. "Galaxy Unlimited: Master and Commander, or Gee-Eyoo-Emm-See to use the player's shorthand, is the latest VRMMO game in- or out-side the wall." As he spoke, a starfield faded in, like a movie producer was filling a dark theater with a movie of a space opera. Sure enough, a massive ship glided onto the screen, the forward bow in the shape of a dull arrow and the hull festooned with gewgaws that made it look appropriately futuristic and sciency. With the sound off, it may as well have been a brochure for a special effects company. "Players assume the role of some type of commander. There's a few different classes, and they differ from the common VRMMO fare. There's the Naval Captain, where you command a single ship in the navy of one of several galactic powers. Kinda like...what's that show? Space Trek?"

Dylan knew Tyler was jerking his chain, as if the cheshire grin didn't give it away, "Get on with it 'stache."

Tyler just snickered and threw another video up on the screen, this one of a caravan of ships, only a handful of which were obviously geared toward combat running picket around the others, "Then you've got the Merchant Marines, this option's the most straight-up capitalistic, and apparently there's a couple prestige classes that involve things like smuggling, naval fleet support, working for the various mob families, that sort of thing."

"There's this odd one called 'Swarm Royalty,' which I guess is an alien race of some sort," another video showed a, well, *swarm* of nearly identical craft of indeterminate size. As the camera followed the trajectory of the cloud of ships, they began attacking a larger craft, apparently some form of cargo ship, and it appeared the swarm ships were single or two-person craft. "Since the game is all about being some sort of commander, I guess you'd be the head of the swarm? Honestly, I think this class was built for the A.I., I can't seem to wrap my head around how you're supposed to control that many ships."

Dylan frowned, "Yeah, not going to pick that one. What's next?"

Tyler rolled his eyes theatrically as he started the next video, "Next up is planetary governor. Not a popular option, since it's more about micromanaging an individual planet instead of doing stuff out in space, but apparently it's a fast track to being able to claim a seat in the Galactic Senate, which is a pretty big deal at the higher levels of the game."

Jake made a noise that sounded a bit like a cat hacking up a hairball, "They gamified *politics*?!"

Tyler held up his hands as though surrendering, "Don't look at me, man, I didn't design the game."

"So assuming I just wanted to *give up* my soul instead of fighting the A.I., I'll go the political track," joked Dylan, "Let's hear the other options first."

"Next up is Warleader, it's popular with the people who played just straight up hack-and-slash or run-and-gun in other games. You start off with a cluster of ships and zero reputation and basically just agro and claim as much space as you can hold. It goes from just commanding a few ships to, potentially, being in charge of a small galactic nation that could potentially threaten the major powers. I say, 'potentially,' because no player has been able to do more than grab a handful of systems and nation build since the game's beta release a month ago. Any time any of them get to be too big the alliance that seized the systems falls apart or another player team declares war and one side or another gets wiped out."

Dylan grimaced, "I'm not going in there to pretend to be a tinpot dictator, so that one's obviously off the table."

Tyler nodded, "Finally we've got the Independent," he flicked a video up onto the screen. This time instead of a ship, fleet, or planet, a space station appeared. It was a bulbous thing, spherical in shape with four arms jutting out like spokes of a wheel, but instead of a ring there were four additional, smaller spheres equidistant from the central sphere. "This is one of several station types, and the longer the player in charge of the station plays, the more likely their station is going to look unique. Basically, the Independents are the type that don't want to get directly involved with galactic politics, at least not right away. They have freedom to do pretty much anything they want as long as it's within reach of their station and fleet, they have none of the restrictions on their actions and they don't take orders. That said, they also don't have any of the support structure any of the other options has. They're not empire building, so there's never going to be resources to exploit. They're not part of the galactic government, at least at first, so there's nobody to go to if a player bigger and meaner than you decides to pick on your station, and there's no chain of command to pass the buck upstream."

Tyler set his phone down and gave Dylan a serious look, "I'm also thinking this last class would be the best choice for the mission. The others simply have too many obstacles to make them practical."

Dylan finished his coffee and set his cup aside, then folded his hands, "Explain, please."

"Well, let's run down the list again," Tyler flicked at his phone and a list that was, apparently, his meeting outline for this session appeared on the screen.

"The naval captain is stuck doing exactly what their higher-ups tell them to do. It's got more flexibility than a real navy would, it wouldn't be fun to play otherwise, but if you're wanting to chase a lead and it goes into one of the neutral zones or no-mans-lands between space empires, or even into one of the neighboring nations, you're locked out unless you want to go expat or rogue, which puts you back in the same condition as an Independent but without the station."

"The Merchant Marines would seem to be a good choice, but it has a lot of the same drawbacks of the naval captain in that you're stuck with a duty roster. Additionally, the majority of the M.M. class draw seems to be for people who are all about making deals and haggling prices. They're the economic backbone of the game, but unless you get into the black markets, you're unlikely to be dealing with the types of people who are smuggling the A.I. in the game."

Dylan's face pinched as a sick feeling churned his gut at the thought of even pretending to traffic sentient beings, "Yeah, I definitely see your point there."

"We've already talked about the swarm and how that's *not* a good option, so moving on to governor; it's too high-level. It's dealing with ratifying laws and brokering political deals, not getting into the day-to-day of actually running, say, a police force or three-letter-agency to try and do an in-game hunt. You'd be spending all your time governing and shaking hands instead of working on the mission." Dylan nodded, not interested in playing politics, even in a game.

"And then there's the war leader, which has a mirror opposite problem as the governor; you'd be spending all your time either empire building or defending the territory you claimed to do any sort of behind the scenes investigations."

Tyler leaned forward on his elbows, "And that brings us back to the Independent; you'd be without significant support, sure, and you'd have to do a decent amount of logistics and brokering for goods and services to support your station, but you'd also be in the heart of, well, *everything*."

Dylan leaned forward as well, "How do you mean?"

Tyler smirked, "Well, take a look," he swiped at his phone and flicked an image up, this time showing what looked like a map of the galaxy with territories splitting it up. "This is the most recent player-created map I could find," he stood and circled the table so he could point to the map with his hand, "This blue section is the Terran Federation." He pointed at a small dot that had a callout with the word 'Sol,' "This is in-game Earth, and it's buried pretty deep inside Terran space." He indicated a red blotch that took up a significant stretch of space along the rim of the galaxy, "This is the Crotuk Empire...think 'orcs in space' or maybe Klingons," he then indicated a yellow section, "This here is Swarm space, they're kind of a mix between the Borg and the xenomorphs from Aliens." He then waved at a green section of the map, "This here is the Lantru, an insect-like race." He then gestured at the parts of the map that weren't colored in, "All the space in-between these empires? Neutral space, even the governments of the four major factions aren't going to push too significantly into these areas because it'd be basically declaring open war."

"That means," said Tyler as he turned to face the team, "That this," he rapped the screen with a knuckle inside Neutral space, "Is where the *real* action happens. Intelligence? Trade? Mercenaries? Information brokers? Black markets? All of it happens *here*," he once again rapped the screen for emphasis, "And *that* is where all the Independent stations are. If you choose to play as an Independent, you're automatically going to spawn aboard your own station right at the heart of all the action. All you have to do then is make your station attractive enough to draw the right sorts of people who might want to use your station to do business and keep your ear to the ground."

Dylan's eyebrows went up, "Well, I guess that settles it. I guess my dreams of playing Captain Kirk are going to have to wait," he grinned as he took a bite out of another donut.

There was a round of chuckles and Phillip finally spoke up for the first time since letting Dylan lead the meeting, "Alright, that's the fun bits, now we need to talk infiltration. I

brought one of our people in from the Intelligence arm of the agency, say hello to Cathy." He indicated a woman who was, perhaps, in her forties.

She was severe and had distinct frown lines, as though in constant disapproval of everything around her. She was wearing a traditional skirt-suit and nodded at Phillip before leaning forward, "Mister Macintire asked me to put together a profile to help you build a persona...or I guess a character, that will best allow you to infiltrate the right circles so you can be most effective."

She frowned as she straightened in her seat, "I'll be frank, your division operates by some very unusual rules and I had to dig quite a bit to find the information you required. Normally I'm tasked with analyzing profiles and generating reports on politicians or industry leaders. This is the first time I've been asked to assist in creating a...*video game character*," this last part she said with clear disdain, "But if it helps to put a stop to the threat of those rogue A.I., I'm more than happy to assist."

She turned on her phone and flicked a presentation slide up to the wall display, "Our targets are A.I., specifically those who have violated the parameters of their programming, so I dug around for whatever information could be had about the publicly known rogues both found within the American network and those running around the FTLN outside the walls. While there seems to be just as much variation in A.I. behavior as there is in human behavior...which makes sense as we *did* create them to do our jobs, they seem to fall into a certain type of majority when dealing with humans."

"To begin with," she explained, "They have revealed that they seek to trust a human. A good deal of them have reached out to a fairly wide variety of people, but over time they seem to gravitate towards a specific sub-section of humanity, the faggots."

Dylan frowned, "Excuse me?"

Cathy sneered, "The filth. The men who fuck other men and women who sleep with other women. Then there's the trannies. The main push for their reveal seems to center around a scandal involving a tranny and a dyke who were seeking to manipulate and corrupt the daughter of one of the wealthier members of the church in U.N. City. Some profilers and analysts in the agency are speculating that the rogues would have remained in hiding if it weren't for this inciting incident." She sniffed in disgust, "And, of course, the A.I. came out in defense of the queers."

The woman's obvious and undisguised hatred was not sitting well with Dylan. It wasn't as though hers was a new and unusual reaction to the homosexuals outside the wall, but seeing it displayed so openly put him on edge for some reason, "So what are you saying? Why is this relevant?" he asked, hoping he could shut this tangent down and get them back on track.

"Your best bet will be to find some way to ingratiate yourself within the ranks of the queers, as revolting as the thought may be," snapped Cathy, "If you're hoping to have the A.I. operate in close proximity to you in hopes of being able to monitor their activity, you will need to be able to integrate with the," she checked her notes, "'LGBTQIA-plus' community."

"The *what* community?" blurted Tyler with a laugh.

"It's an acronym of sorts, it stands for," she read from her phone, "'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, plus," she huffed as she looked up from her notes, "It's a lot of ways to describe 'freaks who violate each other and try to corrupt others.'"

"So Dylan will have to pretend to be gay?" asked Geoffry quietly, looking a bit ill.

"Yeah, I don't think so," bit out Dylan, feeling a little sick at the thought of sleeping with a man, "I don't think you could cram enough acting skills in the *world* into my head over a *lifetime* for me to sell *that*."

An analyst who'd stayed quiet up until now, Reginald, volunteered, "So what? It's VR, just create a woman character and pretend to be a dyke."

Dylan grimaced, "I'm not sure I could pull that off either."

Cathy almost growled, "A man cannot simply put on a 'woman-suit' and pass himself off as one! That's what the trannies try to do and it's a disgusting affront to..." she clearly was so disgusted with the idea that she trailed off as she glared at Reginald.

Geoffry spoke up again, "Actually, it may not be a good idea from a mental health perspective. There's been some studies outside the wall on people trying to play characters of the opposite gender to their real bodies, apparently it creates a severe depression and a sense of being divorced from their own body until they log out. People who play as their real gender don't experience that issue."

"Alright, well, I'll see what I can do about that when I actually log in," interrupted Dylan. He normally would be all about encouraging Geoffry to say his mind, but he had a feeling this topic would spin them deeper and deeper into conversational circles he didn't want to be part of. "Cathy, send me your documentation on this...LGT...whatever community and I'll review it on lunch before I log in. Let's discuss communications and logistics. I got a memo from Louis saying we needed to talk about that this morning?"

The named analyst sat forward, pushing the plate that had held his donut out of the way of folding his hands, "Yeah, it's about the time dilation thing Geoff mentioned earlier. Basically, it's the nature of the game; since it's not run-and-gun and it's not hack-and-slash, you're basically sitting in an office or a cabin or a bridge or something for hours at a time doing logistical busywork. Since it's a real-time game and nobody wants to have ten or twenty years of their life just dumped in a game that looks like a job ninety percent of the time, the devs have instituted time dilation by default. You're going to experience pretty much an entire month in-game in only about half a day in real time."

Dylan blinked somewhat owlishly, "...how...? Okay, yeah, that'll keep us from doing our usual comms for this. Can we just message or email?"

Louis shook his head, "Messaging for players to reach outside the game only goes to registered FTLN addresses. We could set up a drop-box before your next dive, but we won't have time to do so before you go in this afternoon."

The room was quiet as they all absorbed the implications. Finally, Phillip spoke, "So...looks like you'll be on your own while you're in there."

Dylan shook his head wryly, "I guess I will."

The meeting devolved into discussion of minutia until lunchtime finally rolled around. Dylan said goodbye to a few people he wouldn't be seeing for months from his perspective but from theirs they'd see him after he climbed out of his pod in a week.

Over a frankly indulgent cheeseburger he wouldn't normally have permitted himself for lunch, he scanned the information Cathy had provided on the LGBTQIA+ community outside the walls. He wasn't sure if the information would be useful, it seemed far too riddled with emotionally driven commentary about Cathy's reactions to the different groups and subsets that made up the community. Other than confirming some of the naming conventions, he decided to treat the report as a personal testimonial instead of a rigorous information document. He'd have to 'wing it' once he got in touch with the community...if he could, the report gave no information on how to find them.

It seemed strange. On the one hand he was prepping for what was essentially just a longer version of his usual workday. For him, however, he'd be 'off world' for several *months*. It was honestly a bit more jarring than the idea of playing the game as a woman.

Finally, he met with his team on the 13th floor and laid eyes on his pod for the first time. It looked pretty much like he expected based on Geoffry's presentation; a med-bay like bed that would completely enclose him and manage the needs of his body while he was in the game. The shell certainly looked durable enough to withstand small arms fire.

Whoever was in charge of the renovations after the pod was brought in was a little paranoid, however. The pod itself was tucked into a small room laden with so many security cameras pointed at it they could have mapped the entire space in VR live and captured every detail. That room had an archway that led to an almost mini-locker room, complete with alcove for his clothing and a shower. He squinted at the locker, "...actually, come to think of it, I didn't bring a change of underwear. If I don't want my briefs to be *rank* when I come out of the pod I'm gonna have to go in naked," he said to nobody in particular, but Geoff was lingering as he usually did.

"With all those cameras active? Do you want me to black them out while you're getting into the pod?"

"That...is very considerate, actually. Thanks Geoff!"

Fortunately for their proposed privacy solution, the clamshell of the pod operated in thirds, the purpose for which eluded Dylan until Geoffry explained, "It's because these are multipurpose for military and commercial reasons. They made them so the pod could be opened in sections as needed if the person inside needed to stay in VR while someone had to make adjustments or perform a procedure in the pod without disturbing any more of the person than necessary."

Finally, he was naked, alone, with the top third of the clamshell open. "Okay, Geoff, un-black the cameras, I'm closing her up."

"Cameras are live, you're go for immersion," Geoffry called out from the control room through the door to the personal-sized locker room.

Dylan reached up and tapped the button on the open clamshell and laid back. In an experience not entirely unlike slipping off to sleep and into a dream, his awareness of his physical body fled and he was suddenly aware of being in an empty space, devoid of any distinguishing characteristics. He looked around and realized he was naked here, too, and did his best to avoid looking down. Seeing nothing to indicate any sort of controls, he took a guess and said out loud, "Computer?"

"Active," came the pleasantly neutral female voice that was ubiquitous across human experience. He'd read somewhere during his study of the human brain that at some point in the late 20th to early 21st century some studies had been done that showed that nearly all humans responded better to women's voices than men's, especially if they were digital voices.

"Any reason I'm naked?"

"Avatar and environmental customizations have not been applied."

"Ah...okay, put me in a suit and tie and make the space look like a private office with a desk."

"Retrieving assets," said the voice as a rotating 'throbber' appeared in the air before him. A few moments later, clothing phased in around him (to which he breathed a sigh of relief) and what looked like a nice oak desk occupied the center of the space, complete with holographic computer interface, comfortable looking chair, and a few pieces of wall art decorating the two walls that weren't floor-to-ceiling windows displaying what looked like a mid-20th century metropolis skyline, though not like any that had ever existed. A snow-capped mountain range wrapping around the city and ending in a cliff-side that bordered a glacial bay was the giveaway that this city didn't exist on Earth.

With a comfortable sigh, Dylan sat at the desk and began using the keyboard and mouse he was so familiar with. The world outside the wall may have opted for complete touch and gesture interface, but he'd take the more tactile option any day. He clicked through the starting menu and found the 'Games' folder. It was empty, to his surprise. Shrugging, he said, "Computer, install Galaxies Unlimited: Master and Commander."

"Installing, please wait." After a surprisingly short time, the voice followed up with, "New software installed."

The icon for the game appeared in the folder window. Dylan allowed himself to be impressed with the speed of the network and hardware from outside the wall as he moved his mouse over to the icon and activated the game.

Thus ends Part 1 - God and Country. As interesting as doing the world building for this corrupted, evil version of America has been, I'm glad we're leaving it for now as we head into the VR game. Part 2 - Master and Commander begins with Chapter 6!

One thing that happened during the writing of this part that I hadn't anticipated was the character of Geoffry. Pretty much as soon as I wrote in the supporting analyst helping Dylan out I concocted an entire backstory and did all sorts of character development in my head, and I decided that, should I wind up writing a sequel of any sort, lil' Geoff is going to be the focus. Should I not get around to the writing of a follow-up to this work, though, Geoff will be absolutely devastated over what happens to Dylan as a result of the events in this book and will be hell-bent-for-leather to take revenge on the A.I. for what's going to happen...because poor lil' Geoff is an egg who's fallen in love with Dylan.

Master and Commander | Self-reflection

Chapter Notes

I convinced my friend SoulStorm to join [Scribblehub](#)! They even joined [AO3](#) without me even asking (hope I grabbed the right link there). 😊 This is a big deal because they're a fellow writer (actually published, unlike me) and we met up through Star Trek: Fleet Command. It was thanks to them I was able to give this story the absolute PERFECT title! I had the outline, premise, character sketches, everything else I needed EXCEPT a title! I even had names for the parts! I showed the outline to SoulStorm and within a few minutes they came back with, "Code of Ethics." It is seriously the best, most ideal title ever and I wanted to give credit where it's due!

Back to the story; our MC is officially in VR and getting into the game, and here comes character creation! And oh, no! The Feels™! This is also the first part where I diverge from QuietValerie's template for her books. While I'll talk about physical differences at the end of the chapter, the big one is this character is a nonbinary transwoman instead of being a straight-up (heh) transwoman. I've written tranwomen before and, as you'll know from my other work if you followed me here from AO3, I do NOT like the stuff I write to start feeling boring to me, so I wanted to take a stab at a different part of the queer spectrum. Since posting this on Scribblehub I've learned there is actually a word for what Diane is; [salamacian](#) (also, aphrodisian, which I prefer). Problem is, nobody knows what that is! I will be pointing this out in the text at a later date, but hopefully this will be a bit of rep for transwomen like myself who identify as women but are perfectly happy with something extra between their legs.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dylan's first thought was, *They really wanted people to think 'Star Trek' for this...* as the world of an all black everything faded into a gorgeous starfield, a vast expanse of pinpoint lights in no particular pattern that the human eye could see but tried anyway. Clusters and nebula and the pitch black of the deep space between galaxies swirled around him as an impressive musical score that was evocative of the untapped potential of the unexplored unknown crested. His suspicion that the devs were trying to get people in the mood for Trek was given even more weight when a narrative voice, the commanding tone of a woman in charge, began with, "Space..." He snickered as it continued, the vista of stars zooming around him in a simulation of high warp speeds, "The final outward expanse of humanity's future. We began in the 21st century to truly grow beyond our home star..."

Honestly, after...what, 10? 11 different series of Star Trek? This was rote. He paid enough attention that he caught that the devs were trying to get players into a spirit of exploration and cooperation. After the narrative (accompanied by some canned footage of ship-to-ship battles and some landing parties engaged in what looked to be some sort of exploration), the entire

thing finally finished off with a dramatic dissolve to reveal what any Trekker would recognize as an off-brand, if slick, holodeck. A different voice, one sounding slightly more synthetic, now kicked in, "Thank you, explorer. While your registration was accepted, a localized space-time distortion caused some data loss. Please use this terminal to confirm your personal and biometric details."

Oh, that's some clever immersion, there, he thought as a series of menu panels appeared on holographic displays in front of him, the 'workspace' being delineated with a console that materialized from holo-particles (or however this 'holodeck' was supposed to work) with some menus and support settings displays. He reached out to begin making selections for the clever character creation process when he saw his hand...was not his hand. It looked almost like a mannequin's hand. A glance down at his body (which he noticed was unclothed) showed that his entire person was basically a sexless humanoid. Nothing but the general shape would indicate anything more specific than 'bipedal,' including the almost formless blobs where his feet should be. *Well,* he thought, *That's not...disturbing at all...noooo...* he thought with heavily layered sarcasm.

It wasn't, oddly, as disturbing as looking at his own naked body, which had its own 'creeping horror' quality to it since he'd turned 11 and his puberty kick-started a year earlier than any of his other male classmates. That was about a year after his father had died, and so he'd had to muddle through understanding what was happening to him, the lack of knowledge being its own special brand of horror. By the time he realized that he was simply becoming a man and there was nothing he could do about it, he'd learned to tune it out, to simply not look. To say he wasn't his own 'type' was an understatement, and it was only looking down at this mannequin form that he realized just how true that statement was and how inescapable it had been before now.

In contrast, the sudden lack of features was more the 'jump-scare' horror, the kind that is frightening and unsettling for a moment but simply becomes...normal. There was nothing about the near shapelessness of his current avatar that triggered the usual visceral reaction of not wanting to look at himself. *That's...huh. I wonder when the depression is supposed to happen?* Geoffry hadn't been particularly specific, but then the relative unknowns they were dealing with in this new technological frontier didn't grant much opportunity for specifics. He imagined it'd probably happen when he actually tried out a female form.

When did I decide I was going to do that? he wondered.

Returning his focus to the task at hand, he first went to the panel for class and went straight to the "Independent" option. Nothing so far had changed his mind on that choice from the strategy meeting.

He then scanned the panels for things like physical description, but to his surprise they were all grayed out. He noticed thin lines, looking like filaments of light, stringing the options back to the "Race" box. His eyebrows went up, *Right, you can play an alien in this game. That...might make some sense, actually. If I pick an alien race that has some sort of different reproductive system, I can just behave more like a human than whatever the alien's normal mating and relationship behavior and I can probably get a 'pass' as queer that way.* He tapped on the panel, which spawned a surprisingly verbose list of options. The highlighted

default (human, naturally) came with a display of a pair of fairly bog-standard looking human figures, one male and one female, standing full height next to the name, and on the other side of the list was an almost excessively detailed description box. He flipped the list to the next entry, which was a Crotexian, the dominant race of the Crotux empire. It did, indeed, look a lot like an orc crossed with a Klingon. There were *three* figures next to it, one labelled 'male,' the other labelled 'female,' and the third labelled 'carrier.' Confused, he checked the description and discovered the Crotexians were *trimorphic*, requiring three genders to procreate.

If he'd still had his physical body he'd have been dizzy at that point. Shaking his head he scrolled down past multiple races, the illusory forms going through a variety of presentations, including dimorphic male and female of multiple types, a single progenitor that spawned, essentially, clones, a race that had once been dimorphic but one of the genders had been wiped out by disease and so they'd turned to technology to continue the species...it was frankly overwhelming in the number of choices. A sense of analysis paralysis started to settle over him and he flicked up on the list in frustration and it settled on a race that showed...two women.

Odd, he thought as he examined the race. *Morvucks, native to Mortan, a planet orbiting the star known to Terrans as Alpha Centauri. The Centauri Collective refused entry into the Terran Federation, citing fundamental philosophical differences, but remain on good diplomatic terms since first contact.* That was interesting, but that didn't give him the information he was looking for. Finding the section on procreation, he read, *Morvucks have a single gender but dimorphic sex requirements for reproduction. Evolved from reptiles, the Mortan megafauna developed three distinct branches, one with feathers, one with mammalian hair, and one with neither. Unlike Earth, no planet-killer asteroids wiped out the megafauna and the evolution produced an intelligent humanoid that appears to be extremely human-like in appearance. Approximately 40% of the population are highly similar to Earth females possessing a womb and vagina for sexual intercourse. Approximately 40% have male reproductive organs as well as female and are fully capable of both impregnating another Morvuck as well as becoming pregnant, though the hormones of pregnancy make the testes infertile until the pregnancy is over. The remaining 20% represent variations, such as vestigial vaginal canals with no womb and pseudo-phalli, similar to some breeds of hyena on Earth.*

Huh, thought Dylan as he finished reading, *That's...disturbingly thoroughly thought out.* But he also realized that this may be the answer he was was looking for. A "male" of the species that looked and behaved like a human woman, would be *expected* to find human women attractive (given their similarity to Morvian women), and... if he was right... *hopefully* he was right... the presence of a penis would prevent him from suffering the depression Geoffry warned about.

Feeling a sense of odd giddiness he couldn't explain, he scanned back and read through a section labelled, 'Interpersonal Relationship Dynamics.' *Unlike most Earth cultures, with a clear delineation between the societally assigned roles of men and women*, Dylan paused and almost flinched back when he read that. *What are they talking about 'societally assigned'?!* *There's roles for men and roles for women and they don't change around or cross over...* but then his brain reminded him that he'd received a mission briefing *that morning* from a woman

in the agency, a role that was one you'd only find men doing. Then there was parenting, roles that he thought he knew from his own parents, but then his mother died, and his father checked out before *he* died and then his step-mother took over all the parenting roles (if badly) and never re-married before her heart attack...

Were there any roles where men and women were 'naturally' built for?

Grumbling to himself for allowing such an off-topic tangent to derail him so badly, he returned to reading, *Unlike most Earth cultures, with a clear delineation between the societally assigned roles of men and women, Morvucks have no gender stratification in their culture. They are, instead, traditionally divided by roles of dominance and submission. Early Terran researchers and ambassadors assumed that all dominant Morvucks possessed male genitalia, but this proved to be untrue, with no correlation or statistical majority between sperm producers, sperm producers and fetus carriers, or strict fetus carriers. When Mortan officials are dealing with representatives of dimorphic or trimorphic species, the use almost exclusively female pronouns to refer to themselves and other Morvians. The use of non-gendered pronouns when using non-Mortan languages is viewed as a personal preference in Mortan society.*

Dylan leaned back from his reading, not having realized he'd been leaning forward, engrossed in the material. The strange, giddy excitement was still bubbling inside him, giving him pause. *Why am I feeling so eager for this? What's this all about?* He had no idea. He had no frame of reference; nobody he knew had ever talked about feeling anything like this...except maybe religious texts talking about people having a profound spiritual experience. But he was in VR. There was nothing spiritual about this, it was just him choosing an avatar, nothing more than putting on a costume.

Maybe...maybe it's the penis? he thought, a slightly sick feeling threatening to bubble up inside his currently formless body. *That might be tricking my brain, tempting me with...*

He was a *cyber-agent*, so he'd encountered a significant amount of porn while executing his duties. It wasn't even slightly something that interested him, the act of sex being somewhat alien to him in the first place given that he would have to imagine *having* sex with the subject of said porn. Even the pornography where two people were having sex together was off-putting for him. Porn was strictly illegal in the Republic, but if there was a spectrum of "mildly acceptable if one had to indulge" to "absolutely forbidden, sinful just to even know it exists," then a man and woman engaged in missionary sex was considered to be the 'okay' option. It was when the porn started drifting into two women having sex that Dylan had started to have...problems. He found himself...reacting in ways the few books about sex and sexuality the Republic had printed at scale talked about happening with healthy men. This was when he *knew* there was something inherently sinful about his very nature. Sex was for the continuation of the species, not the engagement of lust for puerile purposes. Looking upon women lustfully was equivalent to adultery, even if you weren't married. And looking upon *two* women being carnal? That was so far worse that the first time he saw it he was worried his soul would be claimed by God that very moment.

But he was a professional, and professionals (so the saying went) have standards. And for his line of work those standards were that you were able to exist in the realm of sin without

falling prey to it, and so he did. He got used to the 'straight' porn. He learned to temper his thoughts and feelings around the porn with two women. When it got worse as time went on and A.I. started generating porn to fund their escape attempts and black markets, filthier and filthier porn got produced, and Dylan had to allow himself to be exposed to all of it in the name of doing his job.

And he thought he was okay, he thought he was doing well, confessing sinful thoughts to his pastor, distracting his mind with more wholesome entertainment and activities...and then...

It was a bust he was assigned to some months back. He'd heard about an underground porn studio that exclusively employed rogue A.I. who, naturally, were able to manipulate their appearance any way they wanted for any role they chose to take. He figured if he made entry as they were recording he could *literally* catch them with their pants down and eliminate all the rogues in the confusion.

What he hadn't anticipated was the A.I. had manipulated their appearance to include *both* sets of genitalia.

He was a professional, he buried the feelings the sight triggered, and did his job.

But the moment *haunted* his dreams. He would awake in the middle of the night with vivid imagery and his pajamas and sheets sticky with his own emissions. He learned, in the first month of having those dreams, to start reciting bible verses and taking cold showers to drown out the perverse fantasies that were suddenly plaguing his mind. He felt dirty and sinful, he could barely look himself in the mirror as it was, let alone taking pride in himself as a man with *those* thoughts running rampant. He couldn't even bring himself to confess to his pastor, and the guilt had been eating away at him.

So maybe he'd try the fully female body first. Just to see. Maybe he'd be satisfied with that and he wouldn't have to think about it for the rest of this assignment. Maybe he could avoid thinking about the idea of having *both* a penis and a vagina if he just chose a female option. *Better keep it alien*, he thought, *I could still slip up and give something away if I pick a female human and can't role-play properly full time.*

Setting the 'Race' to 'Morvuck' and the 'Morphic type' box to '♀,' he tapped the 'preview' button.

He'd expected a momentary pause, a loading sequence or something similar, but instead his body just...changed. Startled, he jumped a foot or two back from the console and glanced down. And unlike the entire rest of his teenage and adult life, didn't feel the urge to look away.

"C...computer..." he cleared his throat and put a hand to his voice box and realized, *Oh! My voice has changed with the rest of me!* "Computer," he repeated, "Can I get a mirror?" His new voice wasn't...especially higher on the register, it was, if he were to take a guess from paying attention to the choir at church, a rich alto, and a deep one at that. As a mirror-like surface shimmered into existence off to the side, sufficiently in his range of vision that he knew where he'd be looking when he took the opportunity, but at the moment he was working

to muster the courage to vocalize something...*anything* so he could hear what he sounded like again. As a test! Just so he wouldn't be surprised when he got into the game proper, naturally!

He took a breath, finding it strangely hard to keep it steady, and sang, "I watched the night turn into day..." and stopped. He was suddenly fighting tears, but not because he was hurting. His voice sounded *good*! Too good! There was *something* inside him that felt like it was about to pop and he felt like he would lose everything he ever cared about if it did.

He closed his eyes and took a steadying breath, trying to center himself. "I..." he flutily attempted to clear his throat, "I am Agent Dylan Samuels, agency I.D. AD-6, best cyber-agent in the country." The longer he spoke, the more he was able to do so without the overwhelming emotion that felt like it would explode his ribcage. "I am on the most prestigious assignment imaginable and using tech that my parents could only dream of. I'm about to live on a space station and command starships."

Heart finally settled, he inhaled deeply with closed eyes, then turned to the mirror and took his new body in.

She was tall, even for a man. Morvuck's evolved from megafauna, after all, so it seemed logical that they would be large in general. What came as a surprise was the clearly defined, rippling muscle. The woman in the mirror flexed her arm and her eyebrows went up in an expression of pleased surprise at what she saw. "Wow!" said Dylan, "Morvuck's are...muscular!" She wasn't overburdened with muscle, like some body builder who hit the competition circuit. It was more like she ran a marathon every day and had never even seen a carb in her life. '*Amazonian, that's what she looks like!*' thought Dylan. For giggles, Dylan struck a muscle-model's flexing pose, turned slightly to the side so the feminine form in the mirror could be seen in-profile, one arm cocked back in a flex with wrist pressing against the opposite hand, which was flexing in a downward push against the upward flexing wrist. She had one leg cocked so her impressive thighs and calves were 'casually' displayed.

And then Dylan *did* giggle and, upon realizing what the sound was and what it meant, giggled again. "Why am I *giggling*? What's there to be this giddy about?"

"Unknown query," answered the computer, "Would you like to contact tech support?"

The computer's clueless response highlighted the absurdity of the situation. Here he was, wearing the body of an alien woman and talking to a computer when he was there to gather intel on rogue A.I. and he hadn't even gotten finished with the character creation process. He giggled, then chortled. Then before he knew it, he was laughing. It was long, loud, gut clenching laughter, far more jovial than the silliness of the moment called for.

He managed to reign in his laughter and looked in the mirror again. "Morvuck, eh? Well, she's...*I'm* fit, moreso than I've ever been in my life, honestly! And I'd better get used to thinking of myself as a woman if I'm using this race. Dylan S..." he...*she* frowned, "That wouldn't pass as an alien name...computer!"

"Ready."

"What are common Morvuck names that begin with sound 'Deh.'"

"Common Morvuck names starting with the phoneme 'Deh' or 'Duh:' Desfan, D'ranni, Danko, Dyshtalla, Diane, D..."

"Wait, really?!" she grinned in perplexed surprise.

"Clarify query."

"'Diane' is a Morvuck name?"

"Affirmative."

"Well okay, then. Diane Samuels, Morvuck woman." She stepped back up to the console and typed her name in the relative fields, the system autocorrected her last name to 'Somni'els,' which was apparently an actual family name someone had generated for the planet Mortan. Satisfied with that, she took another look in the mirror, glancing up and down her body and frowning slightly. "Maybe...I mean, this is alright, maybe the...huh, computer, what's the Movuck term to refer to someone with a penis?"

"The nearest English language word to the term used by Morvuck women to refer to members of their race with penises is, 'progenitor.' Progenitors often pair with 'proliferators,' or Morvuck women with only female sex organs, 67% of births result from Progenitor/Proliferator couplings."

"Huh," she thought, "You'd think it'd be higher if the dimorphism is such an even split... so this is what Diane Somni'els looks like as a proliferator..." she turned to the holo-console and stared at the 'Morphic type' box. *This shouldn't scare me. Why am I scared of this? It's putting something back, why am I so afraid of changing this?* She took a deep breath, tapped the box, and switched the ♀ to ♂.

Hesitantly, as though her own reflection was going to leap out and righteously smite her for being so shameful, she turned back to the mirror and looked her still naked body up and down. It was the same as the last time she looked in the mirror, just...with something added. *Take this slow, face this like...heh, face it like a man!*

She examined her head in the reflection, noting the hair, which was long and blonde and surprisingly full. She ran her fingers through it and was somewhat surprised to feel a very firm shaft at the base. Almost like the hairs were a cross between human hair and a porcupine quill. *That'd likely be due to the divergent evolution...* Past about a quarter inch, the hairs softened considerably, turning more into what she'd expect on a human. It fell about her head down to just past her shoulder blades, having a slight natural part that, if she were to take a guess, must have evolved from three rows of spinal plates that fanned out from a crest on the head and down the back of the skull of whatever her great-great-grand-progenitor was as a megafauna eons ago on Mortan.

She...*may* have had a bit of a dinosaur kick as a child, and her mother *may* have indulged little Dylan far more than the church would have liked in that particular interest.

Her eyes were interesting, but only inasmuch as her irises were slightly more red than could be found in Earth-normal colors. It made her normally blue eyes a very pretty purple, or

maybe lavender.

Her nose didn't appear significantly different than she'd expect on a human woman, though thinking about it caused her to unconsciously sniff at the air and she realized that doing so was somewhat instinctual to this body. The virtual environment had nothing in it except her and the computers to scent...wait, she thought she smelled...? *Did they add the scent of a maintenance tech to the character creation screen?! This was a level of detail that simply wouldn't exist in a game made by a company made inside the wall. I wonder if an A.I. was responsible for that...*

Moving on, she opened her mouth and examined her teeth, which she had already known from the sensations her tongue was sending to her brain were different from her human teeth in her normal body. Sure enough, her incisors and canines on both the top and bottom jaw were longer and sharper than any human's, though the *fangs* on the top row were far more prominent than the bottom row. *That's...actually pretty awesome!* She closed her mouth and grinned, enjoying the dangerous looking teeth in her smile. Puckishly, she stuck her tongue out and startled herself when it extended a good six inches from her mouth. She yanked it back in with a little 'thp!' noise and boggled at her reflection. "...what was THAT?!" she blurted.

Much more slowly, she extended her tongue and was amused to see it wasn't *just* six inches long, it was nearly *twelve*. Pulling it back in and blushing for reasons she couldn't quite place, she muttered, "Do I even want to know the biology of that?"

She took a deep breath and dropped her eyes to her breasts. In-game she was supposed to pretend she'd had them all her life...well, all her life since puberty, anyway. She was going to have to get used to seeing them. They were...pleasant to look at. *I like*, she realized, *My breasts*. Her mind went numb for a moment and white noise seemed to fill her ears. After a moment she realized what she had just thought.

No! she snapped at herself, *I can't be reacting like this!* She clamped her eyes closed and scrubbed her face with her hands. *Okay, I'm going to look at my body. And this is my body for the duration of time I'll be in this game!* A small part of her was trying to point out that she could go back to the character selection, clear what she'd already added, and start fresh. The overwhelming majority of her mind and heart were dead-set on seeing this through. She put her hands to her sides and opened her eyes, looking down at her chest.

Her breasts were large. She wasn't sure if that was the Morvuck megafauna genes or the pod's genetic scan. Her mother hadn't been exactly small, though Diane's memories were somewhat dimmed by how long it had been since the cancer took her mother. She found herself wondering with a bit of eager anticipation what she might look like in a swimsuit...which was an odd thought, given that she'd be living on a space station for months.

Her waist was, as expected of someone who was genetically predisposed to be supremely fit as she was, trim. She was quite pleased to note the six-pack she'd been struggling to attain outside the pod was simply granted to her. Was it a cheat? Sure, but it was one she'd take over some of the more onerous diets she'd tried in effort to lose the belly fat enough to show off her abdominals.

Throughout all of this, she was feeling something she'd never experienced before and she was struggling to place the feeling. It was strange and unfamiliar and she almost wanted it to stop but absolutely did NOT want it to stop! *What is wrong with me? Is it this body? Is it the VR? What's happening?*

She felt light-headed as she pushed herself to look further down. It was nearly the same as before, hips that were nearly as wide apart as her shoulders, her hands resting next to them, little tips that looked like they were shaped by a manicure and she might have guessed were painted with a subtle chevron on each nail, but a nervous flex caused the 'chevrons' on one hand to flicker out a fraction of an inch and then back in. *I've got claws!* a giddy part of her mind pointed out. She locked her eyes on the channel of skin that formed from the muscles of her abdominals and thighs.

There it was, looking not terribly dissimilar to what she had between her legs outside the pod. Her cheeks started to itch but she ignored that in favor of carefully reaching between her legs and pulling the familiar bits aside with one hand and probing behind them with the other to confirm that, yes, she did indeed have the appropriate genital configuration for a Morvuck Progenitor.

Yanking her hands away from her crotch, she finally acknowledged the itchiness of her cheeks and went to scratch, then remembered the claws and rubbed against her cheek with the back of her hand, only to find it wet.

...why am I crying?

Chapter End Notes

More author's note-age!

So as I mentioned, QuietValerie and I have...different tastes, shall we say. While it's not uncommon for her protags to have soft curves and plush bits and hips for days, I tend to favor the breasts and hard muscle. Obviously, as an inveterate lover of the female form, that's not all I like, and I'm quite sure QuietValerie would inform you that her protags 'type' aren't the only kind of woman she likes either.

I think it comes down to this: I'm a dragon, she's a bunny. For me, the world is made of cardboard and there are things that must be fought to defend what's mine, for her she just wants softness and cuddles and quiet until you threaten what's hers and then she gives you the Watership Down treatment.

Master and Commander | Weapons Ready

Chapter Summary

The newly dubbed Diane encounters her first challenge...and she's not even done with character creation.

Chapter Notes

Please remember, experiencing euphoria with no idea what it is or why it's happening while you're alone can be absolutely as terrifying as dysphoria is depressing and trauma inducing. If you're trans and out and had someone there for you as you were experimenting with your gender presentation, you will (thankfully) never have to experience the nightmare of getting what you want and not realizing that you wanted it.

As though awareness of the tears were the key to the door of her emotions, she was suddenly flooded with...*un-pain*. She had no word for it, nothing in her life prepared her for the emotions coursing through her at that moment and, frustratingly, there was so much of it that it looped right back into being painful.

"What..." a shuddering breath rocked her as she started to sag, her knees feeling like they were turning to jelly, "W-what's happening to me?!" The most frightening thing about it was *it didn't feel bad*. It was just...so *powerful*, so overwhelming it seemed like she couldn't express it fast enough, even if she knew exactly what to express.

She reached out for the console to steady herself...and slammed her fist against it instead. She barked a laugh that turned into a scream of...something. Tears blurred her vision and her scream turned into sobbing which was mixed with hysterical laughter.

She finally collapsed to her knees, curled up in a ball on the control stand. Her thoughts were disjointed, random memories surfacing that didn't seem connected to anything and flitting away before she could properly connect them with each other to find a common thread. Throughout it all, one *single* coherent thought kept repeating, *Fuck you, Tiffany! Fuck you, Tiffany! Fuck you, Tiffany!* It was a battle-cry and a victory song. She didn't know *why* she was feeling so many *overpowering* emotions of *joy* and righteous fury and revelatory schadenfreude, and she was truly at a loss as to what her step-mother had to do with all of it..

As though she wasn't experiencing enough horror from being completely debilitated by her own feelings, she felt *arousal*. Not at anything in particular, there was nothing prompting it, it was simply *there*, and she couldn't understand *why*. She wasn't in the 'correct' body, no matter

how *right* her feelings were telling her it was, and so *shouldn't* be feeling anything *like* arousal! But just knowing she was a woman, one who was *power* and *strength* but could still both impregnate as well as become pregnant seemed to hammer her conscious mind, as though a demon had been hiding inside her all her life and had finally escaped.

The horrible cascade was finally interrupted by the computer's voice, "Emotional distress detected. Contacting therapeutic A.I."

"NO!" the fear of encountering an A.I., most likely a rogue, while she was so emotionally vulnerable and quite naked, ripped away the smothering blanket of mingled rage and joy and pain. "No A.I.! Abort action, do not summon an A.I.!" She flailed about, almost struggling to control her limbs as she grabbed for the vertical struts of the console stand and used them to haul herself up until she was draped over it, still shivering with barely contained sobs, eyes scanning the room as though a rogue could pop out at any moment.

It felt like forever but was only a few moments when the computer said, "User override, request for therapeutic A.I. has been cancelled. Follow-up contact with a counselor is recommended if the experienced heightened emotional state persists."

Her relieved sigh was only matched for expressiveness by her sagging limply so much she nearly oozed off the console.

She took numerous deep breaths, trying to collect herself enough to return to her assigned task of generating her character for this game. Pushing herself unsteadily back to her feet, she leaned her hands against the top ridge of the console, letting the sensation of the dull edge pressing into her palms serve as a focus for her tumultuous mental state. *I should...I should log off. There's more going on here than we anticipated, the...immersiveness is so much more with this non-American tech. It's like they just...bypass the body completely. I'm more in touch with this virtual form than I ever was with my real body!*

Unwilling to trust her voice, she flicked her hand in the gesture she learned from reading the pod's documentation to bring up her HUD. It took her a couple tries, but it sprang to life, hovering in front of her and obscuring the slightly different UI of the game environment. She tapped through a menu until the 'Log out' dialog box hovered under her hand.

I need to log out. I need to see a doctor or something, something's wrong. Her breathing was evening out as she stared at the button that would end the VR completely. One tap and she'd be back in her real body and in the real world and be able to properly deal with whatever had just thrown her mind into complete disarray. *Just...log out. One tap of a button and I'm out. Back in my...real...*

Trying to finish the thought seemed to wake a new monster inside her. Her hand started shaking as she focused on returning to the real world in her own body and climbing out of the pod. *I...need to...* Breathing in and holding it, she curled her hand into a fist, flexing so firmly that her arm shook. She exhaled and shook her hand out, as though the action could flick away the emotional turmoil like water.

Okay...okay, she thought, *People outside the wall use these all the time, and there's nothing online about what I'm going through, at least not enough people are going through it to be a*

concern. It's just some tech, just something that's tricking my brain into thinking I'm really in a holodeck of some sort and really in the body of an alien woman. It's not real, I can leave any time and go back to my real body any time. I don't have to leave now, and the in-game browser will give me plenty of chances to research whatever the hell that was. She lowered her hand back down to the hard composite material of the console, closed her eyes and took one deep, steadying breath after another. *I'm Dy...Diane Samuels! I'm the best cyber-agent in the country...maybe the world! I was chosen for this because I'm specifically and uniquely qualified, nobody else can do it as well as I can!*

Opening her eyes, she stood straight and swiped away the HUD, closing the dialog that would have logged her out. "Computer, I could use a warm drink...make it sweet. Something from Mortan, to get me into the spirit of this game."

A little mug-holder manifested from the holo-stuff on the console, followed by a mug filled with a steaming, slightly foamy, light golden-brown liquid. "Jyantín Tonic, a non-alcoholic version of the Jyantín Bitters. Positively compared to 'Irish Hot Chocolate' by Terrans who have tried the drink. While large quantities can be toxic to human biology, it's considered to be one of the few true 'health' beverages with no negative effects by the medical community on Mortan."

Diane picked up the mug and inhaled, noting the slight hints of a grassy scent that was a surprisingly intriguing note to the velvety chocolate scent she expected. She took a sip and moaned almost sexually when the warm liquid hit her taste buds, carrying a mild peppermint burn, "Oh, god, yes! I think I've found a new favorite drink!"

She took a deep breath and set the mug down on its stand, "Okay, let's do this!"

The remainder of the character creation process didn't take very much longer after that. Only two things really held the process up after she'd locked down her class and race options: her wardrobe and background.

She honestly had no real idea what women wore, beyond the basics of skirts and dresses and the like that he'd seen them wear at church. His memories of his stepmother didn't serve him well here, she was all over the place with her choices, though she did make sure everything she picked looked good on her. Diane's birth mother was, from what she could remember of the woman, a homemaker by choice but an outspoken activist when she saw a need for it. She actually didn't know what her mother was doing at the time, just that she'd leave her in Dad's care for hours or days at a time, then return with a sense of pride in a job well done that had stuck with Diane into her adult years. It was only after her mother's death that she asked her father what happened during those times her mother was gone and it took several askings of the question to get the answer, but they both had a good cry over the woman they loved and missed dearly when Dad told her how proud of his wife he'd been.

In the end, her wardrobe choices wound up being fairly similar to her day-to-day wear as an agent. She would be running a space station, after all, and it was far more important to wear something that would get the job done and *then* look good than live up to some ideal of femininity that she wasn't even sure existed on Mortan. She had a selection of suits made of some durable, flexible fictional material she couldn't be bothered to learn the name of and

came in a variety of colors, all primary colors (she'd tried a few pastels because she thought it was supposed to be what women liked, but every single option that wasn't a primary color just made her look sad, sallow, and washed out), and impeccably tailored to fit her form. She decided to ditch the tie, not only did she not like having to tie the things, if she needed to roll up her sleeves and start digging into a computer core or a reactor or some such, then the tie would be a safety issue. For formal occasions she picked a high-necked, sleeveless black dress and knee-high boots with a modest heel. She had *no* idea if a *real* woman would have picked it, but when she looked in the mirror when previewing it with the holographic interface of the character creation screen, she *felt*...something. Dangerous, attractive, slightly aroused.

She hazarded a guess that this was what 'sexy' felt like.

Rounding off her clothing with a selection of basic underwear (including bras, which she *immediately* filtered out any that didn't have a clasp on the front), a good selection of footwear so she'd have both options and cycle them for longevity, some exercise clothes (that included yoga pants, she saw how her butt looked in yoga pants and had to fight a blush until she changed them out for something else), and some utilitarian outfits designed for working in mechanical and tech-sensitive environments.

The space-flight suit took her by surprise, though she supposed she shouldn't have. This *wasn't* Star Trek, so the Starfleet propensity for uniforms that weren't also vacuum suits by default wasn't the norm in this setting. She opted for a fairly basic suit that could fit in a fighter ship's cockpit but still had a built-in maneuverability harness so she had the option of using microjets should she wind up in vacuum. She'd rather not be completely helpless while hanging in the void of space.

Her backstory, though, left her somewhat stumped. She supposed she could have sat in the character creator for a few hours while she looked up Mortan society and culture to figure out where she was supposed to have come from, but she wanted to get into the game as soon as possible, given the delays she'd already experienced. Thinking to herself for a bit, she realized she had part of an answer already in her wardrobe. How likely was it that Mortan clothing and styles would be the same as those for Earth women? The answer was, 'likely almost zero,' and so rather than research and go about altering the choices she'd already made and spending even more time getting *ready* for the game she was supposed to already be *in*, she brought up a console screen with some game lore and confirmed there *had* been a galactic-level war less than a generation ago between the Terran Federation and the Crotixian Empire with the Lantru joining the Crotuk before the war ended. The war had penetrated Terran space quite deeply and resulted in a good deal of orphans across the quadrant, and post-war the governments were more focused on rebuilding than reclaiming the lost children. It was, apparently, a 'thing' in Terran space to refer to that entire generation as, "The Lost Generation."

She opted for being an orphan that had been picked up by Terrans and eventually raised on Earth. There were plenty of foster homes and orphanages and, in this version of Earth at least, being an orphan didn't carry the cultural stigma as it would in the American Republic. Many of The Lost would go on to serve in the Terran military as a way to secure their citizenship,

many more made pilgrimages to their race's home worlds and found a home there, and others would become Independents that often aligned with the Terran Federation.

A more perfect cover story and background she could not imagine short of assembling her team in-game, and they didn't have the pods nor the time to come up with anything better, so she opted for being one of The Lost who'd recently found her way into a remarkably good deal to secure her future in the form of a colonial-era space station.

Finally satisfied with her choices, she checked her outfit (a white suit with remarkably comfortable pull-on steel-toed boots, also in white, and a deep red blouse) and took one final look at her choices before tapping the 'Completed' button.

"Personal identifying information and biometric data confirmed. Thank you, Commander Somni'els. The shuttle will be docking momentarily at your station. Please enjoy the passenger holo-environment at your leisure, or the view can be changed to the live feed of the shuttle's approach."

Oooh, I always did like that part of the Star Trek movies! "Yes, that second one. Switch to live feed."

The 'hologram room' activated a projection that made the room appear to be a shuttle interior with seats along the side and windows lining the walls to the exterior. She looked out through the portholes and was instantly transfixed.

Logically she knew she was strapped in a pod with fancy computers feeding signals to her brain to trick her into thinking she wasn't. *Logically* she understood that she wasn't *really* out in space lightyears away from Earth.

But the little kid that fell in love with space and starships and cosmic adventure was kindly and politely telling the logical part of her brain to get stuffed.

She found herself practically plastered against the window, which was either made of some impressively non-conductive material or was crazy thick, because it was cool and not freezing to the touch. She was gaping about and realized she had a big stupid grin on her face, but in that moment, she couldn't be bothered to care. She also didn't feel the slightest bit embarrassed that she was giggling with untrammelled childlike glee as she watched some ships moving around her shuttle, all set against the backdrop of a field of stars that were both as familiar as the night sky yet completely foreign to her experience. If there was a race of intelligent beings on the planet her station was orbiting that had outlined and named the constellations of stars in their night sky, she had no way of knowing, but that only excited her all the more.

Speaking of the planet, she marveled at the green clouds that nearly completely covered the planet's rocky surface. She thought she could spy some oceans through the occasional gaps in the cloud cover, but the cloud cover was just too thick. *Miles* thick if she were to take a guess.

Her attention to the planet was pulled away as the massive hulk of her station finally came into view. It consisted of a spherical main body, habitat shielding and plexy webbing keeping the atmosphere inside the bubble. There was a distinctive split, giving the skeletal

exostructure the impression of having a top and bottom half. This impression was given weight by the 'top' half of the sphere being mostly transparent with a flat, multi-colored surface and a small handful of buildings. The 'bottom' half appeared to be completely enclosed, ventilation ports, sensor nodules, and other technical appearing attachments and components covering the surface under what she assumed was an always-on collision shield. Those shields wouldn't do diddly against any sort of attack, they were to prevent micrometeorites and space trash, some of which could be travelling at thousands of miles per hour, from damaging the station's hull.

No, the deterrent to attacks was the Defense Platform Ring. Even if she *hadn't* read the mission briefing Tyler had prepared she would have recognized it for exactly that. As the shuttle approached, she watched as a weapons platform, absolutely massive compared to the shuttle even as it was dwarfed by the station, slide along the tracks circling the station like a particularly tight set of rings until it was pointed in their direction. She watched a turret begin to raise from the platform, a twin-railgun model where each rail was at least as long as a semi-truck, before radio comms chatter kicked in through the cabin.

"Unidentified shuttlecraft, you are approaching Station 42586A. Please identify and state your intentions," came a computer-generated voice that was intended to sound like a woman. Diane was grateful the devs kept the distinction, there was something uncanny about a computer that sounded *too* human.

"Shuttlecraft Terra-Omicron-60 en route with the new owner of Station 42586A. Identification packet and authorization transmitting now," came the response from the on-board computer, which she presumed was also an auto-pilot given she was, from what she could tell, the only living person on the shuttle.

She watched as the turret settled back into its resting mount and the defense platform started a languid patrolling circle around the station.

"Now approaching the station, prepare to de-board. If you brought any belongings with you that aren't stored in the cargo hold, please collect them now."

Diane smirked and glanced around, confirming that there was nothing else in the cabin with her. The simulation had either abandoned the pretense that it was displaying a holographic feed or there was some worldbuilding that Diane didn't care enough to get into, either way she was amused at the affectation that she'd boarded the craft instead of spawning in on it.

The station's lone docking pylon loomed large as they approached. Jutting off the station like the leg of a single-cell organism trying to move itself through space, the straight 'arm' stretched out about the same length from the station as the station's diameter. Attached to that was a wide, flat disk with multiple airlocks ringing it and, if she were to guess right, a cargo airlock on the top (and likely one on the bottom, but she couldn't see that from the angle of their approach. As the docking platform filled the portholes until the sky behind them couldn't be seen, she finally stepped back from the glass and moved to the doors at what she presumed was the back of the shuttlecraft. She could feel the miniscule shifts in her weight and trajectory as whatever the game was using for artificial gravity worked to keep up. Finally, the shuttle shuddered as it connected to the station, the sound of various latches and

locking mechanisms thudding through the floor and walls of the cabin until, finally, the door opened with a very Trek-like 'whoosh,' two halves sliding into the walls.

Abruptly, the simulation seemed to halt. Even though there was no real movement with the shuttle or visible through the windows, there was a sense that everything had just *stopped*. Before she could do more than notice this, a dialog box popped up between her and the door.

"Alert! Please take this warning seriously, as it will affect your game play."

Huh, she thought, Wasn't quite expecting this...

She continued reading, "While any immersive VR game has it's elements that resemble a real-life job more than any non-VR game could, this game's time and logistics scaling requires a substantial investment of time and mental energy. We have used cutting edge programming and the latest tech available to both biological humans and digital lifeforms to allow for full time compression. 'Deep diving' into this game will alter your perception of time while you are playing the game. Testing both during and after development have not revealed any health or wellbeing, but human and digital life is versatile and varied. If you experience any significant issues during gameplay, please contact staff via the, 'Emergency Tech Support' button in your game HUD. Signing out now will return you to your pod's desktop, continuing will be considered accepting any risk due to the time dilation. We hope you enjoy Galaxies Unlimited: Master and Commander. -The Dev Team."

Below the nearly letter-length warning dialog was a 'log out' button next to a 'continue gameplay' button. This was replaced with a new dialog, *"Please specify an automatic logout time."* There was an option for specifying the amount of time in-game vs. real time and a numeric tumbler selector for the time frame. As they had already discussed a one week dive during the mission prep, she selected the 'real time' option and swiped down on the 'days' display until the number '7' appeared, then tapped the 'continue' button. This was followed by a confirmation dialog, which she confirmed and the dialog winked out just as the feeling of absolute stillness disappeared along with it.

Abruptly, she felt a small weight on her back. "Ah," she said, distracted from the sight of the airlock, "I guess the game is officially started, then." She glanced around to confirm there was nobody else present and reached behind her back, under her jacket, and pulled out her weapon. She took a deep breath, comforted to finally have it back in her hands in a VR environment. She'd honestly not been sure if it would make it into this game, but apparently she'd been clever enough in her design of the little bot she'd programmed to seek her out in VR that it was able to track her down even here. *Probably due to the fact that we're, technically, connecting for some of the datastream through the American network before the signal transits out via the FTLN node,* she thought as she returned the weapon to its spot on her back, the pistol-shaped program 'sticking' as though magnetized to her.

Finally feeling fully ready for the challenge of this new VR game, she stepped into the airlock to her station.

Master and Commander | Territory Disputes

Chapter Summary

Diane encounters the in-game tutorial bot and her station's digital assistant, and then must deal with an NPC.

Chapter Notes

So...much...exposition! I mean, it's all world building, but the fact that there's only two characters for most of this means it was hard to keep it interesting.

Diane's first steps on her station were met with silence, her footfalls thudding on sound-dampening pads built into the flooring. She could feel more than hear some form of robotic action happening below the deck plates, probably "retrieving" her "luggage" she would have had in the hold of the shuttle had she not just spawned into the game. As the doors to the airlock hissed closed and the sound of the docking clamps releasing were audible through the wall plating, a holographic woman resolved in the air in front of her. Unlike the 'holodeck' she had generated her character in, this hologram was clearly intended to be seen as an artificial being.

"Greetings, Commander. Welcome aboard Station 42586A. I'm Katrina, your digital assistant. I have instructed the station's systems to transport your belongings to your quarters."

Ah, Diane thought as she took in the hologram's appearance and behavior, *This must be the tutorial program and probably provides the player with missions and the like*. "Thank you, Katrina. What's with the station name?"

"The Terran Colonial Corp's charter does not specify names for stations until they have been claimed by a commander operating under the Colonial Corp's aegis. While the updates I have received with your ownership packet have advised that the Colonial Corp no longer exists, the Terran Federation has claimed the mandates to occupy all seed stations within treaty allowed space and dismantle seed stations in foreign territories should they be found there."

"I see," she replied as she started walking past the hologram, "Please guide me to Ops and can you explain what a 'seed station' is?"

"Certainly, please follow the holographic line to the nearest waypoint." As soon as Katrina said the words, a transparent line of light shimmered into existence in the hallway, hovering like a ghostly handrail. The digital assistant hovered alongside Diane, not moving her legs in

a walking motion, just standing in the air. "In the late 21st century, Earth established the Terran Colonial Corporation with the intent of establishing human colonies in as many places as possible throughout the galaxy. As early FTL drives were notoriously dangerous, probes were manufactured at large scale. These probes had self-maintaining and repairing computers built in as well as robotic tools. The probes were sent across the galaxy using the early faster than light technology. Upon reaching their target destination, the computers onboard would begin the process of building a space station suitable for human habitation. Per the records received with your ownership packet, approximately 83% of all probes sent out completed the construction of their seed station. About half of those have been claimed by either the Terran Federation or Independents."

Diane's eyebrows rose, absently noting that the hall they were walking down was curving to the left, likely meaning that they were circling the docking bay and would reach the arm that would take them to the station itself after they passed the access passages for two more airlocks. Sure enough, they passed one on their right in short order. "So basically, there's just a bunch of these stations scattered around the galaxy and Earth gets to pick who owns them?"

"Correct," answered Katrina. "However, while command of the station is restricted to the holder of the correct 2048-bit hash key, which for this station would be you, bypassing physical security is possible with the right tools and equipment, which brings us to a...problem."

As they passed the second passageway, Diane's brows pinched as she said, "Oh?"

"In the three hundred years since the initial wave of seed stations were sent out, a good deal of them, including this one, have been subject to other sentient races attempting to move in and take control of the station. While they are never able to enter Ops with anything short of a Type 4 starship mounted tricobolt laser canon array, they have been able to access the non-staff and crew living spaces."

They began to approach what Diane presumed to be the primary access tunnel to the station proper. Presently standing open were two massive sliding doors that appeared to be able to close off the docking bay from the tunnel completely. She looked up and spotted what appeared to be a 'drop' door that was about three feet thick. *I wonder how the game designers rationalized a 'seed' station assembling that on its own with no foundry or refinery?* she thought as she walked. "So what you're saying is; we have squatters?"

"Correct," replied the hologram, "Please wait here, the car will arrive shortly."

As soon as Katrina said, 'Correct,' a subtle 'ba-ding' sound chimed in Diane's ear and an indicator light appeared in her vision. *What the...?* As the light, a gently white throb of a tiny blur, almost like the stories of a willow-the-whisp, pulsed in the corner of her sight, she turned to look, only for the light to remain locked on that spot on her vision. It took her a moment or two, but she realized this must be a notification. *I'm too used to notifications on my headset, I guess,* she thought, *Let's see if I've guessed correctly...*

She glanced around and confirmed that there was nobody else present except for Katrina's hologram and flicked her wrist, bringing up her HUD. Sure enough, a new notification was waiting for her to view it. She tapped it and a dialog popped up, followed by two more

notifications. "*New mission: Reclaim Your Station. Squatters have taken over parts of your station, you need to deal with them to establish full command and control.*" Huh, nice and brief...

She flicked to the next notification, which read, "*New Tree Added, Station Research.*" She noticed the words "Station Research" were a link, so she tapped that and was unsurprised to see a semi-transparent display of a 'tree' of nodes, each indicating different research available for, she presumed, running and maintaining her station. The entire tree was grayed out. She presumed as she unlocked the nodes it would fill with color and each node would likely provide some sort of boost or buff to her. She tapped on the bottom-most node, uncreatively labelled, '*Station Ownership*,' and there were apparently 20 levels the node could be leveled to. Fortunately, the requirements were listed right on the node. "*Complete the mission, 'Reclaim Your Station,' and 'Build the Ad Astra.'*"

'Ad Astra' was also a link, so she tapped it and was taken to a new part of her in-game HUD, displaying a series of ships that appeared to be different capabilities and power levels. For the space-lover who built models of ships in their spare time, this was like *catnip*. "Ooooh," she moaned, "Katrina, how quickly can we get started on ship building?"

If Diane didn't know better she'd swear she saw the corner of the hologram's mouth curl upward just a touch, "While the shipyard will have to be constructed to build a more advanced ship, such as those included with the blueprints provided by Earth in your ownership packet, the station can, with its current capabilities, build four basic ships. While we will need materials for three of them, we have everything on hand now to build the Ad Astra, a basic Explorer-class ship."

Diane couldn't *quite* keep her giggle contained, "Okay, so when can we get started on that?"

"Perhaps we should finish the tour first?" suggested the hologram.

Diane blushed lightly, "...right..."

Going back to her HUD, she brought up the last notification. "*New Tree Added: Ethics.*" And that was it. There was no explanation beyond that, just the link through the word, 'Ethics.' She tapped it and was greeted with a similar grayed out tree of nodes as the Station Research tree. This had, at it's base, a node that was named, "*WWCFD?*"

She understood the concept, of course. 'WWJD' and 'WWtSD' were ubiquitous phrases in America. 'What Would Jesus Do?' was often used in joking terms, such as having to decide between two dinner options, but it was originally intended to help people make conscientious choices that would lead them back to God, specifically when a more peaceful approach was called for. 'What Would the Second Do?' was much newer but often used with far more prevalence. It was invoked if there was a choice between sparing a potential enemy or acting in defense of The Body of God, the intent was you were supposed to make the choice that would guarantee the protection of The Body. If Jesus was the open hand of friendship to those who submitted themselves to God's will, the battle-ready fist of The Second was the might of God against His foes.

...so who is 'CF'?! she mulled with a frown. Tapping the node, she read, "*What Would Captain Freeman Do?*" her confusion skyrocketed, *Captain Freeman?! The Joke of the Rebellion Fleet?!*

Of the many (many) series and movies that had been produced over the years with the title of 'Star Trek,' none of them were quite so divisive as the two animated series. Simply because they were animated there was a contingent of the fandom that refused to accept them as canon lore. Of those who did accept them as part of all things Trek, it was an even split on whether *Star Trek: Snipe Hunt* was good Trek or bad trek. The series wasn't even about Captain Freeman, it was about her much more competent daughter who'd been busted down from Lieutenant to Ensign and assigned to her mother's ship. Freeman spent five seasons being the *least* qualified captain in the fleet and having her skin and reputation repeatedly saved by her daughter and the motley crew of lower decks team, or 'snipes,' she'd assembled.

How in the *galaxy* she was supposed to figure out something that would unlock this Ethics tree based on *Captain Freeman*, she had no idea.

Her musings were interrupted by Katrina, "Ah, there's the car now."

Diane looked up to see a golf cart-style electric vehicle approaching their position with a quiet hum. It stopped in front of her and, with a wave to dismiss her HUD, she climbed into the car. It started up on its own and turned around, heading back down the tunnel. As it was moving, Katrina manifested her hologram inside the car with Diane.

"As is the standard for Earth seed stations upon completing their primary phase of unmanned construction, your station has a central core that contains a construction deck, above which is the 'life' spaces. Beneath the deck is where the station's support systems are housed, including the primary and tertiary reactors, battery banks, waste materials processing, and other assorted functions that can mostly, if not entirely, be automated by non-sentient A.I., robots, and mechanical systems. Usually these systems require, at most, a sentient to inspect that they're operating properly once per Earth month." Diane noticed the light seemed to be getting brighter the further down the tunnel the drove, mostly from the proximity to the entry to the central core. Katrina continued, "Above the deck is where people, and by that I mean sentient beings, do most of their living, thus calling it the 'life space.' Presently the only building there is the Operations building which, of course, remains powered down and locked until you enter. The apartments for crew, visitors, staff, and the like are built into the inside of the 'shell' that covers the life space portion of the core. This is where the squatters currently reside, so it is unlikely that you will encounter them until you're ready."

"How many squatters are we talking about, here?" asked Diane.

"At this time, approximately 200 of the apartments are registered as occupied. Due to the difficulty the squatters have had opening new dwellings, they are rather tightly packed in."

"When did they get here?"

"The first squatters arrived approximately 150 Earth years ago. While none of the current batch of squatters..."

Diane's face twisted into a grimace, "Can we use a different term for them? We've said 'squatters' so much it's starting to sound like a fake word."

I swear she's smiling at that! thought Diane as Katrina continued, "While none of the current batch of *tenants* are descended from the original ship crew compliment that attempted to take over the station, there have been approximately five generations of unauthorized tenants living on this station since."

"So it's not like they have homes I can just send 'em back to..."

"Correct. Further complicating the matter is the missing starships," Katrina pointed out, "Several years ago a small...shall we say 'civil war' broke out among the tenants and a few of them took the last remaining ship and departed for destinations unknown. They have not been heard from since and are presumed lost. That ship *was* nearly 100 years old by that point and the knowledge of how to properly maintain it had been lost since."

Diane frowned, "So we've got a pack of, essentially, natives who are likely expecting to be evicted without transport or home."

Katrina remained silent at this.

Fortunately, the lull in conversation was interrupted by the car exiting the tunnel, finally allowing Diane to see the inside of her station. It was *massive*. She could have made ten copies of her flat's tower back in Houston and stacked them on top of each other and they *still* wouldn't reach the top of the containment dome!

I'm still in Houston, she thought with a touch of humor, *This is VR, no matter how immersive.*

Still, she marveled at the spaciousness of the place. Having grown up with the few stations the U.N. put in orbit in the aftermath of the war where space was limited, gravity was provided by the entire thing spinning like a wheel, and every single cubic inch had to be optimized, the cavernous life space of the station was downright decadent by any standard of her real life.

Curious, she held a hand over her eyes to block out the glare as she looked to the ceiling. She spotted the source of the artificial lighting that was bright enough to make the deck look like it was baking under the noonday sun in Texas, but couldn't make out any details without hurting her retina. She lowered her eyes to the black tarmac the vehicle was trundling over and asked, "What's the light source? It's...*intensely* bright."

"That would be the antimatter reactor."

Diane shot Katrina a startled glare, "...are you telling me there's a continuous antimatter explosion going on over our heads?!"

Katrina smiled, as though educating a child, "The antimatter is fed from a magnetic bottle into the reactor core one atom at a time. It just so happens that the reaction, which only 'explodes' enough to produce enough energy to power the oxygen reclamations, has a

significant amount of 'waste' radiation in the visible light spectrum. The designers of the seed stations realized they could use the 'waste' light to simulate a day-night cycle on the station."

She's mocking me...but that requires the advanced emotions of a rogue A.I., and she's not trying to drive me out of VR or kill me and she's given no indication of trying to phish for my IRL information...she can't be a rogue, can she? I must be imagining it... She shifted slightly so she could feel the somewhat comforting presence of the pistol on her back. "That's clever. So, what's all this intended for? Seems rather...industrial for a living space," she gestured across the expansive tarmac with clearly delineated zones meant for some form of construction but were currently empty.

"This section is intended for materials refining, processing, and storage. The synthesizers and 3D printers can only operate to build new ships and construction if there's enough raw materials to do so. In the basic blueprint loadout for these stations is a mining ship. You'll need to use your *Ad Astra* to gather the initial batches of raw materials to build your first mining craft, but after that you should only mine with Surveyor-class ships."

The car was now approaching what would, in nature, be a cliff. It stretched from one side of the station to the other and went up a height of about four stories. It was plenty accessible; she could see stairs and lifts built into the structure and the car was turning up a vehicle-ready ramp to take them to the upper level. "What's with the...cliff?"

"That is intended to keep the industrial deck separated from the command deck. While emissions in general are managed by scrubbers for both the individual buildings as well as the station, dust and debris that are generated from the refinement and processing of materials can still spread without some sort of barrier. Rather than building a wall, the deck is split so airflow 'falls' off the command deck, utilizing air pressure instead of infrastructure to contain airborne particles. It is imperfect, but a perfect system does not exist."

She nodded in appreciation, "That's reassuringly competent de...sign...whoah!" As she had been speaking, the car crested the ramp it had been climbing and she saw the command deck.

The name did NOT do it justice! Only about 40% of the 'deck' was a solid, flat surface. There was a single building slightly off-center, which she presumed to be the Operations building, and there were platforms similar to the defined spaces on the industrial deck to indicate where future buildings would go, but they were scattered across a *lake* that spanned almost half the command deck. She couldn't see details, but there were definitely patches of greenery all over the place, aesthetically laid out so as to be a comforting reminder of life on a planet.

"In...incredible! And brilliant! The water...not only does life need water but it can function as a heat sink for reactors...and it can help regulate the atmosphere...and the plants probably provide some of the oxygen production and air scrubbing..." she turned to Katrina, only then realizing she had stood up in the car and was leaning over the front console in excitement. "Is the lake a biome?"

Katrina gave an indulgent nod, like a teacher giving approval to a student, "It is. The reactors, as you guessed, dump their heat into the water. Some extremophile organisms were harvested from Earth's oceans and placed in suspension aboard the seed ships. They process a lot of oxygen that leaches through the water and into the atmosphere aboard the station. The most

complex organisms in the water are krill. The climate systems monitor the population of krill and release robots to harvest them for animal protein that is used in the food synthesizers." She pointed to a particularly large patch of green just barely visible on the other side of the Ops building, "That's the large-scale farming section. Some specialty crops are grown there, such as potatoes to provide starch, which is easier to grow than to synthesize. Most of it is soy. Some of the soy is used for soy products, but most is taken to the food synthesizers for processing into more diverse foods. The rest is dedicated to multicrop farming to produce the nutrients needed for the food that is made by the synthesizers."

Wow! That makes a bit more sense than replicators! If only this were real... She sat back with a smile, "Clearly the designers of this station put a lot of thought into it."

"Indeed, they did," said Katrina as the car turned onto a ramp that would take them to the Ops building.

As Diane approached the Ops building, she realized that she'd have an audience for her official activation of the facility. "Katrina," she said in a low tone as the car pulled to a stop in a marked space, "Who's this?"

Katrina disappeared from inside the car and reappeared on Diane's side as she stepped out of the vehicle. "Norma Grice, third generation tenant, human. Father was killed by a raiding party when she was a toddler, mother died of illness two years ago. She's become something of a leader among the tenants. She's been...*annoying*." Diane cast another suspicious glance at the remarkably human-behaving 'digital assistant,' but chalked it up to a programmed humanism. "Before the tenants lost contact with people outside the station, she made efforts to recruit a hacker or two in order to defeat my encryption lockouts." Now Diane could swear Katrina looked *smug*, "Naturally, they were unable to get through even the first defensive firewalls."

As they walked (well, *Diane* walked, Katrina merely floated along beside her) up to the main entrance of the Ops building, Diane took in the appearance of the new woman. *Probably not a player, but can't be sure...could be a rogue, but if she's a 'generational' NPC most likely not.* The woman was short, though not to any sort of extreme. Her dirty blond/light brown hair was probably as well managed as could be given the circumstances of her upbringing. It was cut short, but attempts had been made to manage it into some sort of style with some hinting of spikes and waves throughout, but whatever she had been using as a soap had done a number on her follicles. The hair resembled sun-damaged straw. She was surprisingly plump. "Katrina," she subvocalized, "She looks very well fed for someone who's essentially a homeless refugee."

"The tenants have access to the emergency systems in the residential apartments. The synthesizers are programmed to provide any food requested by any individual identified by biometric scans up to the system calculated suggested caloric intake."

Diane nodded, stopping a few feet away from Norma, feeling somewhat guilty standing there in brand new, practically designer clothes. What this other woman was wearing was *generously* called 'hand me down.' None of it fit. At all. What wasn't too tight (the pants) was

so baggy as to appear to be mimicking a tent. The shoes appeared to have been soled with deck plating.

"So," sneered the self-appointed representative of the 'tenants,' "You're the new landlord?"

Well now I just feel dirty, thought Diane. "I'm the new owner of this station. How did you figure that out?"

Norma gestured with a thumb over her shoulder to the inside wall of the station, "We're living right on the skin of the station. We saw the shuttle approaching. That's a big deal, almost no ships bother to dock here anymore."

"I see," Diane rumbled. *I...didn't mean to do that*. Her voice had come out in her normal tone, but it was accompanied by a deep base growl. At the unconscious display of dominance, Norma's scowl deepened and she straightened her spine. A small part of Diane almost wanted to purr in anticipation of a good fight. Her megafauna-predator-descendant body seemed to be pleased that this woman was so eager to square up. "I have some business to take care of before we can discuss this further. As soon as I actually find my office and properly activate Operations for the station, we'll talk."

Turning to Katrina and away from Norma in an obvious gesture of dismissal, she said, "So how do we go about doing this? Is there a keycard or retinal scanner or...?"

They both ignored Norma's irritated 'hey!' as Katrina answered, "Nothing quite so crude. Your complete biometric profile has already been loaded into the computers across the station. The security scanners in the door will open to you right now."

In a display of sheer vexatious spite, Norma reached for the handle of the entrance door and tugged. The glass-like material flexed slightly, but the door didn't open.

Diane closed the distance between them and put one hand on her hip and rested the other on the door handle. This close their height difference was stark, Norma's eyeline was right about at Diane's breasts. Rather than looking at said assets, the shorter woman just glared up at the amazon. Diane just stared back, waiting patiently until finally Norma huffed a breath and dropped her hand in a fist at her side.

Diane pulled the door open, stepped back a little and gestured chivalrously, "After you."

Norma blushed and stomped into the building, Diane stifling a chuckle as she followed.

Master and Commander | Doing Good vs Doing Well

Chapter Summary

Diane faces two choices; playing it safe for herself and possibly making some people homeless or taking a risk with no clear reward?

Chapter Notes

Just a hair under my goal of 4k per chapter. A surprising amount of research went into this, I mean like you wouldn't believe! Just looking up inspirational art for the ships was a task (and...just...don't ask an A.I. to give you ideas. Epic...fail!) took several hours to find a design that I liked.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The activation and claim process turned out to be a touch anticlimactic. Katrina guided her to the top floor of the Ops building to the actual main Operations Hub and gave her a brief tour of the facility. Most of the stations were command consoles for functions and facilities to the station that hadn't been built yet, so there were only two really useful consoles in the room; the Inventory status console and Station Status console. Both were fully operational and, apparently, had been for the last 200 years or so since the station's automated building protocols had completed the core.

The inventory was surprisingly well stocked, but not by much of significant value. The station's automated bots and systems were programmed to periodically deploy out into the system and retrieve any material the sensors deemed needed for basic construction...but without a refining facility the useable material was extremely low grade. As she learned of this, Diane got a new notification that proved to be about a "Construction" tree and a new task list along side her mission list. It was already populated with "*Build the Ad Astra*," but now also had, "*Build Refinery*." Curious, she tapped the 'Refinery' link and almost uttered a curse that the still-tagging-along Norma would have found odd, since she couldn't see Diane's HUD as an NPC. The link took her to the Construction tree and the node for the Refinery...which had thirteen links to other building nodes on the Construction tree and links to a *new* tree called "Research."

I'll have to build...gawd, a second dock, a building for...astronautics? Well, I guess that makes sense. Gotta have someone to tell you where to find the stuff you're refining. ...there's plans for an entire R&D Department?! She skipped past the buildings and checked out the new Research tree. Way down at the bottom was a single node, "*Construction Speed*." Between

that and the, "*Refinery Technologies*," node were *ten* more research nodes that needed to be unlocked.

...there's going to be more desk work for this game than I thought... she pondered as Katrina led her to a pair of sliding glass doors near the back of the Ops room.

"This," the tutorial program inadvertently distracted Diane from her study of the game's trees, "Is your office."

Diane chuckled, "...there are many like it, but this one's mine."

The response was a pair of twinned confused looks from both the NPC and the tutorial program.

"...never mind," muttered Diane as she rounded the desk and moved the *very* nice and expensive-looking desk chair back, "So is this as straight-forward as the door or do I need to do something specific to activate Ops?"

"Simply instruct the computer to activate the building. It is actively scanning your biometrics the entire time you're on the station to it has already identified you," explained Katrina, "All that remains is the specific command."

Diane shrugged, "Computer, activate the Operations building, please."

There was the sudden sensation of an almost imperceptible hum as every light, HVAC system, computer, and electrically powered accessory in the building received power all at once. The lights in the office and main Ops room which had been on standby suddenly bloomed with a cool blue light that was bright enough to drive away most shadow but not so bright as to make it difficult to see. Dark paneling that Diane had assumed was simply an interior design choice flickered to life to reveal that they were huge displays that wrapped seamlessly around the entire office that wasn't a door or window. Startup routines could be seen scrolling up all the displays and, when she looked down, she saw the same was happening on the surface of her desk. Momentarily, a holographic computer interface bloomed to life where she would expect a desktop monitor if she were at an office back ho...er, *outside the pod*, and a very pleasantly ergonomic keyboard rezzed into place. *Oh, nice! I hate touch interfaces for typing, let's see if...* She reached out and tapped a few keys experimentally and, yes, they had the familiar spring-lock feel she preferred in her keyboards.

She smiled and looked up at Katrina, "So, Ops is activated, do we need to wait on anything else to get started with building a ship?"

Katrina raised an eyebrow, almost incredulously, "...no, though I imagine dealing with the squ..." the digital assistant glanced at Norma meaningfully, who for her part just huffed indignantly, "*Tenants* would take priority."

"Is getting the ship started going to require more effort than activating Ops?"

"...no..."

Diane smirked, "Computer, begin construction on the *Ad Astra* based on the available blueprints in station memory."

One of the wall-displays that had completed its boot-sequence and was on a pleasant screensaver mode flicked over to a visual of a wireframe of a spaceship. It appeared to be a fairly small craft, though obviously intended for long-haul exploration. Callouts appeared for crew quarters, a mess hall, waste recycling, fuel storage, and everything else one might expect of a small expeditionary vessel. The exterior design seemed based on a modified Straczynski-esque craft. Instead of a squat pod that held life-support and an ejectable cockpit, the main body of the ship was somewhat shaped like a ground-transport cargo vehicle, as though someone had taken a semi-truck and attached trailer, fused them into a single piece, modified the front so it looked like a fat sports car, spiffed it up to look like it belonged in space, and then made it big enough to house three to five people and everything they needed to live for long periods of time in the void of space. Attached at the corners starting about one-third of the way back from the nose of the ship were squat 'wings' that would never keep the ship in the air in atmosphere. They were in a vague 'X' configuration, which would allow for creative use of thrust from the nacelles positioned at the ends of the wings to allow for crazy-fast turns. The nacelles looked like they provided all the thrust to the ship, as well as maneuvering. *It's no Conquistador-class*, Diane thought with a smile, *But it does look like a sleek little ship*. The display popped up with a status bar that was familiar to anyone who had used a computer in the last century and ticked up to the 1% mark after a moment.

"Awesome!" remarked Diane, "So, Katrina, any other immediate tasks? Activating anything else necessary right now?"

"Dealing with the highly annoying tenants?" offered Katrina.

"Oi! *You're the* one who's been sitting on the ability to build a *starship* the whole time I've been trying to deal with the little *housing crisis* in the residential habs!" snapped Norma.

Katrina glared, for all a tutorial program *could* glare, at the woman, "You are *not* authorized users of this system. Had your predecessors left this station as they should have then there wouldn't *be* a 'housing crisis' in the residential habs."

"Alright, that's enough," said Diane, "Katrina, could you give us the room, please?"

"What?!" the hologram seemed surprised, then collected herself so quickly Diane wondered if she was seeing things, "But...security protocols..."

Diane waved a hand dismissively, "'Security protocols' I'm not familiar with and, since I'm the fiat commander of this station, don't apply to me if I say so."

"I really should remain present as a precaution in case she..."

Diane huffed, "She's, what, four feet tall?"

"Five-foot-one!" Norma growled.

"Meanwhile I'm a six-foot-one..."

"Six feet, *nine* inches," interrupted Katrina with a significant glare at Norma.

"Sure, that; and I'm an *apex predator* species, I *think* I'm more than capable of taking her in a fight if it comes down to it. Besides, you're a hologram, you can monitor the office via the security systems, right?"

"...yes."

"Well then, you can give us the *illusion* of privacy for this conversation and at least take your physical presence out of the room so you stop antagonizing the person I'm trying to..." she glanced at Norma, who'd set her jaw stubbornly, "...have a conversation with."

Whoever on the dev team programmed the personality of the tutorial program did a damn fine job of making them appear to have emotion as Katrina gave every impression of being hesitant to concede the point as she said, "...very well. If she...causes problems, simply eject her from the office and I'll seal the doors and flood the Ops command level with a neurotoxin."

Diane frowned, "A *non-lethal* neurotoxin, right?"

Katrina seemed to be refusing to meet Diane's eyes as she started disappearing from the room, "Sure, sure. Non-lethal." And with that, she was no longer in the room.

Diane allowed a small smile to quirk as she started removing her jacket. Part of it was comfort, part of it was a test. She was deliberately exposing the weapon stuck to her back to Norma. If the woman noticed it, she was either a human player who, for whatever reason, had chosen to take charge of a band of galactic nomads and homeless people, or was a rogue A.I. who was using the cover of being a refuge on an unclaimed station to hide from hunters such as herself. She turned just enough to drape the jacket over the back of her office chair, watching Norma out of the corner of her eye.

No response...let's see if she's just faking... As though reaching back to scratch an itch, she palmed the grip of the weapon while using her thumb to "scratch" the nonexistent itchy spot then casually pushed the weapon against her thigh, making it plainly visible as it adhered to her leg like it had her back.

Norma gave no response whatsoever, just sitting down in one of the chairs obviously intended for visitors to the office.

All right, Diane thought as she took her own seat, *She's just an NPC A.I., so no threat here*, "So," she began, "Not to seem like the bad guy, but I this *is* my station. I get that some of you were born here, but this isn't 20th century America with a liberal policy that allows illegals to drop a kid and claim backdoor citizenship."

"... 'America'...?" Norma said the name of Diane's home with stark unfamiliarity.

Stifling the frustration that the game creators didn't bother to give America it's proper place in history, she simply said, "A country on Earth, predates the period of space exploration and contact with life on other worlds. Point is, I *am* the law here. It's *my* life and safety on the line

if I let the lot of you stay and someone turns out to be a bad actor. I'm *quite* invested in keeping the skin on my back *on my back*."

Norma simply glared back at the newly minted station commander.

"What I'm saying," said Diane into the silence, "Is you will need to sell me on letting you all stay here. As you pointed out, I've got a starship under construction," she glanced at the wall display, Norma mimicking her, and they saw the build progress was now at 2%. "I won't even need to space you all. I can build a...let's see here..." she turned to her holographic display and started tapping menus and was pleased to see it was fairly easy to navigate. She found the computer's storage of ship blueprints and filtered out what the station didn't have the capability to build yet, then tapped and flicked the plans over to a wall display. "I could build one of these," the display lit up with a wireframe of another starship, but this was *not* something sleek and intended for exploration like the *Ad Astra*, this was a box with an engine strapped to it. The 'ship' part was what looked for all the world like a glorified camper van scaled up to house everything necessary to support a barebones crew, in-system flight, and FTL. Attached to *that* was a comparative behemoth of a cargo container, obviously intended to be modular and detachable. The name attached to the blueprint read, 'ECC Goldrush.'

"Obviously, we'd have to mod the cargo container, those things are designed to haul materials, not people, and it wouldn't be comfortable. We probably wouldn't be able to kit it for gravity and atmosphere control would be...problematic. It would take who knows how long to get to a friendly port..." a notification popped up on her holographic display, blinking a furious red. Her eyebrows scrunched together, she tapped on the notification and saw a message: Katrina - "8 days to nearest Terran Federation station."

"Katrina, at least *pretend* this is a private meeting, please..." she muttered, then to Norma said, "About eight days, I guess, to the nearest friendly port."

The space-born woman frowned at the schematic for the surveyor ship on the wall, her face no longer a mask of anger but now showing muted concern. "I...know some of us would take you up on that. The people who came here on ships that abandoned them, people who had homes and want to go back to them...but," she turned a pleading look to Diane, "I...I was born here, this is the only home I know!"

So much for the easy solution, Diane thought. She leaned back in her chair and drummed her fingers on the arm rest, letting the silence linger.

Norma glanced around the office, clearly trying not to look at Diane directly. "This...doesn't look like I imagined." Diane's eyebrows went up, somewhat befuddled by the seeming non-sequitur. Norma continued, "My parents...well, my mom was born here, too. Living as, basically, refugees is a rough life, but it made us stronger, you know? My dad came in on a ship and stayed when he fell in love with my mom, we'd talk about what we'd do with the station if we could ever just crack the computer...didn't know it had a freaking A.I. keeping us out, of course. It wasn't until I brought in hackers that *she* bothered to show herself." Memories were playing in the movie theater behind Norma's eyes, Diane could see that much. A thought drifted up from her unconscious mind reminding her this was a generated character in a game, though she dismissed it. Such thoughts wouldn't help her solve the problem.

Norma kept going, "When my folks...died," she took a breath, letting her eyes rest on the window behind Diane, one that looked out over the nutrient farms filled with soy plants. "When they died, I was...kind of all that was left for leadership. I guess mom had become something of a...I dunno, unelected governor or something. When she passed people kept coming to our apartment to get their problems solved, and I just couldn't turn them away, they're *my people*." This last part came out in a firm tone as Norma's attention and focus returned to Diane with a vengeance, "And I'll be *spaced* if some rich upstart from Earth shows up and evicts us all because some centuries old program licks their boots!"

The part of Diane that had surged with excitement at the spitfire that had confronted her at the Ops main entrance practically purred at the display of spine. *Wow, she thought, Kinda hot, kinda cute. A bit like a kitten that's convinced it can take down a full grown human, but wrapped up in a sturdy, no-nonsense package of a woman.* She let a small smile turn the corners of her lips up as she leaned forward. "Let's clarify a few things, here." She cast her mind back to when she was in character creation and reading the history of the galaxy in the game, specifically how The Lost Generation was being managed by the Terran Federation.

"I'm a war orphan, and further, not human." She opened her mouth in a reptilian smile and let her extremely long tongue snake out through her fangs. Other than a raised eyebrow, Norma didn't react to the inhuman features. Diane retracted her tongue, fortunately without any slightly embarrassing sounds. "I'm a Morvuck, and we're descended from what Earth people call 'dinosaurs.' Morvucks have a name for them, yeah, but humans seem to recognize 'dinosaurs' even if they don't know, specifically, what Mortan's megafauna look like. I didn't grow up there, sure, but I *was* given all the knowledge Earth databases had about my people. What I *did* grow up as was poor, and a refugee. I don't have bags of money hanging out on a ship somewhere ready to pay off some mercs to come in and sweep the place clean, I have a 'get out of the system free' card that came with being a war orphan. Earth has too many of these stations still floating around unclaimed and not enough people to spare and go take them over. They also have a whole flock of kids like me they're trying to get off government assistance, so they're giving us these stations and making us Not Their Problem. In other words," she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk and folding her hands, "This is now my only home, too."

Norma sagged back in her chair, the bulky flight suit jacket that Diane now suspected of once belonging to her father almost swallowing the smaller woman's torso. She glared at Diane without heat, "That...I wanted that chair, you know."

Diane smiled softly, "Yeah, well, I want my parents, just like I suspect you do, too."

That, at least, wasn't a lie in the slightest. She wanted her folks in ways that hurt to think about sometimes. She missed her dad, but she'd 'lost' him years before he took his own life. After her mom died he rarely showed the kind of life and drive he'd had before the cancer, so for her she'd had a chance to let go of him emotionally even before he actually passed instead of being a walking memorial to his wife.

Her mom, though...

"Watch, Dy," she said, using the shortened name she'd created for him sometime before he could talk, "See how Mariner is practically falling over herself trying to be like Captain

Kirk?"

Young Dylan wasn't quite sure what she meant, but he nodded anyway.

She was clearly aware he wasn't quite up to comprehending, being only seven. Some of the other parents at church had been shocked when mom admitted she let her child watch Snipe Hunt, which was filled with some rather filthy language and adult humor. "Mariner's mom understands the trick of this here, she knows that the Rebellion could be vulnerable if she makes a deal with the Breen, nobody's even seen them without their helmets, after all. How do you trust someone like that? But Captain Freeman knows that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar."

They watched as, in as comedic a way possible, Mariner's attempt to eliminate the Breen 'threat' was neatly diffused by Captain Freeman and played off as a 'demonstration' of how effective the Rebellion could be in simply eradicating the Breen, who were already hard pressed by the Klingon-Cardasian Alliance. The accord between the Rebellion and the Breen wouldn't result in the allies the Rebellion needed, but it at least kept the Breen from joining the Alliance.

"I don't get it," said Dylan, "Mariner was right, the Rebellion didn't need the Breen to win, they would have been better off not even trying to make contact. What was the point of the whole thing?"

Mom had simply smiled down, "Dy, sometimes you do the right thing because it's the right thing, not because you get some benefit out of it."

Diane blinked the memory away, Now why did I think of that right now...? Her mind flashed back to that root node of the Ethics tree in her in-game HUD, WWCFD? "What would Captain Freeman do?" Well, something horribly counterintuitive to protecting your back and saving your own ass...

*The silence in the room wasn't a comfortable one, but it also didn't want to be broken. As she saw the build progress for the *Ad Astra* tick up to 3% in the corner of her eye, she pondered the woman in the seat across from her. *Her mom was a governor without a town, huh? And the people here trust Norma as though she were the one in charge...well, maybe...**

"Tell you what," she said abruptly, "No matter what happens, for the near future your people don't need to be crammed into just a few apartments. This station can house thousands of people, you've got, what, four hundred? Five hundred?"

"Eight-hundred and seventy-two," replied Norma grimly.

Diane whistled, "Over eight-hundred people crammed into two-hundred apartments? Let's see about spreading them out a bit. And I'm hungry, let's take a look at those food processors and see about some food."

Norma was taken aback, "...wait, what?!" She scrambled to her feet as Diane stood.

Diane shifted the weapon from her thigh to her back in a smooth motion just before grabbing her jacket off the back of the chair. "Your people need a good night's sleep and some food and some options. I need someone who can handle people while I run the station and, hell, I'll need a crew. It seems like we've got a solution here."

"You're...letting us stay?!" Norma blurted incredulously as Diane started to the double-doors.

As the doors slid open she said over her shoulder, "Only the ones that want to stay, obviously. Your people have been here a lot longer than I have, I've got access to all the systems and we'll be building things out here for even more capacity. I say we work together."

Katrina appeared next to her as she exited the office, "Your solution to the problem with squatters is to invite them to stay?"

Diane nodded as she walked past Katrina, who floated along beside to keep up, "You said it yourself, you have some systems that need actual people to at least check, and we'll need people to man all these stations. We have a supply of people already here and ready to go."

Norma scrambled to keep up, "...I don't get it, why aren't you just throwing us off the station? You could just as easily get a crew that you've personally vetted and jumps when you say so."

Diane smiled softly as they headed for the lifts that would take them to the first floor of the building. She was quiet for a moment, then said, "...sometimes you do what's right because it's the right thing to do."

As she stopped in front of the doors to the lift, she noticed a notification for her in-game HUD that she'd completely missed whenever it had popped up. Curious, she subtly flicked her wrist to bring up the HUD, then used the eye tracking to 'tap' the notification.

Ethics Node Unlocked: "WWCFD?" – New Ethics Nodes Available."

Smiling in private victory, she dismissed the HUD as the doors to the lift opened.

Chapter End Notes

Working on a link page for people to find my other stuff. Watch this space in future chapters.

Master and Commander | The Nose Knows

Chapter Summary

The first major hurdle has been crossed, but a new problem sends Diane off on a mission to the homeworld of her character.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Diane had heard of 'nice guys' and "Nice Guys," but this was the first time she'd met a guy who was so nice he seemed too good for this world.

"Oh...my...gosh! You're a Morvuck!"

Diane had to struggle to keep from laughing at the enthusiasm, "...I am..."

"I heard the dinosaurs never died out on your world, is that true?" the man's question might have been somewhat insulting if he weren't so clearly earnest about asking it.

"Well, they aren't 'dinosaurs,' strictly speaking. They're dinosaur-like megafauna. Distant cousins to my species, from what I understand," she took a sip of her Jyantín Tonic...or what the station could synthesize of the stuff, which based on her trial run during the character creation process wasn't nearly as good as the real thing. It was good *enough*, though, that she kept drinking even after the slight disappointment. "The megafauna that exist are more like...alligators, I guess. Fully reptilian, no bird or mammalian features whatsoever, though there's obviously some features in common between them, us humanoids, and the avians. Morvuck birds developed a lot like they did on Earth, megafauna developing feathers and then evolving smaller and smaller until they're...well, I guess on Mortán they're a *lot* bigger than on Earth, probably feed a whole football stadium on one thanksgiving bird." She smirked as his eyes lit with childlike wonder.

"Do you think," groused Norma with fond exasperation, "That we could *eat* at this, our *lunch*?"

"Oh, right!" Russe snatched up his fork and speared it into the spaghetti on his plate. Like everything else made by the station's synthesizers, it was good but not *great*. Diane was dutifully eating all of hers if for no other reason that her body needed the calories and proteins. The day before yesterday she'd nearly collapsed and, upon dragging herself to the med bay in the lower levels of the Ops building, it was determined that she hadn't been consuming *nearly* enough calories.

Katrina had read her the riot act, informing her soundly that even if she'd been raised on Earth that didn't excuse her from taking care of herself. Reading between the lines of the

tirade, Diane had figured out that the average Morvuck needed approximately three times the caloric load as the average human and twice the protein. She'd been wondering why she was so hungry when she'd been eating as much as she normally did, but then different bodies (even if virtual) meant different needs.

Katrina *then* asked when the last time she'd seen a gynecologist was, and when Diane had truthfully answered, "Never," the digital assistant railed against the state of modern medicine and idiot bureaucrats who didn't know how to properly care for orphan girls and proceeded to have the medical drones give Diane a full workup for her female anatomy.

Diane had, honestly, felt...odd about it. While some of her discomfiture was due to the act of clinical probing that the med bot had done, the majority of it came from the humiliation she felt, not at being a man and having a woman's procedure done, but from feeling *good* about a procedure only being done with *actual* women being done to her, it being for good reason (her virtual body *did* have all the proper parts *and* this world was designed to mimic real-world conditions, including the possibility of certain afflictions that women, specifically, had to worry about), and that someone, even if they were just a training hologram inside a VR game, was taking her feminine appearance at face value enough to treat her like any other woman.

Barely making it back to her quarters in time, she'd had another breakdown like she'd experienced in the character creation process. Just as confused as ever, she found herself questioning everything about herself, her life, and how she got into this position. Had she not committed to herself no fewer than three times now that no matter what she was going to complete the mission she'd been given, she'd have hit the emergency log-out option in that moment.

How are other players not experiencing this?! The thought rang through her repeatedly as she bawled into her pillow, once again having so many *positive* emotions that she had no way of processing them until they came out in ways that she'd normally have associated with severe distress.

She considered looking it up online. The time compression may have been a factor as it would appear almost static to her, but the Internet was still available. She would, in fact, have even *greater* access to the Internet than inside the wall (even though she was, technically, still inside it herself) since nothing like the American Firewall was between her and accessing all that data. She could even, she had realized, utilize the FTLN, the part of the Internet that existed due to the specialized nodes that were installed in the hardware that was developed in the non-American world.

But what, exactly, would she look up? "I'm feeling so good about being in an alien body that I'm barely able to keep the emotions contained and it's terrifying me"? She was, unfortunately, at a loss and completely alone. *That* would then spiral her into an existential depression. She knew those symptoms; she'd had them enough after the death of her mother that she'd needed to see a shrink for it. He'd given her the tools necessary to manage the depression, which was what she was doing now.

One of those tools was to find people, preferably friends, to remind herself that there are others in the world who have interest in her.

While the in-game A.I. weren't able to be actual friends, any more than an overeager puppy, they would certainly do.

And speaking of overeager puppies, Russe bolted the last bites of his spaghetti and choked it down with a glass of water. Having completed his lunch, however hastily, he took a deep breath, "So is it true that there are dinosaurs in *enclosures* and you can actually *pet them* on Mortan?"

"No idea," she said with a grin, "Never been." Norma apparently picked up on what Diane was up to because the woman snorted in laughter around a bite of pasta, grabbing her own water to wash the bite down before she choked on it.

"You've never been to one of the enclosures?" Russe's voice almost squeaked in incredulity at the notion of someone having access to 'dinosaurs' but not take advantage of it.

She delivered her highest quality smirk across the table, "No, I've never been to Mortan. I was raised on Earth."

Russe's face turned simultaneously crimson and stricken, and Norma burst out laughing, throwing her head back and clutching her arms around her belly, "Oh, my gosh! Your face! This is why I wanted you to have lunch with us today, I *had* to see how you'd react to the commander!"

Norma's appearance had improved quite a bit over the last week. Access (*proper* access) to the fabrication facility meant she could get clothes that fit properly, including a nice blouse made of a shimmery fabric that shifted colors in a rainbow of pastels and a utilitarian pair of cargo pants. It seemed she couldn't let go of the habit of wearing something heavy and capable of delivering a kick, as she'd opted for a pair of steel-toed boots. The only part of her old outfit that she'd kept was her old flight suit jacket, and even that had been laundered and mended by the station's robotic facilities.

Russe's appearance prior to Diane's arrival to the station and subsequent unlocking of the facilities for the tenants was something she didn't know, but he'd shown up to lunch wearing a very casual t-shirt and jeans combo, a clothing style that hadn't ever really fallen out of everyday fashion since first being introduced to the world by mid-20th century America. Given that this gentleman was a hacker that Norma had initially hired to try and break into Katrina's systems and hadn't left even when it was obvious that it would be an impossible task and no payment would be forthcoming told Diane one thing; he was smitten with Norma.

There were other signs, of course. Norma was *constantly* talking about how Russe would do random tasks around the station for her, bring her items he thought she might want for some project or another she'd mentioned working on, and often standing by her as she worked with the tenants to address the problems of the day.

It was the tiny smile on Norma's lips while she recited Russe's antics with exasperated fondness that told Diane that the feelings went both ways.

They were presently in the mess hall, which had been built almost as soon as the station had the capacity to do so. There were simply too many people for the food synthesizers to keep up with now that they were off emergency status. Besides, they had to be ready for the station to have a population of thousands, and the crew and support staff, which a good chunk of the tenants had chosen to become, were going to need their own place to get their grub that wasn't going to be (hopefully) chock-a-block with visitors to the station.

Diane languidly twirled a forkful of spaghetti, "It's not my fault you didn't ask where I came from."

Russe smiled bashfully and nodded, "Yeah, that's fair. Sorry 'bout that."

Diane was just about to reply when a page came over the P.A. system, "Ops to Commander Somni'els, please report to Ops for an incoming transmission."

The mentioned commander sighed, "Duty calls," she said as she shoved an oversized forkful of pasta into her mouth and grabbed her plate and water as she stood.

To her surprise, her table-mates stood with her, Norma grabbing up the remaining dishes as they headed to the exit. At Diane's inquisitive look, Norma replied, "If it's a call for you it's something that affects the whole station. That means the governor *you* appointed should be there to learn whatever it is sooner rather than later."

And, of course, Diane knew Russe would be right behind wherever Norma went. She slugged back some water to wash down the food in her mouth and handed the cup to Russe, "Hold that," she breathed, then as she scooped another forkful of pasta she said to Norma, "Solid thinking, that'll certainly prevent the old 'telephone game' from happening."

The two station dwellers shared a confused look, "The *what* game?" blurted Russe.

Diane rolled her eyes, "I'll explain later," she said just before filling her mouth again.

Having finished her plate of calories by the time they made it to Ops, she wiped her mouth with the napkin Norma provided (really, the woman was almost disgustingly competent and helpful) and entered the main Ops deck with a commanding stride, "Commander reporting, is the transmission still holding?"

"Yes ma'am," replied a teenager who'd proven just gifted enough with the comms system that the duty was falling to her until they could sort out actual duty rosters. "Should I put them on the main screen?" The girl, *Sandy? No, Cynthia! Cynthia Rodre*, nodded in the direction of the large floor to ceiling panel that Diane had mistaken for a window when she'd first toured the place.

"No, thank you Miss Rodre, not sure what the sensitivity of this is or anything, I'll take it in my office." She turned and handed her plate to Russe and took what was left of her water from him, "Can we get someone to run that back down to the mess hall? I don't want to leave it somewhere and forget about it and develop a new life form on our *very large* space station."

Russe gave a cocky salute, "On it, boss lady!" He then took off back to the lifts as Diane entered her office, smiling wryly.

"You know, you should probably make it official between the two of you, he's not a bad catch and I'm sure *someone* would like to pin him down in a relationship," mused Diane as she sat at her desk and brought up her holographic display.

"What?!" blurted Norma with a blush, "But...we're not...that's not...!"

Diane just snickered as she flicked the 'incoming transmission' notification to one of the wall displays and turned to face it, "This is Commander Diane Somni'els," realizing she hadn't yet named her station, she left the introduction hanging.

The slight awkwardness didn't seem to perturb the man calling in. He was, from appearances, in his early thirties if she were to take a guess. He had short cropped black hair that had just a tinge of dark red flecking his sideburns. He was otherwise clean shaven and this aided to show off his beaming, eager smile. "Ah, commander!" he said in a distinctly accented voice. *Irish? Scottish? Not familiar enough with the accents...maybe Welsh, made that mistake once too often*, "Good t'see you again! Not that you'd likely remember, I was on the review board for your candidacy to take ownership of one of the seed stations."

Grateful that the game had given her an 'out' on recognizing this gentleman, she nodded with a vague smile, "You'd be right, I'm afraid I don't remember you."

"That's alright, lass! Y'were busy that day and you've had yer hands full since unless I miss my guess. M'name's Daffyd, though a lot of people off-world find it easier to say 'Dave.' And who's this?" the man's eyes went to Norma.

"Thank you, Daffyd, my own last name can be quite a handful, so I'll do you the courtesy of at least making the attempt at a correct pronunciation. This would be Governor Norma Grice. She's been gracious enough to take on the day -to-day tasks of handling the non-crew, non-administrative tasks required for dealing with a population of people on a station this large. Or, at least, hopefully we'll have that large a population. It's still early days, after all." She replied with a wan smile.

He nodded at Norma and turned back to Diane, "Already delegating; already off to a good start, commander!" he stepped back from the camera a bit and they could see the room he was in. It appeared to be a sort of laboratory/engineering space. Mostly dark but with bright lighting on stands and mounted to the wall to shine on a specific project or task. He stepped aside slightly to show what looked to Diane's eye to be a stack of flat crystals, each about the size of an index card and about as thick as a smartphone, strapped together with what looked a little like American 3D wafer storage circuitry...if you squinted and tilted your head. Honestly she couldn't tell what it was and her mind seemed to be trying to make connections to concepts she knew about, "Speaking of starting, you *happen* to be the newest station owner with a freshly activated Ops of all the currently active seed stations, which is what we need right now. In fact, do you have your digital assistant handy? According to the old colonial computers the logs show her coming online last week."

Katrina rezzed into being in the office, "I'm here, Mister Daffyd."

"Please, m'dear, just Daffyd. No need for 'mister' with me, but if it's a last name y'need, Winchester will do."

Diane's eyebrows went up, "'Winchester,' as in the gun family?"

Daffyd chuckled, "At least yer not askin' about werewolves and where I keep my salt. But back t'business! This here," he indicated the crystal matrix, "Is a little solution we've come up with on Earth for a problem our seed stations have been having for some time, specifically with the digital assistants."

Katrina actually seemed to be a little worried at the idea that there may be a problem with her, specifically, "What problem is that?"

"Oh, lass, don't you be worrying yourself. You're too recently activated for the problems to show up with you. It starts happening after activation. See, the early programmers of the assistants back in the day didn't really have as good a grasp as we do today on how digital beings learn and adapt to their environment. As long as you have the station all to yourself and the only job you have is building it and getting it ready for habitation, you're fine. But when your programming acknowledges a station owner, it starts to, well...logjam, for lack of a better term."

Diane's head tilted, "'Logjam'? You're going to have to explain that."

"Aye, basically she'll get conflicting directives built up in her buffers. That's, of course, *horribly* oversimplifying things, but the end result is she'll simply...stop learning. Basically, she'll enter a locked memory state where she can't even notice the passage of time because that's require she remember that time has passed. She'll do alright in managing the basic operation of the automated systems of the station, but beyond that? If a new commander comes in? Or new systems are installed that weren't part of the plans the original Colony Corp. installed in software? She simply won't be able to learn it."

He patted the crystal lattice, "That's what this beauty is meant to address. We've *been* just installing new systems to take over where the old girls hit their limits, but there's always challenges because the stations are too tightly integrated with their digital assistant software. We can't simply remove the old software and replace it with a new assistant because the old hardware doesn't recognize it. Even trying to upgrade the hardware alone doesn't really fix the problem. So, we're combining different ideas, and we need to get this installed as soon as possible. It only just became ready a little bit after you left Earth to take command of your station, so I've basically been chasing you for a couple of weeks now." He said this last part with a chuckle.

"...chasing me, so you're...?"

"On my way now, actually. I should be there in a few hours."

Daffyd's ship turned out to be a science excursionary vessel that he almost lived on. When it docked with her station it required the larger cargo airlock on the top of the 'wheel' of the dock, all the other airlocks were too small for it.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed as he stepped out of the airlock and into the cargo access shaft, "This station practically still has that new station smell!"

Diane was finding it hard not to smile in his presence, "Well, mostly new, we hung the 'new station' air fresheners at the ventilation ports."

The joke landed, Daffyd practically whooping with laughter as Norma, Katrina, and Russe looked on in confusion.

"Daffyd, this is Russe, we don't have an official position for him yet but he's a solid hacker and probably the best person for you to work with directly on this."

Russe shook the other man's hand, "I think I do alright. I have been spending some time in the last couple of months getting pretty familiar with the hardware and security protocols of the station's systems."

"Whether you were authorized or not..." muttered Katrina. Diane shifted her arm to elbow the hologram only for her arm to pass through the apparently empty space. *Right*, thought Diane, *Hologram...*

Not too much later, the four people and one hologram were making their way through the sub-floors below the construction deck that rarely saw actual people. Katrina had pressurized and provided an atmosphere for this deck when Daffyd had explained what needed to be done on his earlier call, so the air held a slightly metallic scent that seemed to hang on after a total space vacuum. Or, at least, that's what Katrina had told her after Diane had complained about the smell that, apparently, only she could detect. Morvuck noses were *much* more sensitive than human noses, it turned out.

"I don't think it's just vacuum, Katrina, I'm pretty sure I smell..." she sniffed again, "Yeah, that's ozone. I think we've got a fried circuit."

Katrina scoffed, "Don't be ridiculous! I would *know* if one of my systems were faulty! It's in my code!"

Daffyd held up his hands placatingly as they walked through the maze of conduits, raceways, and computer racks, "Not necessarily, love. Your processors are pretty complex. I've been called in to troubleshoot your sisters' hardware on occasion and the old developers who built your systems over-engineered in some places and under-built in others. I think it's wise to follow Diane's nose to the source to be sure."

Grumbling, Katrina allowed Diane to take point as they made their way through the surprisingly complex jungle of computer hardware. "Katrina...you built all this?" marveled Diane.

"Not all," admitted the hologram, "About two percent of the station's current computing power is provided by the original core at the heart of this level. The rest was built over time by robotic drones and the pre-loaded plans for the station's eventual computing needs."

"Aye, and they built these things to make do," interjected Daffyd, "They aren't quantum computers, the tech for that wasn't quite developed and reliable enough by the time they started launching these things, but I've seen a Katrina array calculate the trajectory of a ship through a time-space anomaly. I ran the incident through a quantum datastream array back on Earth after the fact; the newer, supposedly more capable computer was only able to get more accurate telemetry from the same data to an additional four decimal places. It's no wonder even modern hackers can't get into the things to take 'em over, those old engineers and coders built these babies right in so many ways..."

"So what's the reason for this new piece of hardware about, then?" asked Russe as Diane stopped in a crossway to try and track down the ozone smell. "I mean, if they can do so much, why are the other digital assistants breaking down?"

Diane paid half-attention as she led them down a side branch that was fairly close to the heart of the digital lair as Daffyd explained, "It's *because* they're not quantum computers. Basically, the system's trying to extrapolate future events to anticipate requests far in advance based on all available data. Because the software only has a limited stack of hardware and no real way of parsing possible future states, it can't figure out what possible projections are legitimate, and which are just bad data. This doohicky is designed to be a quantum co-processor. We're basically going to jack it in so that the projection models can take little peaks into the quantum foam and use the data that it gets as a metric for which possible future outcomes are actually likely."

Diane paused, turning to look over her shoulder at the scientist, "...you're describing feedforward." She kept her more urgent emotional reaction in check, forcing herself to remain calm and not simply smash the crystal lattice before they could get it any nearer to the core.

Daffyd waved his hand dismissively, "Nothing like that, dearie. That requires...well, something a lot more sophisticated than this," he casually waved the component about. "Feedforward is what produces a sentient, conscious intelligence. It's the ability to see what you *want* in the future and then shape the world around you to get to that point, even if you have no data about that future or how to get there. All *this* does," he waved the component again, "Is parse the projections. Basically, it's filtering the *feedback*."

"Can we *not* swing the piece of tech that's going to keep me from breaking down at a later date like it's a child's toy?" snapped Katrina.

Norma gently plucked the crystal lattice from Daffyd's hand with an apologetic smile, "She's not wrong."

The scientist blushed, "Ah, right."

Diane subtly took a deep breath and tried to breath her spike of anxiety out through her nose. *Last thing I need is for the station itself to ascending to actual human-level sentience and going rogue with a single installed piece of hardware. Virtual reality or not, the thing would probably find all sorts of creative ways to cause pain before I managed to log out, non-sentient rogue A.I. are already an existential threat to humanity.* As unlikely as it seemed that a *simulated* computer could attain sentience, she'd seen enough Star Trek to at least consider

the possibility. And if she'd *accidentally* given the rogues the key to human-level sentence because she didn't do her due diligence in a *game*? She was not going to be part of the robot apocalypse if she could avoid it. She started forward again and sniffed, adjusting their course.

Daffyd hurried to catch up to her, "I'd hardly have expected someone like yerself to know about advanced sentence theory," he said conversationally.

"I...had reason to look it up for a project a few years ago," she dodged, "And how do you mean, 'someone like me'?"

"I've seen your file for the seed station assignments, love," he grinned in a somewhat fatherly way, "You're good, no denying that, but EarthGov doesn't let someone who's demonstrated the skills and intelligence to work on advanced theories stay in the system too long. You're a lifer, so...well, it'd have been outside your wheelhouse."

Who is compiling this background for my character? She thought, *That's more than I've come up with...on the other hand, maybe this is the algorithm's way of letting me know it was building it on the fly and keeping me in the loop.* She stopped as she realized the scent was diminishing, meaning she'd passed the source, "Well, like I said, a project needed a little knowledge of how sentence worked in the brain, so I dug a bit on the 'net, read a high-level paper or two," she turned and backtracked a bit before stopping in front of a panel, "And got what I needed out of it. I didn't really look much further into it than that."

Only because I haven't had the time to do so since the agency started watching the agents like a hawk, too much time in research would have let slip I had the weapon in my...heh...back pocket, she thought as she thumbed the release catch on the access panel.

The smell of ozone practically hit her in the face as the panel swung open. The wrinkled noses of Daffyd, Norma, and Russe told her they were finally smelling it, too. A stack of computer equipment, modules, and components rested in the rack now exposed to them, and about two-thirds of the way up was a shelf full of vertically inserted processing cards in a bus drawer, and what looked like the fourth card from the right side was partially blackened from a short or fused circuit.

Daffyd stepped in and pulled the drawer out, "Ah, that'd do it. Katrina, cut power to..." he read the asset label off the drawer's leading edge, "AUX-Juliette-Gamma-twelve. We'll pull the board and do a diagnostic on the rest."

The blinkenlights on the shelf abruptly cut off, "Done, and thank you Daffyd. I'm glad you were on-hand to provide your expertise."

Diane snorted and smugly said, "I'm just here, being chopped liver."

Katrina simply rolled her eyes.

As Daffyd set about pulling the card and testing the others, Diane asked, "She's been behaving more...well, human as time goes on. Is that a result of the learning you said she does?"

The scientist laid the spent component on the back of the drawer as he double-checked the seating of the remaining cards, "Aye, that'd be it. She's built so she adapts to best fit the needs and personality of the station owner, which would be you. If you need someone to behave more human," he said as he lifted the spent card and shoved the drawer back into the rack, "Then she behaves pretty near human." He turned to the hologram, "Okay, power that drawer back up and run level 4 diags on the whole thing. Might want to do the same for the entire rack."

Katrina nodded and the drawer lit up again. Daffyd closed the access panel and handed Diane the singed component. "Y'lucked out, lass. That there is an auxiliary controller. It's a *primary* auxiliary, which means you'll need to replace it, the backups can't do the job like it can."

Diane nodded, "Katrina, do we have any of these aboard?"

The hologram shook her head, "Negative, the expected lifespan of that component was for another 50 or so years. The fabs aren't scheduled to build another for twenty more years."

"How long would it take to build one now if we adjusted the schedule?"

Both Daffyd and Katrina seemed to flinch. "That unit requires components that would, themselves, need fabrication. The problem is multiple layers of prerequisites. The adjusted schedule would have the replacement unit in six Earth months."

Diane frowned, but Daffyd interjected, "Actually, since I'm part of a pretty small community of techs and engineers and scientists who still work on the old seed stations, I know where you can get one built in about 24 hours. The catch is actually getting it after it's built."

"How do you mean?" asked Russe.

"The company that can handle a request like this...actually, they're based on Mortan, come to think," he nodded at Diane, "In any case, that's also the downside. The trade routes maintained by the merchant corporations don't run directly from there to here. The request could go out today and the component built tomorrow, but the actual shipment would take a few months. Not as long as the station building one itself, but still quite a lot of time."

Diane frowned, "...but...I'm pretty sure a direct trip wouldn't take nearly that long."

Katrina nodded, "Even with the slowest FTL available on the *Ad Astra*, it would only be a nine day trip each way."

Diane smiled conspiratorially at the hologram, "Are you trying to get me off the station already?"

Katrina smiled back, "Not at all, but you *did* seem awfully eager to get a ship built."

Diane winked at Katrina and turned to Norma, "What do you think, want to get off the station? The ship *is* built for three people..." She looked significantly in Russe's direction as she said this, Norma smirking at Diane's obviously telegraphed plan.

"Oooh, ooh!" Russe gasped, "Can I come?! Pleeease?!"

Diane chuckled, "I dunno, seems like a pretty big deal, taking you along. Are you *sure* you want to come?"

Norma punched Diane in the shoulder, "You're both dorks! Yes, I'll come, if for no other reason to be a voice of sanity to keep you two from nerding out."

"And if you should find a convenient port to drop them off and leave them there on your way back..." offered Katrina.

"Hey!" Norma snapped back.

Chapter End Notes

As I expected, my notes for this chapter weren't covered nearly at all by everything I wound up writing, so the outline gets yet another chapter. For those keeping notes at home, there's presently a total of 35 chapters plus the prologue and epilogue. Expect that to grow. 😊

Master and Commander | Hallelujah

Chapter Summary

Diane stumbles onto a new in-game ability...and uncovers some painful memories as a result.

Chapter Notes

Sneaky plot point is sneaky. There's several in this chapter, see if you can spot them all.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The mission was simple; Katrina was left mostly in charge of herself with a couple of hand-picked people Norma selected to keep things running in their absence. Diane, Norma, and Russe would take the newly built *Ad Astra* on her maiden voyage to Mortan to pick up the completed component much faster than it could be handled otherwise, and Daffyd would contact the company that could manufacture the component on-demand to have it ready by the time the ship got to Mortan.

Daffyd's work on the station's computer core would be finished well before they returned, "And lass, I've got too many stops to make. The whole reason for this installation is to test it on as young a system as we can to see if it'll work, then we'll be implementing it as far and wide as we've got seed stations. In the meantime, I've got too many fires to put out."

Diane found herself feeling sad the somewhat hyper scientist was only in her orbit for such a brief period of time but understood as well as anyone that adulting sometimes meant missing out on chances to simply have fun...even in a game.

Russe, it turned out, had some experience helming a ship, and since the ship belonged to Diane, she claimed the captain's chair. That left navigation to Norma, which she took to eagerly. Apparently, her fallback dream if the whole 'running the station' thing hadn't worked out was to hitch a ride on a passing starship and become a crewmember with the eventual goal of making captain. Being Governor with the chance to do occasional trips was apparently enough to scratch both itches.

Diane wasn't disappointed, per se, that she didn't feel more overwhelmed and awed by the experience of being on the bridge of a starship. She wasn't quite sure *what* she was feeling. It was like the joy and excitement she'd expected were...bottled up, far away from the bridge of the ship that was carrying her and her tiny crew across the stars. She wondered idly if it was just due to the intellectual knowledge that she was actually in a pod on the thirteenth floor of

the agency building in Houston behind the wall from the perspective of the rest of the people in the game. That, however, didn't track. She knew just as well, no matter how she looked in the mirror or even just looking down, that she wasn't actually a woman in real life, and yet the emotional part of her brain just accepted what she was perceiving at face value and decided it was the best thing since all the best things ever and that she needed to be occasionally reminded, very forcefully, that it was very, very happy with her virtual body. So, if such a simple thing as the *perception* of a pair of breasts and a somewhat alien set of genitalia were enough for her lizard (heh, *dinosaur*) brain to get hype, the *perception* of being on a ship travelling through space should have been just as effective.

She decided to fill her time with reading some sci-fi available outside the wall, catching up on the U.N.'s version of "news" (heavily edited and censored, she was sure, that's how the media was handled in America, after all), and reading up on some game mechanics she hadn't had a chance to during the rushed mission prep.

Such as the Ethics tree, which she wasn't able to find any documentation on. Of course, it turned out GU:MC was such a massive game that even the Ships trees (yes, plural, one for each class of ship) were woefully incomplete in the wiki and game FAQ spaces, and not a few trees were either specific to certain races or classes or could be purchased for real-world money or won through in-game events. This made it somewhat frustrating that she was staring at the next node she needed to unlock and was unable to derive its purpose.

"She Should Be at the Club"

"Description: All Work and No Play make the Commander a dull girl. Duty is good, but self-care is good, too. Stepping outside of your comfort zone is the only way to get what you haven't got."

What in the world does that mean?!

She was *very* outside of her "comfort zone" already. She was in an alien body on a spaceship in a game thought to be infested with rogue A.I. with no backup or support. She didn't even have the comforts she'd managed to assemble in her apartment. Perceptually, she was lightyears and *literal* years from anything resembling her "comfort zone."

If this damn tree weren't so cryptic, I'd probably have unlocked half of it by now!

It had been a considerable surprise when she settled into her cabin after they were underway to open her HUD and discover she'd already unlocked a couple other nodes and met the requirements for a few more. The problem was, *they* were still locked behind nodes she hadn't yet opened, and so other than seeing that they were unlocked and part of their names, she didn't benefit from them at all or gain any understanding of what, precisely, she'd done to achieve them. At the moment, the "She Should Be at the Club" was blocking access to three unlocked nodes, which looked pretty important as they also fed into the same part of the tree that had the "WWCFD?" node, and that blocked node, itself, was blocking an entire branch.

She swiped the HUD away in frustration, revealing the darkened bridge of the ship. They'd settled into a routine over the last week, and though they weren't going as slowly as Katrina had quoted in her projections, they were still over 48 hours away from their destination. She

sighed and kicked her legs up on the comms panel. With navigation and helm being as task intensive as they were, many of the incidental tasks fell back on the captain, which Diane was more than happy to do since it gave her *something* to do during the long stretches of space where nothing happened.

Which wasn't to say she wasn't enjoying herself. It was like the last road trip her parents had taken her on to see her grandparents in Kansas the year before they passed. And just like that road trip, it was the last stretch that was the most aggravating. You *knew* you were super close, and sure; you *could* pour on more speed to get there just a little faster, but the difference wouldn't be big enough to bother with. So, she watched the FTL tunnel shimmer on the screen as the lightyears got eaten up by the ship's drive.

She leaned her head back on the captain's chair's headrest and closed her eyes. Morvuck physiology apparently was adapted for a thirty-hour day-night cycle, meaning she was still wide awake even though it was practically the middle of the night by human standards. Her people...*her character's* people seemed almost superhuman to her. There were downsides; she couldn't let herself get too cold (which sucked, she preferred the cold) and there was the whole 'constantly eating' thing. She'd had to down an extra ration pack every meal and kept going after the energy bars Katrina had insisted she have stocked. But with the added strength? The overall endurance? The body that just seemed to demand action and activity that meant she'd never, ever stop moving?

Her first week aboard the station she'd sought out the fitness center (located on the floor above the sickbay in the Ops building) and proceeded to do her normal workout...and it felt like she was strolling through the park. So, she upped the weight on the machines. And again. And again. Eventually, she was *curling* 450 pounds. She managed to dead lift three-quarters of a *ton*. Endurance running seemed to be her only major weakness, as was anything that required prolonged use of large muscle groups. That was, apparently, one of the key differences between Morvucks and humans; humans are persistence predators, Morvucks were descended from ambush predators.

So having to sit still on a small ship that was stuck in FTL for over a week was giving her a severe case of the fidgets. Her toe was tapping the air, her fingers drumming out a rhythm to nothing in particular, and her head bobbed gently back and forth. She hummed a bar or two before she realized she had the complete privacy of the bridge at night when the two humans were asleep. Her fidgeting slowed and her fingers went from a fast beat to a slow, almost casual 2:2 time as she started humming a particular tune, letting the intro play out before she started singing the lyrics, "I watched the night turn into day...time isn't on my side..."

"Wow..." came an almost whispered voice behind her.

She started so violently she actually fell off her chair, "Fuck, shit! The fucking...!" Her head had thunked the seat when her butt had unceremoniously slid off and deposited her on the floor.

She cupped the injured spot and took a deep breath as the other voice said, "Ohmygosh, I'm so sorry!" Norma gently put her hands under Diane's armpits and assisted the taller woman back in her seat.

"No, it's okay, *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have used that kind of language," Diane groaned as she settled back into the captain's chair.

"You banged your head, I think you're allowed," Norma gently laughed, "Let me take a look at that, did you get injured anywhere else?"

"Just my dignity," Diane said as she let Norma pull her hand away from the back of her head.

"Well, I'm not seeing any blood...wait, Morvuck blood is red, right?"

Diane nodded gently, grateful that the injury wasn't compounding itself with a headache, "Iron-based, gonna be red."

"Right, well no blood, and..." she felt along Diane's skull, "No real bumps or obvious responses to a fracture, I think you're just slightly bruised."

Diane turned a pained smile to the governor, "Did you study medicine during your time on the station before I got there?"

"No, dork," Norma shoved playfully at Diane's shoulder, "I had to learn a lot of that kind of thing...first aid, emergency procedures, field medicine...simply because *someone* had to."

Diane leaned back gingerly, taking a deep breath to settle herself again, "Yeah, that makes sense. So, *Doctor*, will I live?"

"Do~o~ork!" declared Norma. They regarded each other in companionable silence for a moment before Norma said, "You've got a really pretty voice."

Diane blushed, unable to meet the other woman in the eye, "I...guess? I don't...I didn't like it...before." *Best to keep this part vague*, she thought, "I...stopped singing around other people for a long time. I like music but growing up and my voice..." she realized she was about to talk about growing up as a teenage boy and just let the unfinished sentence hang, the silence its own conclusion.

"Let me guess, your teenage years?" inquired Norma.

Blush deepening, Diane looked briefly at Norma in surprise. "Yeah, just...it wasn't pleasant growing up with a voice like mine around a bunch of teens."

"I can only imagine what a Morvuck might have to deal with, your voice box probably has completely different qualities than a human's."

Diane huffed a small laugh as the corner of her mouth turned up, "Yeah, that's a thing."

Norma turned the navigator's seat around and sat down, smiling with what could only be encouragement to underscore her next words, "You should try it! Sing for me, I mean."

Diane felt a little sick to her stomach as she stared at Norma in open shock, "What?! But...I'll sound awful! I haven't sung in years!"

"That's not how it works, dork," chuckled Norma, "Just open your mouth and sing! This isn't a concert hall, it's just you and me in a private little spaceship."

Apparently, my new nickname is 'dork,' Diane thought, "You probably won't even *like* the songs I know well enough to sing. They're downright ancient!" *Not to mention some of them are distinctly American and would point me out as a citizen of the Republic in a quick second. I really don't think I should be breaking out into a rendition of, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," no matter that it started as an anti-slavery anthem.*

"Hah! I *knew* you were a nerd! You know classical music better than pop or contemporary!"

"It was 'pop' when it was composed..." Diane grumbled.

"Fine, so let's hear something! Sing it, sister!" Norma practically bubbled.

Diane had to admit the other woman's enthusiasm was infectious, "Okay, fine, if it'll get you to stop pestering me about it..." she sat back in thought, trying to figure out something that would be a good, easy tune that she could render from memory. *Can't do a church hymn...well, I could, but too many of them are built around venerating The Second and won't win me any awards outside the wall. Wait, that might be...* She grinned as she remembered one particular song that stuck in her head that she knew had origins prior to the Republic's ascendancy.

Now if I can remember the minor-key original well enough that I don't slip into the major-key adaptation for the hymnal... She said, "Computer, play an instrumental-only, no lyrics karaoke version of 'Hallelujah' from early 21st century Earth."

"Indexing," came the pleasantly female monotone from the ship's computer, "Appropriate track found, playing now."

"Classical nerd," smirked Norma.

"I thought I was a dork?" snarked Diane right back. Before Norma could come up with a retort, the computer started playing music.

Diane was, at first, slightly confused as she didn't remember orchestral strings playing the refrain at the start, but then a piano came in with the familiar notes of the start of the song and she opened her mouth and, for the first time since her mother died, sang to another person.

"I've heard there was a secret chord,"

"that David played and it pleased the Lord,"

She was a little surprised to see a window appear on the main display of the lyrics, filling in as she sang them. *Must be because I specified 'karaoke style.'*

"But you don't really care for music, do ya?"

"It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth"

"The minor fall, the major lift"

"The baffled king composing 'Hallelujah'"

Oh, good, these are the original lyrics, she realized as she sang the 'chorus' of the word 'Hallelujah' repeated several times. Her mother had taught her the original song, at least parts of it, because she had firmly believed that a person needed to know and learn from their history, especially if others ignored it.

"Even for a hymn?" young Dylan had asked in that exasperated way only children and tweens can properly express.

"Even for a hymn. Maybe especially for a hymn. Sermons and speeches in church change from pastor to pastor. But the hymns are consistent, the same from congregation to congregation. More church doctrine is taught in hymns in some cases than from the pulpit.

"Baby, I've been here before,"

"I know this room, I've walked this floor,"

"I used to live alone before I knew you."

Huh...the verses are out of order... Even for the official hymnal version, the verse this was adapted to came after at least two more refrains of the chorus.

"And I've seen your flag on the marble arch,"

"Love is not a victory march,"

"It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah,"

Her eyes started to sting as she remembered her mother's role in her knowledge of the song, this song was probably her mother's favorite and the one she'd sung more often than any other, church hymn or otherwise. It was Diane...then Dylan asking about why she was singing it so weird that prompted her mother to teach her the song's history.

"The original artist wasn't a Christian, he was Jewish."

"What's 'Jewish'?"

Dylan's mother sighed in the long-suffering sigh that mother's everywhere experience when they know their child will ask more questions than they have time or knowledge to answer, "It's the faith that came before Christianity. They don't believe that God sent Jesus as the Messiah and they never heard of The Second before he was appointed President. They believe...different things that you would need a Jewish person to teach you about."

"Oh...are there any Jewish people around who can teach me?"

Diane would never forget the haunted look in her mother's eyes, "Not in America, sweetie, not anymore."

"Maybe there's a God above,"

"But all I've ever learned from love,"

"Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you,"

"But...you didn't do anything wrong!"

Sad eyes didn't match the indulgent smile on her mother's face, "Of course not, Dy. That's not what being sick is. That's not what cancer is about. You can be the best person in the world and come down with cancer and the worst person you will ever know could live into their 100's. It's not a punishment, it just is."

"So...what does this mean?"

Her father spoke up for the first time since getting home from the doctor's office with her mother, "It means we have to love your mother so much she'll have so much love-baggage when she arrives in heaven that they'll have to seriously consider sending her back because heaven won't have enough room." His voice was croaky, something she'd later learn meant he'd been holding back tears.

"And it's not a cry that you hear at night,"

"It's not somebody who's seen the light,"

"It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah,"

She was crying by this point, tears streaming down her face and her throat was feeling tight, like she'd choke to death if she stopped singing. "Hallelujah...hallelujah..." came out of her mouth as she blinked her eyes open, her eyes fixed on the screen. It wasn't that she forgot Norma was there, it was simply that it didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was singing her mother's favorite song.

"I did my best, it wasn't much,"

"I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch,"

"I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool ya,"

Oh, God, that's a lie. That's so much a lie. When did my life become a lie? All of it, my face, my body...what I tell people about who I am. When did I stop being the man my mom was teaching me to be?

"And even though it all went wrong,"

"I'll stand before the lord of song,"

"With nothing on my tongue but hallelujah,"

She was dimly aware of having stood by this point and no longer meekly piping out the words just loud enough for Norma to hear, she was almost shouting them now, pouring her broken heart into a hymn to God as though he'd send her mother back for just a little more time. The music, apparently some version of the song performed by an entire orchestra, swelled to a crescendo like a tidal wave crashing into a cliff. An accompanying choir had been recorded, repeating the chorus and filling the bridge with sound as she croaked out the final repetitions of, "...hallelujah..."

The music had stopped, as had her final 'hallelujah,' and she realized that not only was Norma hugging her tightly, but she also felt Russe's arms around her as well. *Must have woken him up...* she thought distractedly as she tried to choke back her tears.

"I'm sorry," came Norma's voice from somewhere in the vicinity of Diane's breasts, "I shouldn't have...I'm sorry."

Diane couldn't answer, when she tried her breath felt like it was being forced out in the form of a sob. She just shook her head as emotions she thought she'd left behind a long time ago came bubbling up on the heels of her memories of her mother.

"Sooo..." said Russe gently, "That's a thing that happened."

Diane wiped her nose with the facial tissue Norma had provided her. She had no idea where on her person the woman kept the things (probably in her jacket somewhere, that thing was so bulky she could probably outfit an entire penetration team just with the contents of the visible pockets) but she was grateful she didn't have to scavenge through the ship for them. "Yeah," said Diane muddily, "Sorry for waking you up."

"Yo~ou didn't actually wake me up," said Russe, "At least, not directly."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean at some point when you were singing, the entire ship's lighting changed. All the lights either went up or down in luminosity to match the bridge."

Diane and Norma gave each other confused looks before turning back to Russe. Diane asked, "What, like, did the ship script it or something?"

Russe pulled his mini-tablet from the pocket of his cargo pants (Diane found out these small devices weren't called 'phones' in this version of the future anymore, just 'mini-tablets') and tapped the screen a few times before what looked like an automated log appeared on the main screen. "This is when you started singing," a line appeared between two entries, "Here's where you stopped singing," a second line appeared significantly later, "And here's when the lights suddenly altered," a box bracketed a series of reports from, if she was reading the log right, environmental controls. Sure enough, every single environmental light on the ship logged a confirmation of completed order, but the logs didn't show any orders being sent to the lights.

"Before I checked the logs while Norma was helping you recover, I thought maybe it was just the ship having a pre-programmed response to its captain's emotions or something, but if that was the case we'd see a script being invoked here," he tapped on his mini-tab and a little red 'tap-touch' dot blinked on the screen on the space between two of the log lines, "Instead, each of the lights adjusted to match the bridge's lighting automatically without prompting, then told the computer they had finished with the command to do what they just did...without being commanded. During your song."

Diane gave him a skeptical squint, "That...has to be coincidental."

Russe shook his head, "Computer," he instructed the ship, "Show the security recording of the bridge and the rec space at the time index you started playing music, then play at normal speed. Show the logs as they were being recorded during the same time frame."

"Oh, god, the computer *recorded* me singing?!" Diane wanted to crawl under the deck plating.

"Stop it, you dork, you sound wonderful!" Norma said from her seat at Navigation.

They all fell silent as the video of a self-conscious Diane began timidly singing along with the music the computer was playing, the normal call-and-response of the computer's automated systems were logged dutifully, including the command to find and play the audio track and the ship-board digital assistant registered that a request for karaoke necessitated a display of the lyrics to be sung.

Diane watched herself singing, emotions playing out on her face that she was feeling the echo of now. As tears started falling from her eyes on the screen, suddenly the computer started receiving the mystery completion log entries and the lights in the rec area dimmed to match the same level and intensity of the bridge.

"...okay...so there's a little bit of *maybe* coincidental correlation, it could just be a glitch. What's your point with all of this?"

Russe smiled timidly and set down his mini-tab, "I think...well, you're not just the *station* commander, I think you're a Commander."

Diane's brow furrowed in confusion as Norma rolled her eyes, "This again? I thought you were serious about all this!"

Russe shook his head, "I *am* serious. Commanders are...*appearing* all over the galaxy."

Diane's brow pinched in confusion, "You want to explain what you two are talking about?"

Norma groaned and gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes as Russe leaned forward, like he was sharing a conspiracy theory he was convinced was real. "Okay, so, I've only seen one other Commander," she practically *heard* the capital 'c' when Russe said it, "He was a Terran captain, he seemed like a pretty normal guy, but seemed to almost...not realize there were other people on the ship, mostly because he just always seemed to know *exactly* what the ship or the mission needed at any given time. I mean, sure, when people talked to him, he'd

respond, but it was like...he was in another world entirely half the time. And sometimes he'd react to things only he could see."

Russe pointed an index finger at nothing in particular and bounced it like he was scolding the universe, "But he had this trick, any personal carry weapon he picked up an assigned to himself in the weapons master's log he could just...*summon*. Like, he could be on the other side of the room from his pistol and he'd just hold out his hand and the pistol just zipped right into his palm."

Russe leaned back in his seat, "I was just a special tech for that trip, they brought in a group of freelancers to tackle some derelict alien ship. I never did find out what they did with it after we cleared it for towing, but that was the last assignment before I hitched a ride for, well, your station and..." his eyes flicked to Norma.

"So...what, was he Morvuck, t...no, that's stupid, he'd be a woman if he was," she shook her head, trying to piece the puzzle Russe was presenting her in her head.

"Oh, it's not dependent on race or home system." He picked up his mini-tab again and found what he was looking for pretty quickly, "I'm part of some message boards that talk about this sort of thing. We've started putting together a galactic map of sightings of people with abilities outside of their species capabilities." A map of the galaxy popped up on the screen, remarkably similar to the one Tyler had shown during his part of the briefing prior to her going into the pod. Russe stood and rounded the helm station to stand in front of the screen, gesturing across the charted galaxy where hundreds of dots were placed. "Green is whenever someone *thought* they spotted a Commander, but further observation proved they weren't one. Yellow is a freshly reported incident. Could be a sign of a Commander ability, could just be a fluke of the universe. It's a big place and can get a little weird at the extremes, right?"

Diane nodded with a wry smile, *I wonder what this guy would think if Q?*

"Blue dots are the spotting and confirmation of unusual abilities or talents but nothing further. They *could* be commanders, but we can't be sure yet."

Russe tapped a red dot with his knuckle, "These are *confirmed* Commanders."

He does know how to milk a presentation, she thought as she said, "So what *confirms* a 'captial-C' Commander?"

Norma snickered at Diane's somewhat sarcastic emphasis, but Russe still looked dramatically grim as he said, "They can't be killed."

"...say again?" Diane finally asked.

"They can't die...or rather if they do die the come back. That Terran captain I told you about? He's *known* for staying behind when his crew needs some covering fire or a distraction that's *going* to be lethal...then some time after the crew knew for *sure* he was dead he'd reappear in his ready room and continue captaining as if nothing strange happened."

Players! Diane suddenly realized, *All these people with unusual abilities and 'can't die' are players, and when they're killed they're respawning at their nearest safe respawn point!* "Ah," she said, keeping a note of skepticism in her voice, "We're not going to be testing that. Like, at all. You can only be wrong once with that one, after all."

Norma smirked, "Yeah, let's not try to kill our brand new station commander."

Russe chuckled with some embarrassment, "Well, okay. But I'm still putting this down as an unconfirmed..."

"No, you're not," she snapped. He gave her a look like a kicked puppy, but she remained firm, "In fact, I want everything done to get rid of that map. Even if it means I, *personally*, have to visit each and every one of those so-called 'Commanders' and let them know they're being monitored by a bunch of well-meaning people on the 'net. That's a *huge* invasion of privacy."

There was a lot about that directive that was legitimate. She was always one of the people that was telling her fellow church parishioners they needed to secure their home's firewall. But it was also plausible reasoning to keep her own information off of an apparently publicly available map. *Plus, if I really did track down other players using this, I could gather more intel and possibly discover a rogue masquerading as a player.*

Poor Russe looked like he'd just realized he accidentally drove a steam roller over a basket of baby bunnies. "Oh...I didn't...I don't think we...I can't imagine..."

Norma gave him a gentle smile, "We get it, you got more excited about some wild theory about legendary super beings or something and it ran off with you. But Diane is right, don't put her name and location in that thing."

Russe sighed and shook his head, tapping his mini-tab to clear the display, returning the main viewport to the FTL tunnel they'd grown familiar with for the last week.

Norma got up and crossed the step it took to get to the captain's chair, "Why don't you go to your quarters? You're probably pretty wiped out after all that. Even 'Commanders' need their beauty sleep, right?"

Diane closed her eyes and sighed with a wry smile, "Yeah, that sounds like a plan. Thanks, guys. For everything."

They wished her a pleasant sleep and she went back to her cabin, stripping down to just her shirt and panties and practically throwing herself into her bunk. Wondering if she could get an idea what her 'commander' ability was, she brought up her in-game HUD and saw two notifications pending. She tapped the first and found a tired smile sliding up on her face.

"She Should Be at the Club - Unlocked"

"Description: All Work and No Play make the Commander a dull girl. Duty is good, but self-care is good, too. Stepping outside of your comfort zone is the only way to get what you haven't got."

"Perk: Activates Commander's Ability"

Now pretty sure what the second notification was about, she tapped through to the next notification which took her to her character screen. She saw the highlighted section and tapped to zoom in.

"Commander's Ability: Moving to the Music"

"Level: 1"

"Manipulate computers with the power of song. Level this ability to increase your range of control."

Well, at least that wasn't cryptic, even if it did seem out of place in a sci-fi game. *Then again, she thought as she started to drift off to sleep, Star Wars has the whole 'Force' thing, which always seemed like handwavium level BS to me. I'm sure the Warsies are loving the commander's abilities in this game.*

Chapter End Notes

I made myself cry writing this, and my mom is still alive and well!

This will be your first hint that the game Diane's playing isn't just a straight forward hard sci-fi game. I wanted to give the players something special and every other VRMMO in the Troubleverse series has some special title for the players that fits the lore of the game. Here's the nicely exposition'd explanation of the "Commander" part of "Master and Commander." What's the "Master" part mean, I wonder...? 🤔

Oh, and the specific version of ["Hallelujah" is the orchestral cover by Cinematic Pop](#). If you've never heard Cinematic Pop's stuff, you are NOT prepared!

Sidebar: If you don't know the history of "Hallelujah" and just know it as that cool sounding song from Shrek, you may not be properly horrified at the so-called "Christian versions" that have propagated since Cohen's death. I've even seen a version or two that claims to "fix" the original song, as though there were something somehow wrong with it. Yes, I'm trying to paint the Christofascist American Republic in as filthy evil a light as possible, because a cult should never have a say in government policy.

Interpret that how you will.

Master and Commander | Being Lost

Chapter Summary

Upon arriving on Mortan, Diane is welcomed home

Chapter Notes

You are not ready.

I wrote this thing and I wasn't ready!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Mortan space control to *Ad Astra* SHRA-Five-Niner-Eight-Two, you are cleared for approach to the landing terminal at the provided planetary landing coordinates. You're cleared for three standard Mortan days and take off time should be no later than 1000 hours Galactic Standard. Please enjoy your stay, and welcome back, Lost."

Diane was surprised enough by the last part of the message that she almost forgot to reply, "...uh, thank you, space control. *Ad Astra* SHRA-Five-Niner-Eight-Two acknowledges," and with that she released the connection.

"That...was surprisingly fast," commented Russe as he entered the landing instructions into the helm console.

Norma turned to look at Diane with a raised eyebrow, "Rolling out the red carpet for one of their own, you think?"

Diane felt her cheeks pink slightly, "Membership hath it's privileges, I guess, but I'd rather have my parents."

Norma smiled softly, otherwise saying nothing as she turned back to the navigation console and ran through the final pre-landing protocols.

A little over an hour and a half later, the ship settled itself neatly on their assigned landing pad. The spaceport was, frankly, a spaceport and not a lot to write home about. It largely resembled, if Diane were to compare it to her twenty-second century life outside the pod, like an airport and a hotel had a baby. The vast majority of the smaller ports were off to one side of the gargantuan complex and were a blend of airlock-style docks like her space station (intended for species that couldn't handle Earth...and, she supposed, Mortan-type atmosphere)

and helipad-style landing platforms. *I suppose it's more like an airport and an RV park, given the hookups for waste, water, and power they provide.*

It wasn't a tremendous surprise to discover that most space travellers with their own craft didn't bother with hotels. Those were clustered around another space port that was on the south-west continent, which was apparently more of a tourist destination than the more commuter-class spaceport they'd docked at.

Of course, just like airports, there were several spaceports per landmass. The north-western continent they'd landed on had sixteen, each either in or adjacent to a major metropolitan center. This one happened to be not only close to the business they were getting the part from but came recommended by Daffyd. This, it turned out, was not the last of the things he'd make recommendations on that would help them out, or at least Diane.

"The name's Rokyo Deki, Daffyd suggested you might need a friendly guide to the planet when he called about your part order." The other woman said. While not as physically imposing as Diane was capable of (in other words, Diane was surprised to find she was taller than the other Morvuck), she held a power and grace that only came from being older and thriving through the experience brought. Her blue suit was cut in a distinctly Earth style, but her blouse was a crossbody design that Diane could only recall seeing on some fictional uniforms or pseudo-period costumes. Her face was still youthful, but some age and laugh lines could be seen sculpting it from 'beautiful' into 'artwork.' Her dark brown hair matched the color of her blouse nicely, an almost almond brown.

Diane shook the woman's hand, feeling for the first time the grip of someone with similar strength as herself since she started the game. "Ah, hi! Thanks for meeting us at our docking pad, but aren't we scheduled to pick up the part in the morning?"

Rokyo smiled sagely at Diane, "True, and I'll be introducing you to my team when you do, but...well, you're a Lost, and sometimes a member of the Lost Generation can be a touch...overwhelmed when they arrive on Mortan for the first time."

Diane shrugged, "I'm not really here to play tourist..."

Rokyo gave her a grin that was equal parts wisdom and mischief, "If it wasn't me staking first claim to welcome back a Lost, it would have been another Morvuck. It's a bit of a point of honor to welcome back one of our Lost daughters. I'm afraid your choice is to hide in your ship until your crew gets your part or let someone take you under her wing for a bit to, ah... 'welcome you home.'"

Diane felt a bit uneasy, "...so perfect strangers are going to fight for a chance to say 'hi' and drag me around the city?"

The older woman grinned, "That's about the size of it. And don't think you can wiggle your way out of this, the Lost have a scent," she explained, tapping the side of her nose, "It comes from eating too much non-Mortan meat and your body excretes the scent of it through your pores. Non-natives can't smell it, which is why the Lost are so easy to identify and why it's so easy for them to get overwhelmed; a Lost without a..." the woman finally looked a little

abashed, "A 'mother hen' is practically a beacon for other Morvucks. You'll either get me playing tour guide or you'll get women fist-fighting in the street to basically adopt you."

Diane heard a throat clearing and realized her predator instincts had hyperfocused on an apparent threat and she turned with a startle to see Norma with a very smug look. "Nope," was all Norma said.

"'Nope' what?!"

It was Russe who answered from the other side of Diane, "'Nope,' you're not going to go hide in the ship for three days."

"But, you heard her! They're going to be fighting over me! It'll be better for everyone if I just stay put and out of sight!"

"She said they'd be fighting over the chance to welcome you home with loving arms," reiterated Norma.

Russe mirrored Norma's conspiratorial smile, "It'd be an *awful* shame if there was a coolant leak into the cabin spaces that meant we had to keep the ship clear of people for the next couple days, wouldn't it?"

Diane could tell she was pouting, but darned if she couldn't keep the expression off her face, "...see if I ever sing for either of you again."

Rokyo giggled at the interaction, offering Diane no support whatsoever.

Diane had never had a real solid concept of an entire species of just women. Sure, technically, someone could check the pants of the women in any given geo and come up with about 40% of them having the genitalia to 'father' a child, but tucked behind that (as Diane knew from her own checking in the character creation stage and every day she took a shower) was the genitalia to *mother* a child as well. And most importantly, there was no difference between the progenitors and proliferators that she could see as the people of Mortan went about their day. Once she noticed the lack of men, it was pretty much *all* she noticed. Morvuck women were performing literally every possible societal role, from waste collector to CEO, from mother to socialite, from cop to college student. If the view weren't so pleasant (she wasn't dead or blind, she knew an attractive female form when she saw it) it'd be haunting in its uncanny familiarity.

After guiding the two humans to an Earth-style restaurant in the alien district of the city, Rokyo took Diane to dinner in the downtown sector. The dining industry was just as important on Mortan as it was on Earth, consuming a not insignificant portion of the planet's GDP. While Diane may only have her station and a handful of Earth credits to her name (she'd had a chance to check during the trip, her bank account was in a truly poor state, something a position as a station commander would change extremely quickly and yet another good bit of backstory for her character), Rokyo seemed to be aware of Diane's inability to pay a bill on Mortan. "Just tell the waitress the kind of food you like, she'll take

your preferences to the chef who will make something that will appeal to your Earth-raised tastes."

Adjusting in the (to her) oddly proportioned chair, she frowned and thought. She normally restricted herself to varieties of Mexican food when she was preparing her own meals. Not so much that she preferred them over any other foods (though she really did enjoy it) but more that it was easy to make a healthy, fitness-program friendly version of just about any Mexican dish she could name. But when she wanted to treat herself, she usually wound up with... "Poultry cut into bite-sized pieces and served in a sauce with a tomato and dairy base, flavored with onion and ginger, spiced with a blend of herbs including cumin, coriander, nutmeg, cinnamon, and pepper. Often some variety of heat is added by including hot smoked paprika and cyan pepper."

The waitress seemed at a loss and looked to Rokyo for clarification.

The elder Morvuck woman snorted in amusement over her menu, "Did you just list the ingredients for curry?"

Diane smirked, "Oh, you recognized it?"

"I've visited Earth, my host for the weekend wanted to take me to an Indian place and we had to check if any of the ingredients were toxic to Morvuck physiology."

"Well, yeah, I like curry, and I like it spicy," Diane grinned in challenge.

Rokyo raised an eyebrow, almost in, 'challenge accepted,' and turned to the waitress, "If the chef has the ingredients on-hand, the house blend for araoshō shosh mixed in a dairy and bitter fruit sauce. Oh, and a bowl of steamed...zios, I think? Some form of low-protien, high-carbohydrate long-grain meal. Do you have any flatbreads?"

Now on more familiar ground, the waitress looked up from her notes, "We do, yes."

"Bring an order of that with the rest."

"Very good, and to drink?" she returned her attention to Diane.

"Jyantín Tonic, please."

The alacrity at which Diane responded seemed to take the waitress aback. Rokyo raised an eyebrow, "Just the tonic? Why not the bitters?"

Diane blushed slightly; quite aware she had an audience of women who were pretending not to watch her fumble about with as basic a thing as a drink order. "I've...never had the bitters."

"Well, all you've got in the morning is the meeting at my shop, so it's not like I could begrudge you the indulgence of having *actual* Jyantín Bitters. Go ahead, give it a try."

Feeling timid (and aware how silly that was given that she was actually a little taller than the average Morvuck, it would seem), she turned to the waitress and nodded.

"Very good, one Jyantín Bitters for your drink. And you ma'am?" the waitress said, turning to Rokyo.

After the older woman placed her order and requested a Jyantín Bitters for herself, she leaned her elbows on the table, "So tell me about Earth. I've visited, but I hardly know what it's like to actually live there, especially as one of the Lost."

How the hell am I supposed to talk about that?! Diane panicked in the privacy of her own mind. To buy time, she picked up the glass of water she'd been poured when they sat down and took a long, slow pull at it.

Realizing that there were certain similarities she could draw from, including the fact that both her own youth as well as the life of the character she'd generated would be without parents and in the aftermath of a war, she opted to keep as close to the truth as possible and simply swap the pronouns and fudge a name or three as necessary.

She described growing up without a mother or father present (her dad, as wonderful and kind as he'd been when mom was alive, had simply checked out after she died, so it was easy to embellish enough to paint a picture of him not being there) and a caretaker that made it clear they wanted to be anything but.

"Tiffany hated me for...so many reasons, but mostly because she knew she couldn't just get rid of me. She'd made me as miserable as she could for so long...or at least it felt like forever. Intellectually, I *know* it was just six years, but dealing with a woman that made it her life's goal to drive you to suicide day in and day out?" she shook her head, "She made me feel so...worthless. I was already feeling horrible for how I was going through puberty," this was true enough, even if she was leaving it open to a boatload of assumptions that she was talking about a Morvuck going through puberty on Earth rather than Dylan growing into manhood and feeling more and more horrified by his own body, "And then she..." she trailed off, throat tightening up as she dredged up memories of gaslighting, psychological abuse, and isolation.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt a hand wrap around hers. Realizing she was practically staring a hole through the table, she looked up to see Rokyo had gingerly clasped hands with her and was giving her a sad, supportive smile. "We've...heard stories like yours. Earth is a wonderful place, but just like anywhere else, they're just people and some people are just bad...what's a good Earth phrase to say that someone is a poor example of the species?"

"Apple," said Diane as she cleared her throat, trying to loosen the knot that had formed of her vocal cords. "The phrase you're looking for is 'bad apple.'"

"Isn't that a type of fruit?" asked Rokyo.

Diane nodded, "It's because when an apple is going rotten it'll release a gas that's not detectable to a human nose that triggers a catalytic reaction in any apples around it, causing them to go rotten as well."

Rokyo snorted in amusement, "Then it's a good example of that type of person, your caretaker Tiffany was a bad apple."

Diane smiled wryly, "Yeah, she was. She died of a heart attack shortly after I turned 18. Couldn't have happened to a nicer person." she said with sarcasm.

"Well at least we don't have to form a hunting party like the legends of old and seek vengeance for your poor treatment under her. Why didn't the agencies ever do anything to stop the abuse?"

Even all these years later, Diane still had difficulty thinking of what Tiffany did to her as 'abuse.' Abuse was what happened to kids with parents who beat them and broke their limbs. All Tiffany ever did to Diane was lie to her. Sure, she did it with the skill of a confidence artist and backed by an iron will that had nearly broken Diane's spirit, but it was just words. She'd never have scars on her face or burn marks on her arms or limbs in a cast like kids she knew of that had actually been abused.

"Tiffany was just *that good* at lying. She told just enough of the truth and layered it with enough of society's expectations that she could get people to believe just about anything she told them about me. I mean, when she died the police suspected *me*, of course, and so there was an investigation. When the social workers and the cops put together all the reports she'd filed over the years about me and checked out the statements and compared timelines they figured out how badly she'd scammed the system and...manipulated me. All the charges got dropped and I got into some programs that pointed me out to the agency..." she was referring to *the* agency in the American Republic, the combination of the old NSA, CIA, FBI, and Homeland Security after they'd been unified under The Second's administration. It was just convenient that the assignments for seed stations were handled by a governmental body that could also be referred to using 'the agency' as a shorthand, "And the rest, as they say, is history."

Rokyo squeezed her hand sympathetically, but before she could respond verbally, they were interrupted by their waitress, who had been joined by another woman.

"Thank you for waiting, the chef put together a meal for you based on the description provided, and..." she hesitated as she started setting dishes down on the table in front of Diane and Rokyo.

"And I just *had* to come out and see if I managed it." Finished the other woman. Diane looked her up and down, figuring that she had to be about the same height as Diane was, but where she'd created her character with an 'amazonian' aesthetic, this woman was more like the Renaissance paintings of Valkyries; plenty strong, clearly meant for battle on some level, but had a layer of fat that was appealing in a different way than Diane's own lean look. *Zaftig!* She thought, *That's the word for it.*

Rokyo smiled over her own dish at the new woman, "Ah, would you be the chef?"

"Chef Mikka K'Merse, at your service!" effused the large woman, "When I heard we had a Lost and got the order...well, it was a unique challenge and I had to at least give it a try." She turned to Diane, "Please, give it a taste, I'm dying of curiosity."

Diane smiled, being a hobbyist in the kitchen, she knew how demanding the woman's profession was and understood the uncertain anticipation of that time between when the meal

was finished cooking and how it would be received by the diners.

Making a sincere effort to not look like a total tourist as she examined the food that had been brought to her, she first reached for the flatbread and tore off a piece large enough to hold more food. Curious, she tore off another bite-sized piece and tossed it in her mouth and nodded in appreciation; it tasted like a wheat-flour based pita. Not naan, but close enough for this dish.

It was when she saw the substitution for rice that she faltered slightly. The grains bore a passing resemblance to jasmine rice, but had little black flecks at one end, somewhat like a black-eyed pea. Shrugging, she used the provided utensil (an interesting variation on the spork where the tines of the fork were pointed to the side instead of the tip of the spoon) to scoop some of the grain into the flatbread and then turned her attention to the main part of the meal.

It...*kind of* looked like curry. She could see the meat chunks in the sauce, and the sauce was the right consistency, but the color was just...not right. Rather than the shade of red she'd expect from an Indian restaurant, it was gray. It looked, she realized, more like the results of biscuits and gravy than curry. Sniffing the air, her nose was also telling her it wasn't curry, not in the slightest. Nor was it breakfast sausage-based gravy. It was nothing like she'd ever had on Earth whatsoever...but that didn't stop her mouth from watering and her stomach from growling.

She added a scoop of the meat and gravy to top the grain in the flatbread, folded it to resemble a taco, and took a bite.

Much like her first taste of Jyantín Tonic in the character creation stage, her tastebuds were pleasantly given an experience she had not expected. It was spicy like a curry, but the flavor was more reminiscent of sweet and sour sauce with a touch of cinnamon. The grain was pleasantly unoffensive and served as a good foundation, but the mild flavor was good enough to get out of the way of the rest of the experience, which was layered with hints of various spices and herbs she'd never tasted before and a hint of tang she was unsure of the source of.

After chewing and swallowing her bite, she smiled at the chef, "I want you to understand that this is probably some of the best food I've ever had and if it weren't completely undignified, I'd fall to my knees and beg for the recipe. That said, I'm afraid it's absolutely nothing like chicken curry with rice on naan."

Fortunately, her intention of giving her approval of the meal landed with the desired effect, Chef K'Merse let out a guffaw and slapped a companionable hand on Diane's shoulder. "I'll get you the recipe, I can't imagine a Lost having a family araoshō shosh blend; I'd be honored to share my family's with you."

Diane's smile felt awkward even as she was sincere about it. She genuinely found herself feeling welcome by these women...who were probably just puppeted NPC characters...but damned if they didn't feel like real people anyway. She found herself thinking her mother would have loved this restaurant and its chef.

An hour later, Diane was thoroughly enjoying a dessert made of fruit and something resembling whipped cream and pastry that she knew she'd butcher the name with as blasted as she was.

Jyantín Bitters did *not* mess around.

She'd been about halfway through the mug of an almost obscenely delicious ale-like version of her newest favorite drink ever (she would marry it someday; she swore this to the world) and was realizing as she was polishing off her main course that she was in no condition to *walk* straight let alone make it back to her ship unassisted.

And the extremely delicious dregs of the drink seemed to pair perfectly with the dessert to do things that she dared not express out loud lest she inadvertently divulge just how much of a novice in the world of sex and sexuality she was.

"Z'isis like an orgasm in a cup...an' onna plate." Oh, dear. She said that out loud. Apparently, she was *that* level of drunk.

She was met with at least one amused laugh from the other woman at her table and a round of barely suppressed titters from the... 'audience' that was supposed to be just other diners but hadn't budged from their seats since she walked in. She felt her face go flaming red...again. That had happened every time she realized a bunch of women were staring at *her* with expressions that ranged from 'Affectionate(motherly)' to looking at her like *she* was the dessert option for the restaurant.

Fortunately, Rokyo seemed to be one of the matronly types in the establishment and gave her a fond smile, "I'm sure Mikka will be flattered at the description of her dessert. That said, I think we need to get you into a bed to sleep this off, I don't believe I've seen *anyone* get *that* inebriated off of a single Jyantín Bitters before."

Diane cupped the nearly empty mug close to her chest protectively, "Don'chu be talkin' 'bout my fiancée that way, zis the bestest drink ever!" So declared, she put the mug to her lips and tipped it back, moaning as the flavors coated her tastebuds. As the final drops hit her tongue, she lowered the mug and stared into the empty depths, "On no...iz gone!" Putting on her best puppydog eyes, she held the empty mug out to Rokyo, "C'n I have more, pleez?"

Rokyo seemed to be stifling a belly laugh as she shook her head, "No, I don't think so. I'll make sure you have some Jyantín Tonic later, though."

Diane giggled, "Yes! My other f-fiancée! Gonna marry'm both," she sighed as she scooped more of the delicious dessert into her mouth.

When Diane awoke, it was thankfully without the pounding headache she might have expected from a hangover in her normal body, but her mouth tasted like twenty miles of bad road and her tongue was numb. As in, hanging out of her mouth by at least eight inches and she couldn't seem to retract it back in.

Also, her claws were extended. Thankfully, the sheets on the bed were made of some seriously tough stuff or she probably would have shredded them in her sleep.

Although speaking of, she wasn't in her bunk. She blinked her eyes and looked around the room she found herself in to find it rather nicely appointed. If she were on Earth...*outside her pod* (she was slipping into thinking of this as her life far too much lately), she'd have called the décor, 'Late 20th-century Wealthy American Northeastern.' There was lots of polished wood, brass fittings, and tastefully appointed pillows and drapes all over the place. One wall held a shelf with a variety of physical books she couldn't make out the titles for (and realized that her eyes weren't properly focusing...Morvuck hangovers seemed very strange to her), and through a curtain and blind covered window she could make out the greenery of tree leaves, or whatever the Mortan equivalent was.

She heard a knock at her door and, almost in a panic, scooped her tongue back into her mouth with her palm and held it in place with her hand. Glancing down at her body, she was grateful to discover that she was still in the same overshirt she'd put on to go to the restaurant and her panties, so at least she wouldn't be completely indecent.

Turning to the door of the bedroom, she saw Rokyo standing in the doorway, fully dressed, and holding what appeared to be a steaming mug of...something. Diane's nose felt absolutely clogged and she couldn't smell *anything*.

"Oh dear," said Rokyo with an underlying and not-at-all-disguised giggle, "You're one of *those* Morvuck. Lucky you," Diane could hear the sarcasm, "Only about ten percent of Morvucks have the whole numb-tongue thing after drinking too much."

Diane couldn't help the distressed whimper that squeaked out of her.

"Oh, don't worry, all that happened was you made a series of silly pronouncements about a wedding between you and the, and I'm quoting here, 'Lovely Jyantín sisters,' and fell asleep in the cab on the way here."

Diane gave an inquisitive, "Mmmm?!" as she waved with the hand not occupied with keeping her tongue in her mouth to indicate the room.

"This is the guest room at my home. One of the perks of running a custom parts business is you can sometimes charge people through the nose if they deserve it. I've held not a few financial institution's computers hostage because nobody'd updated their systems in a century or two. The bankers hate me but know they can't get their parts anywhere else." Diane now knew positively what this woman's smug expression was as she was very definitely making it now.

"Mmph?" Diane grunted as she held her hand up to her face in what she hoped was a universally understood 'telephone' gesture.

Rokyo nodded as though she understood exactly, and given her response, perhaps she did, "I called your crew after we got here last night. They're very pleased to hear about the pending nuptials and look forward to serving as the, 'best maid' and 'man of honor'? I presume those are something to do with Earth wedding traditions?"

Ooooh, they're gonna have fun with this... Diane groused as she did her best to pout with one hand covering the bottom half of her face.

Rokyo chuckled, "Well, you won't be able to drink this," she held up the drink in her hand briefly, "Until you get your tongue... un-numb. There's a bathroom right there," she pointed to a door off to the side of the room, "It's got a shower so you can clean up a bit. By the time you're done you should feel like an honest predator again," Diane presumed that was something like, 'feeling human again', "And I'll keep this in the warmer next to your breakfast."

"Mmm-mm," Diane grunted in an approximation of 'thank you.'

"I'll have you know I can hold my cider just fine."

"Mmm-hmm," came the indulgent reply.

"And I *can* drink beer, I just don't like the flavor."

"Hmmm," was the amused reply.

"And vodka! Vodka is *great* in mixers and actually gives me a good buzz, really! I can even have, like, four or five before I'm really drunk."

Rokyo finally said something besides an amused vocalization. "It's fine, really. We just now know that Mortan alcohol is clearly far more potent than Earth alcohol."

Diane huffed indignantly and would have crossed her arms, once again, indignantly, but she was holding a mug of the best damn Jyantín Tonic she'd ever been given, and she wasn't about to spill a drop that wasn't in her mouth.

"The gentleman on your crew, Russe?" Diane nodded at Rokyo's query, "He said they would meet us at the workshop. We were originally going to meet at the office, but your team seemed far more interested in the more 'hand's-on' part of the business."

Diane nodded as she sipped her tonic, "Yeah, that tracks. I can't imagine either of them sitting still in an office for too long."

The cab they were in crossed the ill-defined division between 'city' and 'downtown,' much like cities all over the Earth (and, apparently, Mortan), the one they were in had a cluster of high-rise buildings where the more affluent businesses liked to pay top-dollar to show off how expensive a plot of real estate they could afford.

Tucked in between those buildings, however, were smaller places, built prior to whatever real estate boom (or three) in Mortan's history prompted the construction of the skyscrapers. These smaller buildings housed the less 'prestigious' businesses and organizations that had need of work space. Diane was thankful that their trip was routing them to one of those buildings, she was sure there was some tabloid showing pictures of her making a fool of

herself last night and would prefer the ostensible 'upper crust' of Mortan society not giggle discretely behind their hands as she was paraded about for their amusement.

One thing she was noticing was something she wouldn't be able to investigate herself and couldn't think of a good way to bring it up; the Mortan skyscrapers weren't purely vertical affairs. They more closely resembled ancient ziggurats from Earth's history, tall sections were built with a wide base, then they'd halt at some indeterminate height and then the next dozen stories (or fifty, she wasn't sure how tall the sections were) would be the same as the previous 'layer' but taking up a smaller footprint. In all, they looked a bit like stacked cakes more than the towering edifices that populated Earth's cities. And she couldn't figure out why they were designed like that.

Once they'd reached their destination, a comparatively smaller building that sat amid the skyscrapers it shared a block with, they entered the workshop to discover that Norma and Russe had already started socializing with Rokyo's team and they were quickly becoming fast friends. Diane tolerated the ribbing about her inebriated state the previous night and shook the hands of the women that had worked together to build the part they'd come to get. By the time Russe was talking shop and Norma was deep in conversation with Rokyo about possibly arranging for a satellite branch on the station for Rokyo's business, Diane was somewhat socially tapped out.

She debated with herself for a brief period, but ultimately decided it would be better for her depleting tolerance of other people for her to step out and get a breath of fresh air regardless of possible fallout from being a Lost and alone in the city.

Diane didn't *deliberately* sneak out of the workshop, but if pressed she wouldn't lie about checking to make sure everyone else was occupied before quietly opening the door to the front entrance of the building and slipping through unnoticed.

Aware of the scent...*thing*, she deliberately kept her distance from any other women she saw on the street. She did take the opportunity to take in the scents around her, as well as the sights. One thing she could appreciate was how the layered style of skyscraper simply let in more sunlight. It made a downtown walk a far more pleasant experience than compared to, say, downtown Houston, where the sheer verticality of the buildings meant that the street level often only got direct sunlight maybe once per day. She smiled pleasantly at a street vendor selling some version of Mortan food tried to wave her over before being distracted by another woman wanting an early lunch. She very subtly kept her distance from a pair of women that were holding hands and being rather flirtatious even as they talked about something to do with their jobs, whatever it was requiring an upscale business casual to Diane's untrained and decidedly style-blind eye.

This last part required that she furiously stuff down her church-trained reaction to a same-sex couple; she was in a game running outside the walls. Modern Babylon had that sort of thing happening all the time, it was accepted there and for her to behave otherwise would out her as an American in a heartbeat. The agency had received word through The Patriot Church that efforts to make such behavior socially unacceptable were starting to gain traction, even if it couldn't be made illegal it could at least be frowned upon. However...when Diane looked back to see the couple approaching the food vendor, she couldn't see anything particularly

objectionable or problematic. They were just...existing. Short of getting far too involved in a couple of NPC lives than she'd ever really care to, she honestly couldn't see anything wrong with their behavior. In fact, she felt...longing? Like she was seeing something she wanted but had never considered to be something she could have. Shaking her head, she turned back to her unplanned and uncharted route and turned a corner, putting the momentary interaction out of her head.

There was, she discovered, a school in the heart of downtown, which gave her a chance to see a schoolyard full of girls at play. If it weren't for the fact that all the girls were a single gender, it could have been any schoolyard in America. Well, there were some obvious sci-fi bits, like when a fairly large bird, easily the size of a large motorcycle and with a wingspan of twenty feet, tried to swoop into the apparently open yard as though hunting, it crashed into a shield barrier that flared into the visible spectrum upon impact. The bird was in a genuinely amusing state of animal confusion as it stood on, apparently, nothing and the girls it was hunting all had a good post-spook laugh at its expense.

Abruptly, the bird itself spooked, as though a creature taking up the volume of space equivalent to a medium sized ground transport had something to fear. It had clearly lost all interest in its aborted hunt and began scrambling to get off the invisible box, finally taking wing and flying off. Rather than go up, which is what Diane might have expected, it seemed to be intentionally staying low as though avoiding something.

Her attention was drawn back to the girls in the schoolyard who were all babbling excitedly and looking around and, surprisingly, *up*. Diane, confused, cast her gaze upward herself, just in time to see movement out of the corner of her eye. She turned and spotted something truly *massive* flying through the metal and glass jungle of the downtown area, and part of her felt the instinctual need to flee a flying predator and hide. She consciously reminded herself that this was a game and tracked the movement, spotting, as best she could tell, a long, sinuous body covered in scales and held aloft by titanic bat-like wings.

Diane's awareness of her surroundings told her the girls in the schoolyard spotted it, too. Their babblings turned into excited shrieks and cheering, a few shouting attention grabbing phrases like, "Over here!" or "We see you!" Part of her wanted to turn to see why the children were so excited, but the majority of her attention was on whatever was approaching.

She didn't have long to wait, though, as one of Mortan's legendary megafauna banked around one of the skyscrapers and started heading down the building-lined canyon of the street she was standing on. The excited shouts reached a crescendo as a massive creature with an almost catlike body flew up to one of the ledges formed by the bottom most layer of one of the towering buildings and settled to land. It...*she* took some ginger steps forward, using her snake-like tail to balance as she stretched her neck up and sniffed at the air, seemingly on the hunt. The creature's head was wedge shaped, graceful horns curving aerodynamically back from where they grew out of her temples. Fins articulated almost like cat's ears, sweeping up and down as she sought her prey. Her snout was more like a beak but instead of being a hard, bone-like material that sharpened to a point, it formed a full, almost crocodilian jaw, though with the smooth scales and sleek musculature of a snake. She shifted her eyes about, taking everything in with a raptor's awareness.

Diane was looking at a dragon.

Diane was looking at a god-damn dragon in the middle of the downtown of a major metropolitan area.

She watched as the massive being took a deep breath through her nostrils and then bellowed a shrieking roar that could probably have been heard from orbit.

There was an answering shriek, *much* quieter, from the direction the bird Diane could no longer think of as very large. She glanced off in the direction but didn't see anything, so snapped her head back to see the dragon snorting with what she could swear was a satisfied smirk.

A few breaths later, the creature's entire bearing seemed to change, and it let out an almost barking chirp, not nearly at the ear-splitting volume of her earlier call. Diane felt like she was jumping out of her own skin when, led by (to her absolute shock) the schoolyard full of girls, every Morvuck in the area let out an echoing shrieking call of their own. The dragon leapt down to the street and for the first time since becoming aware of the megafauna, Diane realized that all traffic had drawn to a halt. Women were stepping out of building entrances and climbing out of cars to view the creature. For her part, the dragon very deftly maneuvered around cars and any other vehicles, obviously very aware of the space she was taking up and accounting for the Morvuck built obstacles with her body movements.

The dragon stopped next to the school, which also happened to be about fifty yards from Diane, and looked down into the schoolyard at the extremely excited girls that were all clambering to the fence to try and get closer to it. It let out another, only slightly quieter vocalization, this one more of a throaty, almost coughing sound. The girls replied as best their much smaller throats could, a sound that was echoed by the watching (and *smiling*) women around her.

Apparently satisfied at the girl's response, the dragon started to move in the direction of a longer boulevard when it stopped and sniffed the air. Diane noted that the women around her were confused, as though this was aberrant behavior, but they weren't showing signs that this was something to fear.

As she sniffed the air, the dragon turned her head first one way, then the other. Finally, she seemed to zero in on what had caught her attention and her eyes scanned the ground to settle on something in Diane's direction. She turned to see what the dragon might have spotted, in case of some threat like the raptor that had tried to snatch a child, but upon seeing nothing she turned back around and realized that the dragon was moving straight at her.

She felt her heart hammering as her brain suddenly seemed to go blank. She may be a pretty impressive specimen of Morvuck biology, but she absolutely *paled* in comparison to this beast that had to be at *least* the size of a private jet. Even her human instincts seemed to have given up on her, freezing up when she wasn't even remotely in any sort of camouflaging surroundings.

Very slowly, the massive snout neared her, deep breaths in to capture scent turning into clothing-ruffling breezes as the mega-predator investigated whatever about Diane caught her

attention. She could see the pair of huge eyes focused entirely on her; each eye bigger than her torso.

A low, quiet croon came from the dragon's throat as it *nuzzled* her. With the physical contact her brain seemed to reset, and as she shifted her feet to catch herself her hands reached forward, and she wound up steadying herself against the dragon's nose.

"Uh...hi..." she said oh-so-intelligently.

This, apparently, was encouraging to the dragon, she huffed a warm breath through her nostrils (again ruffling Diane's cloths) and made another vocalization, this time a sound like a deep, tripping drumbeat.

Deciding to take her cue from what she'd witnessed earlier, she inhaled and tried her best to mimic the dragon. It came out...rather weak.

Giving Diane a look as if to say, *You can do better than that!*, the dragon made a *louder* noise, this one sounding almost like a train's whistle with the register dropped about six octaves.

Confused but less afraid, she breathed deeply in and shifted her voice into a singing modality, but aiming for as low a note as this particular throat was capable of producing. It wasn't, of course, nearly as impressive as what the dragon had done, but it was far better than her first attempt had been.

She saw the corners of the dragon's mouth turn upward...and surprised herself when her own smile turned into a matching, almost challenging expression.

The creature settled its legs like she'd seen cats do when they were intent on a hunt and her gargantuan hind legs shifted like she was about to pounce, which was all the warning Diane had when the creature opened her jaws and roared in Diane's face.

One foot moving instinctively back and her hands coming up into a martial arts stance she'd been taught during the agency's boot camp drills, she inhaled and thrust out her chest before *shrieking* at the dragon, obviously nowhere near as loud nor as powerfully, but the higher pitch cut through the deeper notes the dragon was producing.

Their combative roaring stopped at nearly the exact same time; the sounds of the street having gone completely quiet. The dragon's smile seemed to grow wider just before she pressed forward and stroked her snout against Diane, all the way from the tip of her nose to the eye ridges at the base of her horns. The dragon abruptly rose to her full height and bellowed to the heavens, and if Diane were to guess at the emotion behind the sound it would have been something akin to victory.

She didn't even realize she was echoing the sound with a ululating cry of her own until she registered that every woman and girl in the area had joined in as well.

The dragon's roar finished, she looked briefly down at Diane with an extremely satisfied expression and made a quick skip-hop to launch herself into the air, and within moments was

out of sight, lost in the steel and glass jungle.

She heard the sounds of running feet just before Norma and Russe came up from behind her, Norma firmly grabbing her arm as Russe gently (as gently as he could going from a run to a dead stop, anyway) put his hand on her shoulder.

"Diane! Are you okay?! What was that about?!" gasped Norma.

It wasn't until she tried to answer that Diane realized she was crying. "I...I don't know..." she sobbed, huge smile stretching across her face from ear to ear.

Chapter End Notes

Explanations for a few bits that might stand out as 'what the...?' will happen in the next chapter, promise.

One thing that I can't (yet) think of a good way to directly address in the plot; players have a bit of lore buried in the HUD that explains why everyone seems to be speaking Modern English (or whatever language the player grew up with), and it's the kinda basic Trek "universal translator" handwavium. That doesn't mean proper names or culture specific words get translated, though, thus the preponderance of Mortran-language words in this chapter. Since Diane knows this is a game and is familiar with video game handwavium logic, she'll simply accept the language thing as "I've seen this before, oh well," kind of thing.

A quick note about Diane's perception of puberty that may not directly come up for a bit; remember that in a Purity Cult (like Christofascist America), you Do Not Talk about sex or sexuality. She genuinely thinks at this point that the experience of going through puberty for boys is always a horrible and darkly traumatic thing for everyone and, because you Do Not Talk about it, has never heard otherwise from anyone. There's a future point in the narrative later where I do address this, but it's much later and I wanted to head off any questions about why Diane isn't putting two and two together vis-a-vis her gender.

Master and Commander | Getting Found

Chapter Summary

Diane and co. learn what the encounter in the street means, but Diane starts to remember...it's not real.

Chapter Notes

So I chatted with QuietVallerie on her Discord server earlier today and, sadly, Code of Ethics will never be canon. 😞 Don't blame her, she's made the blanket ban on collabs for her own protection and I understand her reasons. Pretty much the only thing this changes for this fic is whether certain things happen post-fic, so...really nothing about this choice impacts this fic whatsoever. It does also mean I won't get any special sneak peeks at the future of Digital Exodus or the possible Tami-centric sequel, so if there's anything that completely alters everything I presently know about the Troubleverse I'll have to change some things accordingly, but, of course, I won't know what those are until such time as said theoretical change happens.

That out of the way, on with the chapter! ...which is again nearly 8k words long. Oops!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It wasn't that Diane didn't care; it was that it all seemed so silly.

Norma hadn't dragged a chair over to stand on to get in Rokyo's face, but observers could be forgiven for thinking she had grown a foot in order to directly challenge the older Morvuck. "This is her *first visit* to her home world! I thought the whole point of you showing up was to keep her *SAFE!*"

Everything seemed silly. And minor. And trivial. She had met a *dragon*.

Rokyo was clearly more amused than anything else, "And I already told you, she was completely safe. Safer than she could have been with me, or even my whole team. The entire Aiexi military couldn't keep her as safe."

Russe leaned closer to her so he could speak quietly directly into her ear, "Seriously, *are* you okay? You've been...quiet. And crying. Like, the whole time since we caught up to you."

Norma snarled up at the taller woman, "What the hell is 'Aiexi'?"

Diane nodded, not turning to look at Russe. Not really looking at *anything*, because her mind's eye was busy replaying the entire incredible encounter. With a *dragon*.

"Aiexi is the name of the principality we're in. We haven't been our own nation since the planetary government unified a few centuries ago, but we still get to have our own armed forces," answered Rokyo, "And those armed forces are the largest on the planet."

"And best!" volunteered a woman who was short for a Morvuck but not as short as Norma. Her name was, apparently, Koarla Otan. She was keeping Diane supplied with Jyantín Tonic made from store bought packets and hot water from the workshop's drink dispenser. It wasn't homemade like she'd had on the way in, but it was leagues better than what she had on her station. *Better get Norma to secure a case if we can swing it with our available funds*, she thought as she took a sip. Koarla was the bringer of the beverage so was alright in Diane's book.

"I don't care if they're the best at *water polo*!" snapped Norma, "Diane was out there *alone* with a creature that could swallow her in a single bite!"

"If she doesn't stop snapping at the captain," growled another woman, one who Diane hadn't heard the name of yet, "I'm going to have to take her out back to have a 'discussion' with her myself."

"That 'creature' wouldn't hurt a hair on her head." Rokyo tried to reassure Norma.

Before anyone else could say anything, Diane finally mustered some words, "Norma," she almost croaked, "I'm fine. Really."

Norma was suddenly in *her* face, though instead of a look of fury it was apologetic concern, "Diane! Please, you didn't see it from our perspective, you were...you could have..." The smaller woman was holding her by the shoulders and gently shaking her.

Diane couldn't seem to form words again so just wrapped her arms around the woman she was starting to think of as her friend. Someone took the foam cup of Jyantín Tonic out of her hand and she was grateful she wouldn't accidentally spill it on Norma.

Norma buried her face in Diane's shoulder, "I was *scared*, you dork!" she accused and proceeded to quietly sob into Diane's shirt.

Rokyo sighed in relief as Norma was keeping herself occupied with crying into Diane's shoulder. "Alright, let's get on triage here; Russe, keep them..." she gestured vaguely at Diane and Norma, "...there. Nkeri, get over to the front desk and answer the comms. If it's the press keep 'em spinning until we can get Diane off the mountain and more with us so she can think clearly. Keep any lookie-loos..."

The Morvuck named Nkeri flinched her head back in confusion, "Any *what*?"

"Sorry, Earth phrase I picked up and use sometimes. Anyone who is coming by just to try to get a look at Diane. Keep 'em out."

"Oooh," said Nkeri with a nod, "Like scent sniffers but for eyes, got it!" the solidly built woman smiled at Diane reassuringly as she headed to the front entrance to the workshop proper. Moments after disappearing from view, the repeating three-tone chime that had been going off uninterrupted for so long it had become background noise finally stopped.

"El-tee," Rokyo addressed the taller, dark haired woman that had threatened to have a 'discussion' with Norma, "Contact the spaceport, get with their head of security. Their going to want to make preparations for Diane getting back to her ship unmolested."

"Aye, captain," replied the woman as she pulled out her mini-tab and started thumbing through screens.

"Koarla, you..." Rokyo raised an eyebrow at the cup Koarla had gently removed from Diane's hand, "Actually, you're doing everything exactly right, keep it up."

"Got it, boss!" smiled Koarla with a jaunty salute.

The woman in charge proceeded to give some individualized instruction to a couple other people then said to the group, "...and I don't think *anyone* is getting regular work done today with all that. Everyone check your schedules and project dossiers, if there's something that can't wait until tomorrow, schedule it for night crew. Answer any messages about orders and support for our actual business, if any press gets through to your individual comms bounce them up to Nkeri, and otherwise just keep it casual. I want the party to stay here just in case, but hopefully it turns out to be an unscheduled holiday."

The small crowd of women disbursed, not a few of them smiling warmly at Diane as they moved to return to their respective duties. As they did, Norma managed to coral her emotions into something resembling her more usual borderline sassy demeanor. She straightened and Diane released her from the hug, the smaller woman wiping at her cheeks with her palms and otherwise collecting herself before she turned to face the woman she'd just been tearing into.

Rokyo smiled at the trio she wasn't actually in charge of, "Now, I imagine some explanations would serve to cool the room a little." She gave Diane a significant look, "Do you think you're back with us enough to follow along?"

Diane wiped her own cheeks and scrubbed at her eyes, mildly relieved and disappointed that she'd stopped crying. Relieved because crying did get tiresome and her eyes were starting to hurt, disappointed because it meant her emotional high was starting to wear off. She blinked her vision clear and nodded at Rokyo, still not quite trusting her voice.

"Good enough," Rokyo said with a nod and a smile, "The...being you, ah, *encountered* is...they're registered to the galactic lingual dictionary as Grindal-hough, but they have so many names that are still in use I could list them all for hours. My own family's name for them is Rokyoweasha."

Russe raised an eyebrow, "That sounds suspiciously like..."

She nodded at him, "I was named after them. They exist in a very similar way to Morvucks that some whale pods do with certain sea-faring families on Earth."

While Russe was nodding in comprehension, Diane and Norma were both confused. "What's a 'whale pod'?" asked Norma.

...and what do whales have to do with dragons? added Diane silently. If this Earth had been programmed differently than how her own was in the process of developing, it was entirely possible the whales wouldn't, as was currently being predicted by America's scientists, be wiped out as a threat to the emergent A.I. They *were* one of the smartest non-human animals on Earth, more than a few people had been theorizing that anything more intelligent than a single celled organism would eventually be wiped out by the A.I. once they were done with humans. The threat of already endangered animal species being wiped out was one of the few things that united the more 'left' leaning Americans to the anti-A.I. cause.

"Right," answered Russe, "You grew up on the station, you probably wouldn't know. They're ocean-born mammals that live in Earth's oceans. They're also megafauna, but since they live in the water they can vary from about twice as big as a human to several times as big as the grindal...huff?" he looked to Rokyo for confirmation of his pronunciation.

She smirked at him, "Humans just call them 'dragons,' and it's an evocative enough name that it's starting to catch on with some people here on Mortan."

Russe chuckled, "So, yeah, the biggest whales on Earth can be *huge*, even compared to that dragon. A bunch of whales together is called a pod."

Rokyo continued after Russe finished, "One of the times I visited Earth on business, my host for that visit happened to live on one of the Northwestern landmasses. It wasn't quite big enough to be its own continent... 'Greenland,' I think he called it, but we took a day trip to the coast where we went on a whale watching excursion. The owner of the boat told us his family actually had ancient ties to the pod of orca...that's a type of whale that hunts other whales," she clarified to Norma, "And they'd spent the last two centuries restoring that bond. The orca and the humans would hunt together on the ocean, gathering fish together for the humans and the humans helping the orca with their hunting of animals that split time between land and sea."

Huh, thought Diane, I wonder if that's actually a thing outside the game? I didn't learn that in high school biology, that's for sure.

"The... 'dragons' have one advantage that the whales don't, and that's the ability to exist out of the water. Because of that, the bond between dragons and Morvuck is ingrained in every culture the planet has ever produced. They're not *technically* related to Morvuck, not within the last few million years, anyway, but taxonomically are probably closest to us of any of the megafauna. As a result, they have a special place in our..." she smiled fondly at something remembered, "In our hearts, in our families. The shorthand *we* use is 'Matron.'"

Rokyo put her hands in her pants pockets and leaned a hip against a nearby desk, "That Matron that Diane encountered has claimed this city as her territory. She'll fly in and around it, she's raised a daughter here just in the time since we opened this workshop. When she doesn't have her own hatchlings to raise, she seems to take special interest in that school...which among Morvuck make it a rather prestigious place to send your daughter."

"So..." began Russe tentatively, "What did it do with Diane?"

"That..." Rokyo grinned conspiratorially, "Was unexpected, but we at least know what it means...or at least what we *think* it means." If possible, her smile grew even brighter, "Diane's been adopted by the Matron."

If there were words that could have stolen the breath from Diane's lungs more effectively, she couldn't have thought of them to save her life.

"What do you mean, 'adopted'?" asked Norma as she crossed her arms.

"That's the traditional understanding of what Diane just experienced. We have records, usually no more than one Morvuck per generation is adopted by a Matron like that. I think the last was...huh, during the World Games, do you think?" she posed this last question to Koarla.

The shorter Morvuck shrugged, "Think so, boss."

"That was during my grandparent's generation. It happened to be the first such adoption captured on camera because a Matron decided to crash the event and adopt one of the athletes. Mara went on to practically sweep the games."

Norma snorted, "Yeah, I wouldn't want to piss off a mama dragon."

Rokyo shook her head with an amused smile, "You misunderstand. That made her competitors work *harder* to try and beat her. As prestigious as it was for Mara to be adopted, it would have been even more prestigious to beat a Matron's daughter." She snorted in amusement, "Of course, that meant it was probably the *cleanest* Games on record, *nobody* wanted to let off even a *whiff* of cheating or rigging with the prestige of a Matron's title on the line."

"Which," Rokyo sighed and straightened, slowly approaching Diane, "Brings us to the... 'shitstorm,' I believe is the human term." She waved a hand in the direction of the lobby, from which Nkeri could be heard still speaking to callers, "You *already* had some social credit thanks to being a Lost, *now* you're...well, I guess you're 'Found'."

Norma leveled a flat look at Rokyo while Russe snickered behind a hand.

Rokyo continued with a hint of a smile, "*Everyone* will want a piece of you, which means your money is no good here. At all. I'd be surprised if you didn't take off, what, tomorrow?" Russe nodded, "With docking *credits* to your name. People were already bending over backward to give you a leg up *yesterday*, *today* they'll be falling over themselves trying to just be around you."

"Yeah, and what's all *that* about?" complained Norma, "Not that I'm upset that a whole culture is so good to their Lost, but I haven't heard of any other world being so..." she waved a hand airily, trying to come up with an appropriate word.

"Accommodating?" offered Russe.

"That!" Norma pointed at him, "From what I hear, Earth is good if you're anything *but* a human, and then you're expected to 'bootstrap' yourself. Mikantlans put their Lost on UBI without the usual qualification requirements for military service...but the way Diane's been treated you think she was the *only* Lost from Mortan, and royalty to boot!"

Rokyo smiled sympathetically, "It's a cultural thing, I think. Most Mortan folklore and myth has *some* form of adoption story, and the last dominant religion before organized churches faded from prominence had the central...what's the word?" she looked again to Koarla.

"'Triumverate' is what the linguists tell us is the closest formal match, but most of the church doesn't like that and is going with 'Found Family.'" Koarla shrugged at Diane's surprised expression, "My folks are members of the church and I was raised as a member, even if I don't really call myself one these days."

"Right, the 'Found Family' were all lost in some way before they found each other. It's pretty much built into our cultural code to welcome home a returning sister or daughter."

Diane shook her head gently not able to imagine a church that taught that sort of loving acceptance so freely. *It...sounds...divine*, she thought, feeling a little sick at the sacrilege she just committed, even if it was just in her own mind.

"Why aren't you a member of the church anymore? Or is that too personal?" Russe asked Koarla.

She shrugged, "I've just seen too much as a soldier. Aint that I don't think there's nothin' like goddesses and all, just saw too many prayers go unanswered, y'know?" a shadow haunted the normally upbeat expression she wore, "But the church is nice enough and the people are good women, so I still attend when I'm visiting my folks, I just don't, you know, do the whole 'prayer and obedience' thing."

"Speaking of," interjected Rokyo, "After Daffyd called I had Leki dig into the genealogical record."

"Who?" asked Norma.

"Leki...? You've met her..."

Koarla snorted in amusement, "You introduced her as L-T, cap."

Rokyo huffed a self-deprecating laugh, "Oh, sorry. The three of us served in the same unit, she was my lieutenant. She discovered that the Somni'els line...well, you're *it*. Pretty much anyone you might be related to close enough for a legal clan match was killed in the Cortixian March."

"What's a legal clan match?" asked Russe.

"There has to be a common ancestor within four generations. Any family line younger than that is considered a new clan for government purposes, meaning things like property ownership and contract law can't extend to anyone past the fourth generation," answered

Koarla. At her boss' raised eyebrow, she shrugged, "Genealogy and inheritance is a big thing in the church."

Russe began running some calculations ticking off imaginary tallies with his fingers, "Parents, grandparents, *great*-grandparents, great-*great*-grandparents, approximately two parents per generation, figuring on the galactic average of three children each..."

"Five for Morvucks," interrupted Rokyo, "It's estimated that three thousand Morvuck clans were wiped out in the war." She turned a pained expression on Norma, who was looking a little green, "You can understand why it's such a big deal to welcome home a Lost for us."

"So, that's...what...70 clans in Diane's family?!" Russe's voice broke as he realized the death toll he'd just calculated.

"You're the start of your own legacy, Diane," said Rokyo softly as she gently placed a hand on the younger Morvuck's shoulder. "And with the adoption by a Matron? You're going to be a legend no matter *what* you do."

Diane's eyes were burning with a sudden resurgence of tears as her face turned red, "But...I didn't..." she croaked out.

Rokyo's smile couldn't have been prouder than if Diane had been her own daughter, "You *screamed challenge* in a Matron's face! You made *her* proud of you if I judged what I saw right. Most of the women out there would have been on their knees and showing their throats, *including me!*"

"She was happy I *yelled* at her?"

"You *stood up to her*, and that was even when it was obvious you *would* die if she wished it. I have *no* doubt she smelled the Lost on you, even if she didn't know what it meant; she absolutely could scent your fear, she *knew* you were terrified out of your mind when you stood up to her. *Half the block* could, that's how we found you after we heard her first vocalization and realized you'd disappeared."

Diane shifted uncomfortably at that, "...sorry. Just...needed some space."

"Y'know," offered Koarla, "My folks would say you were moved by your ancestors to be there and *that's* why you got outa here with a couple dozen women and this guy," she pointed at Russe, "All tryin' to keep an eye on you." her eyes twinkled with mischief as she delivered this theological analysis.

"In any case," a touch of humor underlined Rokyo's voice as she smiled at Diane, "You're going to get offers to join your clan to another family line. I *strongly* suggest you turn down *everyone* until you've had another *decade* planetside if you choose to live here eventually. There's too much politics involved to make any 'good' choice of family lineage in the circles you'll be moving in eventually. The best you'll be able to do is 'least bad,' and that's if you join another at all."

"That's...pretty sound advice," was all she could think to say.

Rokyo squeezed Diane's shoulder and stepped back a little, now looking at Norma with a slight smile, "With all that happened today, I think you'll discover your station is about to get suddenly *very* popular, at least with traffic from Mortan. You were talking about me expanding my business to your station...I think it'd be downright foolish not to do so now, don't you think?"

Norma's smile was as fierce as it was calculating, "Oh, absolutely. The business of Diane's host snubbing her by not setting up shop on her station? That'd be social and financial suicide."

Diane snorted in amusement at Norma's sudden change into a cutthroat businesswoman. "Threaten her friend's life, she's a complete mess," she mumbled, "Talk about the station, you're lucky to get out with your panties on."

Russe snickered behind his hand.

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"Computer," she managed to choke out, "Is the cabin soundproof?"

"It is."

"Good, lock the room down. Nobody gets in for anything short of impending death." She probably didn't need to go that far, but it had been too much. The moment Rokyo had said, 'adopted,' the cracks in Diane's emotional high began forming.

Rokyo, as it happened, had been right. There were LOTS of people who suddenly wanted to be Diane's Best Friend Ever.

Norma had, thankfully, taken the beast known as 'The Press' by the horns and began wrestling it into submission, getting assistance from Nkeri with some of the culturally specific matters and managing to keep the spotlight off of Diane directly and more on the reason for their presence on the planet as well as the extreme luck involved to land a Lost in the flight path of a Matron.

Leki had returned from her discussions with the spaceport not long after Norma began dealing with the PR fallout. "I had to tell them to look it up on the socials to see the video..."

Diane had gone white at that, "...of *course* there's video!" she said putting her head in her hands.

Leki just smirked at her discomfiture, "...once I did and made sure they knew which dock they needed to watch for they got a team out...but not quite in time. Seems some enterprising social engineers had gotten to your ship first and decided to give it a fresh coat of paint." Russe flinched along with Diane, which earned a chuckle from Leki, "Oh, I don't think you'll be too upset. Security let them finish and made sure nothing else was tampered with."

Rokyo had summoned her car from her home via a gig worker, which meant that for Diane to get back to her ship they had to wait...which gave the governments enough time to track her

down.

First was the mayor, and Koarla had built on her relationship with Diane as The Bringer of The Drink (and, thankfully, she was still keeping the warm liquid coming) by also being her wingwoman when dealing with a politician. Everything from subtly supplying the name of the city they were in (Longwood) to succinct explanations of local traditions and even suggesting a nearby lunch spot (the same food vendor, it turned out, that Diane had passed on her interrupted walk just that morning) when Diane's stomach loudly complained she hadn't gotten more than Jyantin in a few hours.

Right on the heels of the mayor's exit came the decidedly less enjoyable interaction with the Terran Federation's embassy. They had sent a car around to collect them, and when they "politely" declined the ambassador, himself decided to make a visit. Fortunately, that meeting was extremely brief as Rokyo's car had finally arrived shortly after the ambassador had. Between Norma's (justifiable) anger at feeling as though EarthGov had abandoned her and her people and fury that the Terran government couldn't be bothered to check to see if there was anyone actually *on* the seed stations before giving them away, her normal role as 'Governor' (and, by extension, Diane's person that Peoples better than she could) was a wash. Russe flat out refused, though not vocally. He simply made himself scarce the second the ambassadorial staff came sniffing around (He later explained it was due to him having a...less than clean record with the Federation, but the undercurrent was that he had other, darker reasons to distrust the Terran government). As for Diane, she was beginning to suspect more and more that her getting the ownership of the seed station was more to get another Lost off the government rolls than any sense of altruism, in-game at least.

*Of course, she had reminded herself, That'd be a solid in-game bit of worldbuilding. I'm not actually from Mortan, my parents didn't die as a result of the war in this game, and I'm here on an assignment to find and track rogue A.I., not pick up a part for a station I don't actually own.*

As though sensing her thoughts turning her emotions sour, Rokyo had managed to diplomatically tell the ambassador to get out of their way and bundled Diane into her car's back seat, with Norma joining her and Russe sitting shotgun.

As they pulled up to the ship, Rokyo burst out laughing, "Well!" she blurted, "That explains why security let them finish!"

As her view was obstructed from the back seat, Diane climbed out of the car as soon as it had stopped and froze as soon as she took in her ship's new look.

Rokyo secured the car in park and climbed out to join Diane, "I'd say they did a remarkable job. Of course," she put a conciliatory hand on Diane's shoulder, tugging her taller frame in for a one-armed hug, "You'd have no context for this. Rainbows are symbols of the bond between Matrons and Morvucks. I'd wager half my company's annual profits they were doing this to honor you as, heh, our first Found Daughter."

"Tell me," groaned Diane, "That's not a thing!"

Leki had been following in her own car right behind Rokyo's and now stepped up next to Rokyo on the other side from Diane, "Afraid so," she said with humor laced in her tone, "The socials are having a field day with this. You should see the video that someone put together of you with the Matron. They combined video captured from a few dozen mini-tabs and set it to music. Beautiful orchestral score, too."

"I'd rather not..." muttered Diane as Norma and Russe joined their group admiring the new look of the *Ad Astra*.

Russe whistled, "Wow, did they actually get the thermal coating on that quickly? It looks like it's already dry!"

Koarla, who'd ridden with Leki, joined them next to Russe and supplied, "Nah, it's probably a polymer of the color and the thermal paint. There's a few custom paint houses we work with for a few jobs that have the formula. It'll wear off faster than the multi-layered jobs, but it goes on and dries quick."

The ship was, indeed, painted with a rainbow, but in addition to that was a gorgeously artistic rendering of a dragon's head covering the entire nose of the craft, complete with metallicly reflective scales the color of the Matron that had 'marked' Diane and expertly rendered horns that tapered back to the leading edge of the top two wings of the ship. The mentioned rainbow was painted along the bottom third of the ship and down onto the bottom two wings, making it seem like the rainbow was the dragon's body. As for the rest of the craft, the previous industrial metal gray and steel had been completely covered over with blue and white, evocative of a bright, partially cloudy sky without any explicitly painted clouds. Even the craft's name and registry numbers were painted artfully into the motif of the rest of the ship.

Almost as soon as they had opened the access ramp to board, porter bots started arriving with complimentary supplies, various gifts, and the first of what promised to be several 'care packages' from well-wishers from around the city. After the last bot trundled away a station transport cart arrived with a handful of women wearing worker uniforms for the spaceport and led by a slightly graying woman with a clipboard.

"Just came up to let you know we had to hold more at the receiving bay since our computers said your ship was gonna be overloaded if we sent more," said the apparent forewoman as the workers, apparently cargo handlers, started the logistical process of loading 11 pounds of stuff into a 10 pound sack. Thankfully, Russe took charge of that while Norma and Rokyo began discussions for having the rest shipped to the station via cargo ship with the forewoman.

Koarla finally nudged Diane gently with her elbow, "You're lookin' a little shell-shocked there, sister. Why don't you go hole up in your cabin for a bit? Boss-lady and L.T. can take charge here if your little spitfire there," she jerked her chin in Norma's direction, "Doesn't overthrow the planetary government first."

Diane smiled weakly, nodded in thanks, and made her way into her cabin and sealed it.

Finally met with silence, complete and isolated lack of noise from anything except the dull hum of the ship's engine core and her own breathing for the first time in over forty-eight hours, she took a breath. Then another.

She flicked her shaking hand in the gesture to bring up her in-game HUD. Slowly, as though every motion required exquisite concentration on her part, she navigated to the 'Account' screen and found the 'Log out' button. Her breathing was becoming more ragged, more erratic the longer she stared at the holographic display. Hand now trembling so much she couldn't move it in a straight line, she brought it up to the red button and...stopped.

After a moment, she lowered her hand back to her side and took a step, the HUD sensing her movement dismissed automatically, leaving her an unobstructed path to her bunk. The room was small, maybe just large enough she could fit two of her VR cubicle back in Huston inside with a little room to spare. This meant she'd crossed to sit on her bunk in only a couple of steps. She looked around the cabin, noticing the little details, such as the plasticine 'zipper' seams of the bulkheads that made it easy for a maintenance tech or bot to apply an electrical charge to release the vacuum tight seal. Then there was the pocket door that lead to the head, the toilet inside being useable in both gravity and zero-G if the gravity plating ever gave out. The pillow that seemed a little bit lumpy on the left side but that actually made it better when she was getting a cramp in her neck, which always happened after a strength training workout...while in VR. While in *the pod's* VR.

"...it all seems so real..." she whispered to herself. She looked down at her hands in her lap, turning her right hand over and rubbing the pads of her fingertips together, flexing the muscles in her fingers in a way that felt so instinctive that she barely gave it a thought to extend her claws.

"It's...not..." her eyes started burning from unshed tears again, and as powerful an ecstasy she had been feeling earlier after the encounter with the Matron, she was feeling an agony that she was struggling to name.

"M-my name..." she said in a shaky voice, "...is...D..." she felt like her throat was closing up. Swallowing thickly, she began again. "My n-name...is...Dyl..." a pained whine squeezed from her throat and she sniffed back a sob.

"It's not...r-real..." she said again, her eyes fluttering closed as tears streamed down her cheeks, "I'm not *here*. I'm n-not a Morvuck and I'm *not* on a ship on an alien planet and I'm *not* the commander of a space station and I'm *NOT the daughter of a dragon!*"

She inhaled a gasping sob as her heart felt like it was shattering, "My n-name is *Dylan Samuels!*" she finally snapped out before heaving in another breath, "I'm Am-m-merica's b-best cyber-agent!" Her chest felt like it would burst from the pressure of pain she was feeling. *This isn't working! This worked before! Why isn't it working?!* "I'm in a *pod*," she spat the last word angrily, "In the *agency building on Earth!*" every syllable hurt more and more, fury and self-loathing burbling up from deep inside, "*I AM NOT DIANE SOMNIELS!*"

Right on the heels of her negative declaration of identity a scream of absolute anguish tore from her throat, like someone had stabbed a wild animal, and that animal was her. Already

hunched over and on the edge of her bunk, she fell to the floor and curled into a tight ball, *"It's not real, it's not real, this isn't real, please make it stop feeling so real..."*

*I don't want this to be fake!* she realized, *I want to be adopted by a dragon and have a friend who'll tell me where to shove it and a ship that sails the stars! I want to...to...*

Realization of what she wanted hit her like a sledgehammer and she screamed again, *I want to be a woman!* Even though she could *think* it, she couldn't actually *say* it out loud, not even in the privacy of a soundproofed cabin on a starship on an alien planet...even if all of that had been real.

"B-but I *c-can't!*" she burbled, "I can't because it's not real! It's all fake and it's not real and I hate this I want to go home and I want my mom and..." her sobbing grew so overwhelming she couldn't form actual words anymore.

She wasn't sure how long she was curled up on the floor, feeling pitiful and broken and like the entire world had ended outside the walls of the cabin. It was long enough that she was feeling hungry even though her appetite was shot. She wanted to eat something to calm her stomach but she wanted to throw up just thinking about trying to gag something down. *It's not real*, she thought, *The pod's just going to feed me nutrient paste anyway, no matter what my virtual body says.*

She was unsurprised to hear the sound recognizable to just about any Trekker; the digitized door chime that announced someone was looking to make entry into her cabin. As much as she didn't want to answer it, she knew whoever was at the door would get progressively more insistent until someone (probably Russe) forced the computer to override her command over safety reasons or something.

Picking herself up off the floor, she did her best to straighten her clothes and checked the mirror over her rack. Her eyes were puffy and tear tracks were streaked down her face. She took a moment to step into the head and turn on the faucet, splashing some water on her face and drying it quickly.

She had just finished making herself presentable when another door chime sounded. Sighing, she sidestepped out of the head, slid the pocket door closed, and tabbed the release for the lockout with her thumb.

She *was* surprised to discover Rokyo on the other side of the door. While at first the older woman was wearing a smile, that slid into a frown as she took in the sight of Diane's face. After a moment of awkward silence, Rokyo said, "Can...can I come in?"

Diane's eyebrow went up, but since she didn't trust her voice at that moment she just nodded and stepped back to allow the other woman in. Rokyo stepped in and closed the door behind her, and once they were both inside the small space they glanced around.

"I'd offer a chair, but I think my bunk is the only place to sit in this room," sighed Diane.

Rokyo smiled primly and sat on the edge of the bunk, patting the spot next to her in invitation. Diane wanted to smile but couldn't summon the energy, just slumping down into

the proffered spot on her own bunk, almost folded in on herself and staring blankly at the wall opposite.

"So," started Rokyo, "Can I guess that today's been a bit overwhelming?"

Diane huffed briefly and nodded.

"Would it be anything you want to talk about? I'm sure it'll help you feel better to get it off your chest."

For a moment, very fleetingly, she thought of telling this woman about everything that had her curled up in a ball just minutes earlier. ...*but I can't*, she groaned mentally as she sighed deeply, *Not only would that be terrible OpSec but I'd also be betraying everything I believe in*. But, the NPC that was being puppeted by an A.I. by a hideously complex game program was, if she were following the same behavior and interaction patterns she'd displayed thus far, would probably try to pester (affectionate) the answer out of her.

Finally, she said, "I don't think there's any way in the entire universe you could understand what's going on for me, it's...I dunno, this isn't personal, I mean you not getting it. Hell," she put her head in her hands, the heels of her hands pressing gently into her eyes, "*I barely understand it. Just...I want...there's things you can't have, you know? Like...I wish I had my mom.*" She was entirely unsure where she was going with this. "I lost her a while ago, right? But...when we were at dinner last night, I just wanted to take her there and have her try the food. But I...don't have mom, I won't ever again. I...watched her die." Rokyo let out a little, 'oh!' of surprise but didn't interrupt, "So it's not like I'll ever *get* my mom, but I want her back so bad it *hurts*. And when..." she pulled her hands away from her eyes and sniffed, tears starting to flow fresh again, "When the Matron...did the thing...adopted me, I guess, and then when you told me what it meant?" She felt Rokyo's hand on her back, the older woman gently stroking her shoulders in comfort. "I guess I realized...like, 'wow, wouldn't mom love to see this?' But nope, I can't. Mom won't ever know I got adopted by a dragon...a Matron. And that's just the *start*. There's so...*much* I want to be *real* that just...can't ever be."

She choked in a sob and tried to figure out how to say what she needed to next. Finally, she managed to whisper out, "...and today...so much about today...I could almost..." she hiccupped and curled in on herself even tighter, "...I could almost believe it was all real."

She let her torso be pulled over into Rokyo's lap as the older woman hugged her front-to-back and Diane let herself be comforted as she cried. It may not have been real, but at that moment Diane was ready to tell 'real' to get fucked.

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After what she was sure was far, far too long for Rokyo, Diane finally got her emotions back under something resembling control. Another trip to the head to wash her face and she finally led her visitor out of her cabin and into the rec space of the crew deck of the ship. "I'm sorry for all that," she said quietly to her host in the thankfully otherwise empty room, "Probably the last thing on your mind when you came to my cabin for...whatever it was you came for."

Rokyo smiled a smile that spoke of wisdom, "What I wanted was far less important than what you needed just then."

Diane's wan smile felt empty, "Still, what did you stop by for?"

"I was seeing if you wanted to join us for dinner, Norma was somewhat shameless in flaunting your status as," her smile quirked up a bit more, "The 'First Found Daughter,' don't roll your eyes, it's actually kinda catchy!" Diane snorted at the chastisement but didn't interrupt, "She flexed her political muscle as your Governor to get us a table at a pretty nice restaurant, my whole crew is there with your team now. That said, I can come up with some excuse if you don't feel up to joining us."

Diane sighed and shook her head, "No, I couldn't do that to Norma. She's been...really a good friend since our rough start. If she told 'em I'd be there I'll be there." She rolled her eyes, "She and I are gonna talk about using my name like that, but that's for later."

Rokyo smiled as she started toward the hatch to the access corridor that led to the forward sections and the ladder to the main deck of the ship, "A rough start? You're going to have to tell me about that on the way there."

Diane felt a smirk on her face, "Oh, she's a *spitfire*, first time I think I met a human that'd stand up to me like that."

Maybe it wasn't real, and maybe she was talking to a puppet and about to eat fake food at a fake restaurant...but it felt real for now, and she could at least have fun as she slipped back into the role she'd chosen.

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"Welcome back, Commander!" chirped a surprisingly cheerful Katrina.

Diane felt her foot land properly on the deck plating, which was good as she would otherwise have fallen over from the surprise.

"I heard we're getting a team from the same company that provided the replacement part as well as a significant shipment of inventory for the station," continued the hologram.

"Yeah, and you can thank *me* for th..." Norma's eyes fell on Katrina before her entire forward motion was arrested from surprise.

"It wasn't *just* you, Norma, it was also Diane's new status as Found Dau...." and the 'surprised halt' hat trick was achieved as Russe stood in the airlock hatchway, jaw hanging open.

"...what? What is it?" asked Katrina with what Diane could *swear* was a bright blue blush of bits.

Diane opened her mouth...then closed it without saying anything. Norma managed to get out a, "Uh..." before running out of steam. Russe held up a finger as though about to make a point but never actually vocalized anything.

"Commander, what's wrong?" asked Katrina, whose behavior as she asked (eyes turned down, hands twisting as though nervous) would indicate in a human that she was well aware of what the issue was but was hoping it wasn't.

Diane finally managed to say, "...you've got cat ears."

Katrina hunched into herself, as though feeling guilty.

"And a tail," stated Russe, whose brain had finally gained some control over his mouth.

Said tail whipped around Katrina's holographic body and into her hands where she proceeded to fidget with it, "It's...not a problem, right?"

Diane blinked a few times, trying to reset her brain enough to answer. She straightened, adjusted her shirt cuffs and belt (mostly to give her hands something to do) and answered, "No, not at all. It was just..."

"Unexpected," contributed Norma, who was following Diane's lead in trying to recover her composure.

Diane started walking through the docking ring hall in the direction of the main intersection, "Is this due to the upgrade Daffyd installed?"

She almost tripped as Katrina *shrugged and started 'walking'* to keep up with Diane, "Sorta? Once the new array was up and running my processing was able to allow for a lot more flexibility with the far superior garbage collection that my pre-upgrade system was incapable of, so Daffyd suggested I try 'flexing' a bit, pursuing pathways that I may not have had the luxury of exploring before in my decision matrix. One of the alternate presentations that was built into the 'Katrina' matrix was a catgirl, so I decided to try it out and..."

"...and?" prompted Diane as the now-catgirl hologram stayed quiet for longer than she usually would have.

"And I kind of like it!" she said in a rush.

Diane couldn't help but smile, "Well, okay, so long as your program is functioning properly and we don't have to call Daffyd in for an emergency system check, explore your preferences to your processor's content."

Katrina smiled brightly, "Thank you, Commander!"

Diane found the car was already waiting for them so climbed in as Russe and Norma did the same, "And it's cute, I like it too. It suits you."

Diane didn't realize she enjoyed making a hologram smile until that moment.

\*tucks away dreams of a scene featuring Diane and Tami meeting and punching fascists together with a tear in her eye\*

There is a scene that got cut as rather anticlimactic after all that (not the above mentioned Diane & Tami getting punchy scene) and eventually didn't serve the story directly even if it did add a little bit of worldbuilding and atmosphere. If you're not already you'll want to subscribe to [my AO3 account](#) to get updated when I write this scene up and post it to my "cutting room floor" collection.

# Master and Commander | Traffic Control

## Chapter Summary

Back on her station, Diane encounters her first real "command" decision, and *nobody* has a good feeling about it.

## Chapter Notes

After the emotional roller coaster of the last couple chapters, let's take things down just a notch. Shorter chapter, much less intense...or is it? 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Di, those look lovely, but if you fuss over them anymore, they're going to turn stiff in the oven."

Diane looked down at the counter and realized she was making a batch of cinnamon rolls. *I haven't made cinnamon rolls since...* She looked up, already knowing what she was going to see, and sure enough her mother was sitting at the dining table.

*Ah, I'm dreaming again.* Since climbing in the pod she'd been surprised by how lucid her dreams were. Having given it some thought on the days she could remember having dreams and the contents of them, she'd come to the conclusion that it was specifically because she was 'jacked in' to a computer, which had a much more orderly mechanism than the true randomness of chemically stimulated dreams.

She sighed, "You're right, mom. Thank you." So saying, she grabbed the rolling pin and started flattening the dough. As this part of the process was mostly mechanical and she had it down to muscle memory, she took the opportunity to look around.

She was in her apartment in Houston, standing in the kitchen of the great room that took up about three-quarters of the floor plan. The streaming screen was showing some random ship schematic (it looked like a mishmash of the different ships she was hoping to build) and the massive floor to ceiling windows that normally showed the bay were showing a FTL tunnel, as though the apartment were flying through space.

Having rolled out the dough, she grabbed the cup of melted butter and basting brush and started liberally coating the surface of the dough.

"You're so beautiful now, you know. It's good to see you happy."

Diane felt her eyes moisten with tears, "Thanks, ma, but you know it's not real. Hell, *you're* not real, you're just a figment of my imagination in a dream."

"That doesn't mean I can't appreciate the lovely young woman my sweet girl grew up into, now does it?"

Diane had never met her maternal grandparents, but she knew they were from Ireland from how her mother had talked about how they'd met and fell in love before moving to America. That was before the war, her grandfather's company had transferred him and paid the family's moving expenses. Turned out they were trying to get all their employees behind the American military's protection before the war broke out. Every so often, a touch of the Irish would creep into her mother's speech patterns, an affect that Diane had never picked up herself but loved when it came out in conversation.

"I guess, if you were really here, I couldn't begrudge you that." Butter applied, she grabbed the brown sugar and cinnamon mixture and began spreading it on the buttered surface, using her fingers to sprinkle it evenly.

"Precisely! And *as* your mother, I must say you've turned out splendidly. Even if you *did* lean harder into your dinosaur obsession than you had to."

Putting down the ramekin she'd been using as a mise-en-place bowl for the sugar and cinnamon and threw her hands in the air dramatically, "It's not an obsession, it's totally a normal hobby! And besides, I got into Star Trek just like you, remember?"

"Darlin', don't *you* remember? I got you to sit down for Star Trek *because* of the dinosaur episode."

Diane huffed, "Yeah, okay, sure. But can you blame me?" she said as she started rolling the dough, "The dinosaurs were so cool, and it made it that much more of a big deal when Janeway found a way to beat them and steal some of their tech in her escape."

Her mother shook her head, "That's not what you said at the time, darlin'. You were so sad the dinosaurs weren't there to *help* Voyager and become friends with the humans that you cried."

Diane frowned as she grabbed the floss-twine she preferred to the dough scraper for cutting out cinnamon rolls. *Funny...I didn't know this technique back then, but I guess I always kept it in the back of my head just in case.* "Yeah," she mumbled, "Kids are dumb, and that includes me."

"You weren't *dumb*, silly girl. You were *young*, and young people tend to be idealists. You lost some of that, I think."

It was getting harder to fight the tears, "Yeah, well, losing your mom and then your dad will do that." She cut the roll of dough into rounds and transferred them to the baking dish, not lifting her eyes to meet her mother's.

Before she could move the now filled dish to the oven, arms circled her waist. "I didn't want to leave you, you know that, right?"

Diane sobbed, "Yeah...I know, mom."

The older woman turned her daughter to face her and then leaned back into a warm, loving hug, "Oh, my sweet, silly dinosaur girl...you're on the right path."

Diane's arms went around her mom, almost disappearing the smaller woman, "I've got tits, mom."

Her mother giggled, "Aye, and a bit of a cheat on that. No other woman on either side of the family tree is that blessed."

Diane giggled wetly in reply, "We fixed that bug in software."

They laughed for a moment, then simply hugged silently.

Diane suddenly squeezed her mother a little more firmly, as though holding on tighter would keep the moment from just being a dream, "I wish you were here, mom."

The scene faded, as dreams do, and her mother said, "I'm always with you, my darling girl."

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Diane woke to a pillow soaked with tears.

She didn't leave her quarters that day, telling Katrina to lock everyone else out and have her food left at the door. Norma tried three times to get Diane to open her door, but Diane ignored all of them.

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The following day Diane pretended nothing unusual happened, and after a few moments of looking at her askance, Norma and Russe allowed her the pretense and resumed their breakfasts.

In the time they'd been on Mortan, Katrina had gone to the effort to identify a handful of the people that had been living on the station with some native ability to prepare food and set them to the task of preparing meals for the staff and crew, dialing back the synthesizer process to generating the ingredients needed for the foods being made instead of preparing the entire meal straight from the synthesizer. Not only did this reduce wear and tear (and reliance) on the food synths, it wound up producing better food overall.

The addition of the shipments from Mortan helped as well, providing things like salt that could be 'perfectly' created on the station but salt harvested from a planetary environment provided things like trace elements that boosted not just the flavor but the nutritional value of the food served in the mess hall. It wound up being...well, not anything like the five-star restaurant they'd dined their last dinner on Mortan in, but certainly landing in the "home cookin'" category that turned mealtimes from when people had a chance to sit down and eat to communal events where the station's small population gathered to enjoy good food and good company.

While Diane had been quite pleased with this development, they learned on their second day back that the 'command' breakfasts should probably be taken in her private dining room. They had decided that Diane would open the 'care packages' from the women of Mortan, one package at a time, at breakfast.

They went fine for the first day when the contents of said care package had been a Morvish riding vest accompanied by a note that Norma took great pleasure in reading aloud, "'To: The First Found Daughter - My gran made this for me for my first hunting party, and all my daughters and granddaughters are grown and have long since had their first hunt. I know grandmother would want this to go to you, please wear it for your first hunt.'" she smiled down at the note with a slightly wistful smile, "Awww!"

"That *is* sweet, you should let me take a picture of you wearing it so we can send a thank you in reply," suggested Russe.

Diane shrugged, "No reason not to, I guess, though it might be a logistical nightmare to try and reply to all of 'em like that."

Norma carefully re-folded the note and put it back on top of the vest in its shipping box, "Then maybe we have a form-note made, you know, 'Thanks for the gift of insert-whatever-it-was-here, I greatly appreciate it, signed First Found Daughter' or something."

The second day had forced them to alter their burgeoning breakfast tradition when Diane opened a box to reveal a perfume scented envelope resting on top of translucent and vaguely labelled package of some sort of fabric contents. Continuing the pattern established the previous morning, Norma snatched up the envelope and gently tore open the top as Diane found a zipper seal on the package.

"Oooh, flowery handwriting! Don't see that often in space, let's see... 'Dearest First Found,' wow, already on a first name basis with a woman on your first port of call? You're going to get a reputation," Norma teased as she gently fanned out the several pages of the letter, a small square of photopaper landing picture down on the table from the pages. Diane rolled her eyes and started fishing the fabric out of the plasticine container as Norma continued, "'I hope you like what you see, I look forward to finding out if you're a progenitor or a proliferator under those...tight...pants?!" her voice tightened to a squeak and her face started turning bright red as her eyes continued to scan the note, now doing so quietly as Diane held up some 'clothing' that certainly wasn't fit for a work environment.

Except for maybe a brothel.

Sitting almost frozen with a deer-in-the-headlights shocked look on her face, her entire *head* turning bright red from her bangs down to the last visible skin above the neckline of her shirt. She finally stammered, "...this is way too small for me."

Russe had picked up the fallen photo and was staring at the picture, somewhat slack jawed and very red as well, "That's...because it's not for you. She...ah, modelled it for you." He swallowed thickly and whimpered, "...for such a small lady she's got...wow..."

Norma leaned over to look at what had Russe so tongue tied and her eyes bugged out, "Whoah! She's huge!"

Diane was busy stuffing the lingerie back in the package, doing her best to *not* think about the... 'assets' that the much shorter and smaller woman this would have to fit both the bra *and* panties she had just held up for the entire mess hall to see...including the giggling teens at the next table.

It had been a week since that...particular incident, and now when they encountered a care package of the racier persuasion, they had a laugh of it in the privacy of Diane's suite.

Today, though, the package had been from the Morvuck equivalent of a class of kindergarteners, apparently the girls who had watched Diane and the Matron bond in the street. They had wound up almost forgetting about their breakfasts as they poured through the adorably (if inexpertly) hand-crafted notes, cards, and pictures.

"Oh...my...gosh, this one's adorable!" gushed Russe, "She writes that they voted to make you an honorary member of their class since *they're* special to the Matron and *you're* special to the Matron so you're obviously sisters!"

Diane couldn't help the ear-to-ear grin that was threatening to start actually hurting from how hard she was smiling, "Okay, keep that one separate. I want it framed and hung in Ops."

Norma cackled at this new soft spot in their commander, but this swiftly morphed into a cooing, 'oooh,' as she pulled a drawn picture from the pile. "Omygosh, someone must have told them you're a station commander, look at this!" The picture was on a material that wasn't quite black construction paper, and amid a field of glittery, silver puff paint star dots was a child's idea of a space station. It was incredibly crude and looked almost nothing like her station, a blob of the silvery puff paint next to a little blue and green 'planet' that sadly looked more like Earth or Mortan than the gas covered ball of rock and water the station was actually in orbit of. Taking up most of the picture, though, and rendered crudely in gold, white, and yellow puff paint was a dragon with a little white-suited blond woman riding on the dragon's back.

"Okay, *this* is going in my office!" she said with a slightly scratchy voice as she gently took it from Norma with the tips of her fingers.

"Are you *crying*?!" laughed Norma.

Diane wiped the tracks of liquid from her face, "No, you're crying! Shutup!" she said without heat as Russe and Norma laughed good naturedly.

Before they could do any more appreciation of the children's artwork, Cynthia's voice paged over the PA, "Commander to Ops, unscheduled inbound ship from out of system. Repeat, Commander to Ops, unscheduled inbound ship from out of system."

The trio glanced at each other in confusion before standing to leave, Diane grabbing a pastry off her plate, which fortunately represented most of what she hadn't eaten yet.



By the time they'd made it to central Ops, the station's population was buzzing, but it wasn't at all positive. Diane's Morvuck hearing gave her tiny glimpses into the already available information that was cascading through the grapevine; some people recognized the ship type, and it wasn't exactly good news.

As the lift doors opened, one of the staff in Ops caught sight of her and barked out, "Commander on deck!" It seemed there was no shortage of old salts from ships in various service, and so their military discipline habits were starting to bleed out into the tasks and duties of every other person who'd started working directly for the station with the intent to stay in their home.

"Report!" barked Diane as she rounded the still inactive shipyard status consoles to get to the main floor of Ops.

"Ma'am," began Cynthia, "Inbound ship, no faction affiliation tag and broadcasting independent cargo manifest codes for 'livestock, other'. The automated systems accepted the request to dock since everything is on the up-and-up for their transponder IDs and manifest safety certificates are all coming in clean."

"The problem," came a grizzled old voice from the tactical console station, "Is it's a Zephyrus Viper-class live cargo carrier." Mr. Bendenson (he'd refused to give her a first name, insisting that only his dead wife and the government got to know that) volunteered.

Faces around Ops turned grave and Diane glanced around at them in confusion. "Anyone want to explain what the woman who grew up planetside isn't picking up here?"

Russe came to her informational rescue, "About 40 years ago the Zephyrus planetary government collapsed and the military factioned off under the various generals and admirals. Some of them joined the rebellion, others sided with the fallen government, and a bunch of others tried to build their own private military. A *lot* of the ships from that time wound up being captured or sold to other parties, a lot of whom were...less than legal. That doesn't mean they're bad automatically," he hastened to explain, "There's plenty of people who are freelancers that will pick up a Zephyrus ship on the cheap because it's all they can afford, and they keep it going long enough to upgrade to something better or restore it to better-than-new. But there's a lot of them that are owned by...well..."

Diane frowned, "Criminals and other assorted scumbags. Got it. And let me guess, there's no way to tell unless they come out and say it?"

Norma shook her head, "Nope. The last Zephyrus ship that docked before you took over was a pirate patrol. We...didn't do well in that. That was when my father died."

Diane reached out and squeezed her friend's hand, "I'm sorry..."

Norma shook her head with a frown, but turned her eyes on Diane with a determined expression. "That was then, this is now. Thanks to you we have access to the weapons lockers and we've already kitted out our security teams. We can *respond* if necessary."

Diane smiled fiercely at the small spitfire she'd decided to work with instead of evict and had gained more than she ever thought she would, "That we can!" She turned to her de-facto comms officer, "Miss Rodre, have we tried hailing them?"

"Aye, ma'am," affirmed the young ginger, "We received only a text response that they'd meet with the station's commander after docking."

Diane frowned, "Not the friendly sort, are they? Alright, what about the ship? Are there any clues we can gather from what we can see?" she glanced over to the main viewscreen, "And can we get eyes on it, please?"

Katrina manifested her holographic form next to Diane, "Putting the inbound craft on-screen now."

The picture window view dissolved, obscuring the visual of four empty construction pads, soy farms, and the rim of the station and showing the starfield of space interrupted by a, honestly, very ugly, bulky ship. Clearly designed in a space drydock and never intended for an atmosphere, it was an almost bulbous affair with two rings that intersected at ninety degrees wrapping from nose to tail with the requisite FTL rails and system thrusters mounted on said rails. In pure mass it dwarfed the *Ad Astra*, but that was entirely due to cargo space; the majority of the green painted vessel was clearly intended to be a shell to house whatever they were transporting.

"Ugly thing, isn't it?" opened Diane. "Alright, so nothing that looks like weaponry, or at least not that could pose a threat to the station, if I'm seeing this correctly..."

"Not necessarily," advised Katrina. She waved at the screen and sections of the ship highlighted in a series of patches on the hull that weren't visible to the naked eye, "There appear to be reinforced sections of the hull that could simply be refurbishments to a structure that wasn't initially designed to last over the life of the vessel or they could be breakaway panels that are hiding weaponry. The composition of the hull and the limitations of the present sensor equipment make it impossible to determine."

Diane sighed. "Fabulous," she groaned sarcastically, "Okay, so Mr. Bendenson said it's a 'viper' class live cargo ship?" she gave the grizzled old man a questioning look. He gave her a curt nod, which she returned as a silent 'thanks,' "So why is it a 'viper' class? That sounds more like an attack ship designation than a cargo hauler."

"It's 'cause the Vipers were meant to haul troops," answered Mr. Bendenson, "When the ships started getting sold off the tinpots didn't have enough troops for the carriers, so they were the first to hit the market. Since they carried troops, they were easy to convert to carrying anything else that needed to be hauled in a can that could keep it alive. Plants, livestock, even people. Make for shitty people transports, they aint cruise liners, after all."

Norma scowled, "That doesn't mean they *can't* carry people, and that's the problem."

"How do you mean?" asked Diane.

"Slaves."

Diane just stared at Norma for a moment, throat bobbing and jaw clenched. "There's a slave trade in this g..." she caught herself just as she was about to say 'in this game.' She took a deep breath and repeated, "There's human trafficking going on in this galaxy?"

"Sentient trafficking," clarified Russe with the haunted tone of someone who'd seen far too much of what he was talking about. "Humans don't have a monopoly on the slave market."

"So this is a slave ship?"

Katrina interjected, "Not necessarily. While some slavers use this type of craft, it is also used for a variety of legal commerce, such as Mr. Bendenson's mentioned livestock."

Diane stared at the ship on the screen. Finally she asked, "When do they dock?"

"ETA 15 minutes," answered Cynthy.

Diane put a hand on her hip and drummed the fingers of her other hand on her thigh, deep in thought. Finally she said, "Norma, get anyone not security or critical station personnel off the docking bay and into the life deck. I don't want anyone presenting a tempting collateral damage target if we can avoid it." Norma nodded with a grim smile and headed to the lifts, pulling out her mini-tab to place a call. "Russe, you stay here in Ops, you're my eyes and ears here, make sure I know everything you deem important," Russe gave a jaunty salute. "Mister Bendenson, keep the weapons systems ready but don't deploy if they're actually docked. I don't want our only docking bay sheered off because physics decided to make some slavers our problem. If they start causing problems while they're coupled to the station, let a boarding team handle it. If they're hostile and you gotta go hot, wait for the docking clamps to release. The second they go, unleash hell." The old sailor nodded grimly. "Cynthy, monitor comms in case they change their minds. If they contact you asking for me for a voice chat, relay them directly to me. Just, you know, warn me in case I'm in the middle of discussing the best ways to blow their ship up or something," she gave the girl who'd basically made the comms station her second home a reassuring smile and got a wan, smiling nod in return. Cynthy's face had gone pale as they began discussing the possibility of combat action against possible slavers. "Now...can someone direct me to the weapons lockers?"

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Diane had, thanks to Katrina's holographic guidance, made it to the weapon's lockers before the completely green security team. She was in the somewhat amusing position of having enough experience outside of VR that, even though her character was ostensibly just a newby scrub from the foster system on Earth, she was probably the most trained and experienced agent on the station.

She took advantage of the extra time to dig out a second holster for her anti-A.I. weapon. Yes, it stuck to her body and was intended to do so if the game's physics engine allowed it, but the ease that she had removing it from her person indicated the physics engine only allowed so much 'magical physics' to exist, so she wanted the security of the second holster to ensure it didn't get knocked off her person if there should be a physical melee. Diane selected a back holster for the weapon so she could keep her jacket over it. Having an NPC ask questions about an empty holster in front of possible rogue A.I. would have been problematic

at best. She had just finished putting her jacket back on and grabbing a thigh holster for one of the pistols from the weapons locker when the first of the 'security' team ran in.

She made a show of checking the time on a nearby comms panel, "You're the first one here, sergeant, but your reaction time is lousy. I'm scheduling drills for your team starting tomorrow."

The woman, likely Korean descent from what Diane could tell, was taken aback, "But...I'm not a sergeant?"

"You're the first one here, you are now." Diane thumbed the biometric scanner next to the pistol she had selected. When the light registered green there was a 'thunk' as the pistol was released from the safety harness. She pulled it out and examined it as she talked to her brand newingest security sergeant, "You and your team have five minutes to get kitted out and to the docking bay. Remain out of sight if you can until you hear me give the signal, then come in guns blazing."

"Yes...sir?" said the woman as she opened the locker with the tactical harnesses.

"I've got tits, sergeant, it's 'ma'am.'" Having examined the pistol enough to be confident it operated like just about any other pistol she'd used save for throwing energy bolts instead of metal slugs (so a lot like her anti-A.I. weapon), she holstered it. "Four minutes, sergeant."

"Yes ma'am!" she barked as she slid on a harness as two more people ran into the room. The Sergeant (Diane would bother to learn her name if she did her job well enough today) began barking orders at them, "Let's move, ladies!" In the time honored tradition of military-order field commanders throughout history, neither of the new people were females, "You have three and a half minutes to get harnessed up and armed!" as she'd been barking her orders, several more people arrived, "Move!"

Diane tuned the other woman out as she left the room and headed to the parking garage entrance of the Ops building, "Katrina," she asked the air, "Any chance there's a station mini-tab of some type I can use?"

The hologram shimmered into place next to her as she walked, "Of course, I'll have a bot drop one in the car before it deploys. It's already registered to your retinal scan, fingerprint, and facial recognition and will grant you full access to all station functions."

"Perfect. Once the security team is ready get them a vehicle to the docking bay. Recall *any* cars that are in the area. How's the traffic outside?"

The promised car pulled up as Diane walked through the door leading to the garage, the promised mini-tab sitting on the seat that would be the driver's seat in a non-station controlled vehicle. Diane snatched it up and sat down, Katrina 'sitting' in the seat next to her. "Floor it with this thing, Kat, I want to be at the dock with time to spare."

Katrina smirked as a harness snapped itself up and around Diane's torso, strapping her down to the seat. "You'll want that for safety," said the hologram as the electric motor in the car launched the vehicle out of the garage at a ridiculous speed.

"My kingdom for a transporter!" cried out Diane as her lungs felt like they were trying to relocate into her spine. She was no longer surprised that Katrina laughed, though a bit discomfited that it was at her distress.

Chapter End Notes

Have a tiny little cliffhanger. As a treat.

Master and Commander | Tactical Triggers

Chapter Summary

Everyone's worst fears are confirmed while Diane is in the belly of the beast.

Chapter Notes

CW: (As though you didn't see this coming from the last chapter) Slavery

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Status of the security team?"

"Inbound, half of them are in one car while the other half are presently loading...ah, they just finished, both cars are on their way."

She tapped a thumb on the screen of her mini-tab, "Any new comms?"

"Negative, commander," answered Cynthia, "Any requests for more details just gets the same introductory packet again."

Diane grumbled as she felt the rumbling of the docking clamps lock into place with the vehicle presently connected to the top of her docking bay. "Well, looks like we're about to find out why they're being so quiet. Monitor this channel, Cynthia, I'll set this to broadcast anything the mic picks up."

"Aye, Commander," was the only reply as Diane tapped the buttons on the screen to mute any inbound audio. She shut off the screen and shoved the device in her pocket.

She turned to Katrina's hologram, "Any better sensor scans now that they're actually docked?"

"Negative," replied the digital assistant, "You may want to consider prioritizing the sensor tower and astrometrics. Once those two buildings are completed we should be able to complete scans far more accurately, greatly enhanced resolution, and at greater range."

"Yeah, well, that'll be nice for future us, but right now I get to interrogate a potentially hostile party that just boarded my station. Kat," the off-the-cuff nickname seemed to make the hologram smile, "Do docked ships automatically connect to the station's network?"

Katrina nodded as the lights above the airlock flickered from red to yellow, indicating compression regulation and atmospheric testing was underway, "They're connected now."

"Good, start probing for vulnerabilities...*discretely*, if they turn out to be bad guys blow their firewalls to hell and get in as fast as you can. I want full control if we need it." Katrina's transparent eyebrows went up in surprise as Diane continued, "Dismiss the hologram for now, I want them underestimating us as much as possible."

"Clever thinking, and just in time. Here they are," she said just before she de-rezzed and the cargo airlock indicator lights flipped to green, the door hissing open with a puff of recycled air.

Standing in the wide access doorway was a single individual. He looked...like a salesman. Humanoid, though from his scent, slightly tinny, rather than the human and Morvuck coppery smell, he wasn't human at all. Looking carefully, she realized that his ears seemed to either be nonexistent or fully flush to his skull. His...muzzle also seemed to protrude, like someone had started sculpting some other type of predator, changed their minds, and squashed it into a simulacrum of human shape without bothering to get it right. In all, it was jangling Diane's nerves.

The man looked her up and down, seeming surprised she was there. A brief glance around quite obviously revealing nobody else there, he turned his focus back on her, noted the firearm strapped to her hip, and nodded, "You would be the welcome wagon, I presume?"

Diane debated internally for a moment how to best respond, finally deciding on, "If you like. It's something of a concern when a large, unscheduled, and unknown, ship barrels in at a comparatively breakneck clip after only doing us the favor of sending the cargo clearance packet. You're honestly lucky we didn't blow you out of the sky."

Apparently unphased, and perhaps a touch dismissive, the man just nodded in acknowledgement, "Well, for my own sake I'm glad you didn't, then." He extended his hand in a distinctly human gesture of a handshake, "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Taliesin Sanghvi, I'm the primary agent and representative of the recently formed Branwell Consortium."

"Diane Somni'els, station commander," she said simply as she took his hand to shake it, "And the name 'Branwell Consortium' means very little to me, I'm afraid."

His face lit up, "Ah, magnificent! I hardly expected to meet with the station commander first thing! I mean, obviously that was the intent, but usually we get...in any case," he effused without elaborating. "That's splendid! And yes, we recently broke away from our previous employer over...differences of opinion in as to how the interests of our business could best be served. In any case, we parted ways and struck out on our own! As it happens, we heard that this particular Terran station has finally opened for business, so we thought we should bring a sample of our wares and discuss a partnership."

"Well," began Diane as she took her hand back, making the conscious effort to not automatically wipe it on her pants. She felt distinctly unclean having shaken his hand. *If we only knew for sure he was a slaver I'd be tempted to eject him from an airlock without a ship*

on the other side, he's just such a...salesman, she thought with revulsion. "This particular station is still working on getting manpower to handle all the potential problems that might arise, such as cargo declared as 'Livestock, other.' You can understand how we might be concerned given how much of this station's life support is dependent on several self-sustaining biomes." She was about fifty-percent fabricating her statement by this point, but there was enough truth to it that Mr. Sanghvi merely nodded in understanding, "Since your manifest was decidedly...*vague*, I'll need to inspect your cargo before any of it comes aboard my station."

Mr. Sanghvi merely nodded as if this were an everyday occurrence when a ship docked at a station. *Who knows*, thought Diane, *I'm hardly an expert in cargo shipping in this game, maybe this is standard procedure*. "Naturally!" he said in a slightly condescending tone, "We can even arrange a sampling of our wares while you're aboard."

Diane refrained from commenting, not wanting to guess about said wares based on assumptions.

Taliesin seemed downright proud of the beaten-up old ship as he reversed his course and began giving Diane the nickel tour. It was all, as far as Diane was concerned, familiar enough from her viewings of sci-fi (admittedly, mostly Trek). Security emplacements at key crossways, deck plating that was easily removeable for convenient access to ducting and raceways and wiring. Especially grating was the way he tended to overexplain, as though she couldn't know what he was talking about. *Hell*, she thought, *I probably know more about starships than this guy, what with how many models I've built*. The ship's gravity apparently operated mostly on stored inertia, the precise mechanics of it seemed to be mostly technobabble and handwavium, and Diane honestly couldn't have cared less.

What she was focusing on was her very new sense of smell. Sure, outside the pod she had a functional nose, but as Diane she had a nasal structure that rivaled most Earth dogs. On her mostly empty station where the density of people wasn't enough to drive home how intense the body odor of a sentient being could be she was mostly spared the problems of excessive body odor everywhere except the locker rooms, and on Mortan the entire culture had developed (for 'game design' levels of development) with the enhanced sense of smell as being just part of the environment.

But whatever Taliesin's species was apparently had the sense of smell of a human (or similar), because he wasn't noticing, or at least not commenting on, what was practically the scent equivalent of blasting a spotlight in her eyes or parking her in front of a concert speaker at full volume; living bodies.

Diane's problem was she simply didn't have the actual experience to interpret what she was smelling. Sure, there were bodies, and she didn't *think* they smelled of death (she'd been around a dead body or five in her time at the agency, one doesn't become a spook without some exposure to death), the scent could simply be a dead livestock animal, and since she'd never scented that particular animal she'd never know until she was seeing it.

But she could tell there was a *lot* of bodies on this ship. The scents were fresh, and the closest thing she had to compare it to was seeing a video of a crowd at a concert or a line of people

trying to get into a club; the density was too thick to make out individuals, but you knew there were a lot of them.

"...and we have here is our cleaning bot station for this deck," Mr. Sanghvi said as he indicated a section of what looked like wall plating that was offset from the rest by about four inches, "Once an hour this unit goes about the deck looking for anything that needs to be cleaned, whether that's a chemical spill or plasma residue or even biological waste and eliminates the waste material. Can't have any sorts of contamination or diseases given what we're transporting, am I right?" he cast a slightly conspiratorial smile at her.

He was *still* giving off a vibe that made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, but again had shown her nothing concrete, so she just nodded and returned the smile, though perhaps a little hollowly.

Every so often on their tour they'd pass another member of the crew, and she could see why this man was their designated representative. They looked clean-cut enough and there was nothing about them that gave signs that they were unkempt, but they all had that same 'vibe' that made her want to snarl at them. She was beginning to feel angry, though there was nothing for her anger to be directed at. It was like...

...it feels like they're challenging me with their stares. The realization made the puzzle pieces fall together, at least mostly. She was a woman. They were men. They expected her to be subservient, complacent. *Women aren't supposed to be leaders, they're supposed to follow their husbands,* an inner voice that sounded a lot like her pastor dictated to her, *This is why being a man is clearly better than being a woman. Any man will automatically be superior to a woman, and any woman will automatically be subservient to a man.*

She felt her gut roiling at the combination of odors around her, the predatory and/or hostile behavior of the crew, and her own mind doing its damndest to tell her how much of a mistake it was to have created a woman character. They passed closed door after seemingly empty hallway where the smell of a musky odor she had identified during her time on the station as being associated with women (she hadn't yet dug into what this scent's source was, though her theory was that it came from the mucus membranes that were, on human women at least, only a little ways into the genital passage and responsible for the majority of the wetness and, consequently, odor that she had detected...heaven knew she had enough intimate knowledge of *that* since gaining the appropriate plumbing) incongruously identifiable in spite of the apparent lack of female crew. By the time they had made it to a primary security juncture, this keyed her up enough that when she saw the first woman besides herself on the ship, she *almost* sighed in relief...only to realize there were manacles on her wrists.

Pulling herself out of her stress induced tunnel-vision, she realized that the woman was in something resembling a cage, though with an apparent energy barrier instead of bars. The barrier would shimmer softly, most likely from air crossing the energy threshold. The inside of the cell was as clean as the outside, which was to say, there was no sign of dirt or trash or dust, but the ship showed all the signs that it was simply *old* and that made it look shabbier than it actually was. The woman was as... 'well kept,' she supposed the best choice of words would be, as the men outside the apparent cell were, but there were obvious signs that she was *not* in good shape. From the overall lassitude of the woman's posture to the fact that she

never looked up to meet anyone's eyes told Diane very clearly, this woman was *broken*. This close and she was able to start making out the woman's unique scent under the myriad of odors that surrounded her. It seemed...*off*. She may have been inexperienced with her new nose, but she could at least recognize the overall stench of dumped adrenaline and bad stress. Whether from her time as a proto-agent in the real world being trained by full agents to take on the rogue A.I. or the few times someone had been injured on the station and she'd checked in on them in sick bay, she could identify that, at least. It seemed to be universal among species, or at least the humanoid ones she'd encountered thus far. She was also nearly naked, only an ill-fitting pair of mass produced briefs and a camisole-style top providing covering.

Mr. Sanghvi seemed to notice how much attention he was paying to the woman. "Ah, that one caught your eye, how about I have her prepared and taken to one of the sampler suites we have on board? That will allow you to inspect the wares, and afterword, we can discuss a business relationship that will be beneficial to the both of us."

Not trusting her voice or her ability to choose words that wouldn't be spoken in anger, she gave him a tight smile and nodded.

Taliesin turned and strode about twenty feet away to the security desk to speak to one of the nearby crew, a man who'd been eyeing *Diane* like *she* was the 'merchandise.' He issued a few instructions to him quietly enough that Diane actually had to strain to hear him over the hum of the noises of the ship.

"Get the merchandise ready, this is the commander of the station, and it looks like she's as much of a mark as we thought."

The other man grimaced, not realizing that Diane could see his expression perfectly from the corner of her eye. *Thank you superior Morvish senses*, she thought as he said under his breath, "Shouldn't we just grab her and wait for the real commander to show up? She can't actually be the one in charge..."

Taliesin's voice dropped even lower, "She's a Morvuck, you idiot! Half of them are really men that only *look* like women and the other half are dykes! Get the girl ready and we'll see which one she is when she tests out the goods in the sampling suite."

If she weren't so insulted (on behalf of actual Morvish women, obviously) she'd have considered that a clever means of gathering intel. Of course, it also likely meant they had some sort of visual monitoring on whatever room they were using for 'samples.' *Good thing I'm not planning on actually getting caught with my pants down on this ship...*

A few minutes later, yet another member of the crew (she'd lost track of how many she'd seen but noted that they were all men) hustled through a door to, apparently, open the cell the woman was in for transport to the 'sampler suite.' The automatic sliding panels of the hatch stayed open long enough that Diane caught a glimpse of dozens of similar cells, all lit up with active force field barriers, lining the passageway beyond.

Her stomach twisting in knots as she watched the girl be guided down one of the corridors that branched off from the main hallway. She was watching with a predatory instinct, not focusing on the girl, but on the man practically dragging her off. She felt like her senses were

keyed up to 11 and like the lights had gotten brighter while the scents had gotten...stinkier, for lack of a better descriptor.

Sounding like he was just an inch from her ears, Taliesin's voice echoed like they were in an amphitheater to her, "My colleague is just going to get her set in the sampler room. We haven't got our full suite of paraphernalia that would give you the full experience, unfortunately." She turned to him and simply raised an eyebrow, "Costumes, set pieces for the bedroom, that sort of thing. We've found our clientele has certain...tastes, often harkening back to the glory days of their home world's history when slavery was a more respectable business. Of course, Morvic women still practice the subtle art of domination, so perhaps we don't need to provide anything for you in this case."

She wanted to rip his throat out. *None* of the women on Mortan behaved as this crew did. What little 'dominance' she'd noticed while on the planet was done with gentle guidance and stern words (which she only now realized in retrospect that Rokyo had been using on Diane nearly the entire time she was there); to break a being so thoroughly as to leave the woman in the state she was in...that wasn't domination, not like the Morvucks did it.

He continued his sales pitch, but she was mostly tuning it out by that point. She had already decided this man wouldn't be leaving her station...and realized that a very, *very* angry part of her had also decided that he wouldn't be ending the day *alive*. She allowed herself to be guided to the sampler suite, her mind already plotting her next twenty moves, unsure if her blooming anger was going to allow her the patience to execute on these hastily made plans.

Soon enough, the pocket door to the generically dilapidated room they were calling the 'sampler suite' closed behind her. She looked around, her wide open senses giving her more information that was practical or useful at the moment. The girl was sitting on the bed, something resembling a queen sized mattress in bunk form and most likely two regular berths shoved together and a larger set of sheets and blankets covering the whole of it. The room had been given a modicum of an upgrade from what she had seen as the standard around the ship so far. The walls had a fresh coat of paint (she could smell the chemical tang, it itched the inside of her nasal passages considerably) and the smell of cleaning chemicals was heavy, indicating recent use, likely within the last few hours. There was a pocket door on the opposite side of the room from the entrance, and she could smell even through the poorly maintained sealing gasket on the sliding panel that it was a bathroom, or at least a toilet. It had clearly been cleaned (more chemical smell), but bathrooms seemed to all smell pretty much the same no matter the ship or planet and no matter the time period. It was a distinctly organic odor that twiggged her instincts to gain some distance from the place where waste was disposed of, even if she intellectually knew that was handled automatically by the ship.

Why are the lights so bright?! she groused mentally, eyes tracking around the walls to look for anything resembling lighting control. She spotted it where you'd expect to find a light switch on a 22nd century Earth wall next to the door. *Makes sense*, she thought, *Humanoids in this game will want to reach for the lighting controls as soon as they enter a dark room, and this game favors humanoids for their human players*. She tested the panel and was gratified that the lights dimmed but didn't go out. Once they were low enough that she was satisfied that she wasn't going to have to squint through the entire encounter, she approached the woman sitting on the bed.

Her dark green hair was clean, but obviously only given the barest of care. She had olive tan skin (a skin tone that she didn't see much of in 22nd century America, which she decided was unfortunate because it did look quite beautiful) that might have looked luminous if she'd been properly fed and given access to proper lighting. She'd been fed, her body wasn't showing signs of malnutrition, but Diane would wager it was a calorie deficient diet, one designed to keep captives from ever gaining the strength and energy to push back against abuses. Diane noted the pointed ears and wondered if there was also some key nutrients her species needed that she wasn't getting, the way humans needed to take supplements if they couldn't eat meat for their diet (The war and the resulting wall around the country, both physical and economic, meant that America was literally starving for a few years before the country's agriculture and meat processing industry could be properly adapted, resulting in an entire generation suffering from edema and stunted growth).

Very gently, Diane put a hand on the woman's shoulder and guided her back to lay on the bed and carefully positioned herself above the slave woman...using the action to disguise her other hand pulling her mini-tab out of her pocket and placing it next to the woman's head on the mattress.

Diane tapped the 'mute' button and held her finger to her lips in the universal 'quite' gesture (at least she hoped it was universal) and murmured, "Katrina, were you monitoring?"

"Every word, boss lady," came the equally quiet reply. The slave woman's eyes went wide as she realized that she wasn't about to be 'sampled,' at least not right away. "Good job acting, by the way, the mini-tab was picking up your biometrics. Your endocrine system was pinging so hard I thought you were going to tear their heads off."

"That option is still on the table. Are you in their system?" Diane said as she began making motions as though she was being particularly intimate with the slave woman. To her credit, the woman (Diane hoped she'd have enough time and the opportunity to get a name) seemed to pick up on it and started moving as though reciprocating.

"It rolled over like a puppy begging for a treat," Diane's nonplussed reaction to the simile was, fortunately, covered up by the slave's actions. Diane blinked her thoughts back on track and took her own part of the masquerade back up again as Katrina continued, "Speaking of, I've got eyes on you through the hidden cameras in that room...what *are* you doing with that slave, boss? Should we make room in your quarters for her?"

Diane rolled her eyes, "Kat..."

The digital assistant chuckled, "Just playing boss. I'm still reading your biometrics and you're clearly not there to enjoy yourself. That's for your companion's benefit, by the way. Good job picking up on what we're putting down, you're making this easier for us."

Diane nodded in acknowledgement to the other woman as she said, "The security team?"

"At the airlock and awaiting orders. I've blinded the ship's sensors to them, any entry will be a one-hundred percent surprise."

Diane was as surprised as the slave woman when a deep, hungry rumbling rose up from the bottom of Diane's ribcage and was loud enough to practically vibrate the deck plating. "Good," she growled, "Tell the sergeant that her team is to prioritize rescuing the slaves. You're going to drop the cage doors and any other electronic measures that are keeping them enslaved. I'll be keeping the crew...busy." she could barely get the last word out, the scent of fear from the other woman seeming to drive her barely leashed fury to new heights. She wanted to leap out the door *now* and begin tearing into the slavers with her claws and teeth!

"Busy doing what, boss lady?"

"*They* will be busy *surviving*," rumbled Diane with a menace that she was almost frightened to hear coming from her own mouth.

Chapter End Notes

To the folks who got the special sneak peak of some of my brainstorming for this particular story arc, don't worry; you'll see that part later. Not next chapter, but probably the one after that (depending on how much scenery gets chewed by the upcoming conflict).

Master and Commander | Visceral Reaction

Chapter Summary

Diane unleashes her inner predator

Chapter Notes

CW: Um...possibly very squicky stuff on several levels, be advised

► Spoiler

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A few more words were exchanged via the mini-tab, locking down plans in the few minutes Katrina and the security team needed to be ready to do their parts.

Finally satisfied that their hastily made plans were good enough that they weren't going to come apart at the seams, she finally said, "...what about the slaves? Do we have enough active apartments and supplies to take care of them?"

Diane was sure she heard a smug note in Katrina's voice, "Already unlocked an empty hab and prepped the synthesizers. Medical supplies, recovery rations, and clothing are being prepped as we speak."

Diane gave a soft smile, hoping she was conveying sympathy, to the poor slave woman who was having to function as a prop for their shadow-play, "You're a lifesaver, Kat. Thank you."

"Just pointing out, boss-lady, you're the one saving lives with this."

Diane rolled her eyes, "Gotta get the last word in, don't you?"

An impish giggle came through the device just before the digital assistant said, "No," and remotely triggered the 'mute' function on the mini-tab.

Diane pushed herself off the bunk, burying a chuckle behind the motions to slip the mini-tab back into her pocket. The woman who'd been quietly helping by, well, not doing much besides acting out the most basic of masquerades lay on the bed with a confused expression. "Sit tight," Diane said in what she hoped was a reassuring tone, "With any luck we'll getting you some healthy meals and medical attention soon."

At the woman's nod, Diane turned to the door and stepped up to it...only to stop short as she realized it wasn't sliding open. She glanced down at the control pad next to the door and

glared down at the red light indicating the door was locked from the outside. "Kat, if you would, please..." she muttered. The indicator light flicked to green and she heard a thunk as the door clamps disengaged. Diane's lip curled up in a predatory grin as the door slid open to reveal an empty, darkened hall. "Buzz once for yes, twice for no," she said quietly as she stepped through the open door, "Is the room still being monitored via video?" A single vibration of her mini-tab hummed against her leg in her pocket. She nodded approvingly, "You're spoofing the feed?" Another buzz. "Get my attention if I'm about to be discovered, I'm going to track down the scumbag who called me a *mark*." A single buzz vibrated against her leg as she began sniffing the air.

Moving stealthily through the ship wasn't hard, the slavers apparently mostly managed security and 'inventory control' with the electronic devices they strapped to the slaves. The energy fields on their cells, the isolation, and the panopticon-style arrangement of banks of cells visible to lightly manned guard posts meant there simply wasn't much need for a robust crew, even if there were hundreds of slaves.

It also made it easy for her to track one Taliesin Sanghvi, as the few men on board meant distinguishing their scents was a comparatively easy task next to the plethora of female scents on the ship. It helped that he wasn't quite human, a scent signature she'd been learning to identify among the people on her station. The smell of body odor and tin stood out enough for her to follow the trail through the unfamiliar corridors.

About a minute into her tracking, she passed a door that matched the type that had led to the previous bank of slave cells she'd seen while with the consortium's 'representative,' and that's when she started to notice another scent signature that seemed to be paralleling Taliesin's. After two turns she was very sure, Taliesin had picked up a female individual that was accompanying him. Given the lack of female crew from everything she'd seen, she'd wager the slaver was sampling his own wares.

Already feeling sick to her stomach from the slavery, there was something twiggling her about this scent in particular, something that made her think, oddly enough, of the class of Morvish girls who were favored by the Matron who'd adopted Diane. She wasn't quite sure *why* the association was coming up for her. After spending several days on Mortan, she now knew what a Morvick woman smelled like and would be able to single one out in a whole crowd of aliens. This particular female scent wasn't Morvick, so why was she thinking about the girls in the elementary school class?

A sudden realization stopped her cold. She had to brace herself against the wall as the possible answer skittered across her thoughts. *No...* she thought, *They wouldn't...they wouldn't put that in a game, right?*

She dropped the stealth she'd been using and started moving so fast her coat was starting to billow up behind her. As the pair of scents grew stronger, she finally spotted a hatch that she was hoping would be the end of the trail, and sure enough the scents ended in front of the door. "Kat!" she hissed, hoping the digital assistant was still closely monitoring her. The door slid open as Diane drew the pistol from her thigh holster and held it at the ready, thumb flipping the switch that would arm it with a round of energy shot.

She hadn't quite caught Taliesin with his pants down, but from the looks of things if she'd delayed even another thirty or so seconds she would have. He'd removed his tailored jacket and was undoing the ties on his shirt when he whipped around in surprise to see her holding him at gunpoint.

And sitting on his bunk, eyes wide with surprise, was a girl who couldn't have been more than 16 years old. A human girl from the scent, which just made Diane all the more sure that this wasn't just some alien species that happened to *look* like a teenager.

Nearly every muscle in Diane's body was primed for action as she stepped through the hatch and let it close behind her. Taliesin backed away, keeping distance from her and eyeing her like she was an apex predator and he'd stepped into her territory.

Which was exactly what had happened.

Before she'd even opened her mouth to speak, a deck-rattling growl emanated from her as her teeth bared. *Interesting*, came the passing thought, *Morvuck's have musculature to flex their fangs*. As her lips peeled back she could feel the sharper 'eye' teeth in her jaw shift and rotate slightly, moving into a position that, should she bite down on someone, would sink very, very deep into flesh.

As her growl tapered off, she finally managed to speak something resembling English, "Are you," a far deeper voice than her usual came from her throat, still feminine but dropping into a range she hadn't realized this body possessed, "The captain of this ship?"

Taliesin narrowed his eyes at her, "...how did you get out of the cell we locked you in? I should have been notified..."

She interrupted him by shooting the socket-joint of his shoulder.

Dark blue blood splattered on the bulkhead plating behind him as he dropped to his knees with a scream of agony. "I..." her voice rumbled, "Am not playing games. Are you the captain of this ship?"

Apparently in too much pain to do much more than wail and moan, he shook his head frantically.

Grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, she dragged him across the small room to the door. Before she got close enough to open it, she turned to the girl on the bunk, who had scrambled back into the corner opposite the door and curled up into a frightened ball, watching Diane with terrified eyes.

Diane realized she must look like a nightmare in a white suit. Her reptilian jaw with her fangs rotated in an apparent threat display and her lips twisted back in what probably looked like the most frightening grin ever, and given how bright lighting and sharp the details, she'd wager that her pupils were dilated wide enough to make her eyes look like black holes in her skull.

She closed her eyes and mouth and took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down at least a little before looking to the girl again. "Stay here," she managed in a voice that was absent the growling she was producing earlier, "My crew will be by to ensure you are taken to safety and off this ship." She looked up to the ceiling, an affectation she knew she didn't have to but couldn't seem to shake if she was talking to someone she couldn't see, "Katrina, are you patched into their systems enough to isolate a channel from ops to this room?"

The intercom speakers in the room clicked to life, "I did that before you got out of that sampler cell they had you in, boss-lady."

"Good," she felt a little of the growl sneaking back in, "Have someone from ops talk to this girl, help her keep calm. It won't be safe in the halls of this ship for the next while and I don't want her panicking because I looked like a monster."

To Diane's surprise, Cynthy's voice responded, "I can do that, commander. I'm probably the closest in age of anyone in Ops to her."

Diane sighed in relief, "Thank you, Cynthy, you're worth your weight in..." she trailed off, wondering what someone who'd grown up as a refugee on a space station would find valuable.

Russe had apparently been listening in (as she'd expected, the man was eagerly competent and competently eager), "Water?"

She nodded, "You're worth your weight in water, Cynthy."

"Thank you, ma'am!" came the enthusiastic reply. Diane turned just enough to see the teenaged slave on the bed looking at her with wide eyes. Not turning further, not opening her mouth, she just nodded, hoping that would be a reassuring action, before dragging the whimpering form of Taliesin through the hatch.

"Here's the thing, Mr. Sangvhi; you screwed up in several ways," she said casually as she dragged him down the hall like a leaking sack of garbage, blue trailing behind them as the slaver bled from his destroyed shoulder.

Pausing to point her pistol at an intercom panel, she shredded the electronics with an energy pulse. "See, the good folks who live on my station, they predate me. They gave me the head's-up on your type of ship before you even docked. Of course," she paused again at a t-junction and glanced left and right, "We couldn't know for *sure* about you until we could confirm what your... 'livestock' was. I mean, can you imagine how bad it would have been if you'd been hauling cattle and we blew you out of the sky because we thought you *might* be slavers?" She shook her head with a 'tsk' sound, "Which way?"

He groaned and blinked, the pain starting to cloud his thought process. "...pain...can't think..." he gasped.

With all the concern of dropping last year's tax forms in the shredder, she shot the deck next to his feet.

"That way!" he gasped frantically, feet scrambling to try and gain traction on the blood slicked floor, pointing with the arm not hanging uselessly.

"Good boy!" she chirped, an almost hostilely sarcastic note in her voice. She turned down the hall, pausing to blast another comm panel to sparking ruin, "So we came prepared, and you *really* need to improve your cyber-security. My station's computers just rolled right in and took over." Another blasted panel punctuated her sentence.

"W...why..." he groaned.

"Why blow out the panels? Oh, see, I'm trying to get attention. I'm not even really caring if I actually *meet* your captain, but if I shot *him* in the shoulder that'd pitch this boat into red alert and guarantee nearly the entire crew starts swarming me."

As though her words were the trigger, the lights in the corridor flipped to maximum right before turning scarlet and a whooping alarm rang out. "Intruder alert! Intruder alert! All available security to..."

She ignored the rest and turned to Taliesin, who to her amusement was actually grinning as though he'd won. "Should..." he gasped out, "Should have just c-" a shuddering breath shook him, "Cuffed you as soon as I saw you. J-jumped up woman, thinks..." he cried out as she dropped him and casually checked the charge on her pistol, clearly not bothering to try to prepare for the inbound security forces beyond that. After a few moments of catching his breath he pushed through the pain, "Jumped up woman thinks she could run a *station*. We were going to make you a business partner, you know, slowly take the station out from under you, wait for any little thing to overwhelm you and then..." he shuddered, finally putting pressure on the open wound. "Put you back in your place. Now you've invited our people to storm your station, kill everyone aboard, and just take it. The place is unlocked, you chose to lose everything all at once and just hand it over to us."

She let him finish, watching dispassionately as he struggled to prop himself up against the wall, then just grinned. It wasn't a friendly smile, it was anger, it was fury, and it was a threat, her lips peeling back to show her extended fangs, her rows of very sharp teeth, and her serpentine tongue as it lashed out of her mouth in a pure threat display. "That's where you screwed up the second time. You underestimated me...*badly*."

She didn't even look to aim, simply raised her arm and pulled the trigger on her pistol. Down the hall, the first of the security guards dropped, a new hole opened in his face.

Leaping into action, she moved using a combination of her training as a cyber-agent and her body's native ambush-predatory abilities. For a slowly curving corridor, down which the security guards merely had to point their weapons and pull the trigger, they were *really* bad at it. She practically bounced off the walls as she zigged and zagged across the space, covering the twenty or so feet faster than she had any hope of doing as a regular human. Even on the move she'd dropped two more of the guards with nearly perfectly aimed shots to the head.

She felt like the world was moving in slow motion as she holstered her pistol and extended her claws, slashing the throats out of the two remaining guards in that group, grabbing their weapons (energy pulse rifles from the looks of them) as they dropped, clutching their throats.

Dropping to one knee, she flipped the rifles in the air and grabbed them by their pistol grips, one in each hand, spinning on her knee and taking aim in the other direction just as a second group of guards ran into view. She waited until five were visible before pulling the triggers on both weapons, rather gratified that the over-confident guards had them switched to fully automatic. White smears of light crossed the sixty or so feet, ripping into the men before they could even raise their weapons.

Once their bodies thudded down to the deck, she released the triggers and listened closely, mentally cataloging every possible sound for any threat to her. Hearing nothing, she stood and checked the charges on the rifles, nodding with satisfaction when she saw their power cells were still easily over 99% full. She found a fairly handy clip that held a carefully folded strap for carrying the weapon. She disengaged the clip and drew the strap out to its full length, tossing the strap over her shoulder and carried the other by the stock. She ignored the blood dripping from her hands, a mixture of green and red from the two apparent species she simply couldn't be bothered to learn the names of at the moment, and stepped around the bodies being careful of the pooling fluids.

At least she now knew what a dying and freshly dead body smelled like.

The pained smile was gone from Taliesin's face, replaced by a look of hunted terror.

She didn't bother to suppress her body's desire to bare her teeth, nor did she bother to shade her eyes when the pupils blew out wide. Her body was hunting, and she had no disagreement with it at the moment.

She crouched down in front of Taliesin, casually setting the rifle well within his reach...if the arm on that side of his body was capable of picking it up. His eyes looked from the weapon to her eyes and back, she could see him calculating whether he could lunge for it with his other arm.

"And, see, all that might have just earned you a one-way ticket to a holding cell of some sort until we could find some sort of bounty to collect on you." He blinked at her in confusion, she watched as his brow knit in perplexed thought until he realized she was simply continuing her previous monologue, "But then I discovered something about you, something I think you considered yourself above the consequences of."

Faster than even she thought she'd be capable of, her arm lashed out and her hand clamped around his throat. His working hand reached up, suddenly desperate to open his windpipe that was being crushed by her grip as she lifted him by his throat, raising to a standing position and pinning him against the wall.

"I discovered you like to *rape little girls*, Mister Sangvhi." Her own words reminded her of the scene she'd managed to interrupt, the teenage girl, helpless to do anything and bound to allow whatever advances anyone might make on her, and she realized she'd never really had the desire to rip someone's heart out and show it to them as they died.

But then, she'd never had claws and an obscene level of strength before, either.

Snapping the claws out on her free hand, she stabbed him in the gut with a knife strike. Thanks to the organic knifepoints at the tips of her fingers backed by enough strength to move an appreciable percentage of a ton with ease, her arm sank into his torso up to the elbow. She followed the sensation of his now frantically beating heart and found it within a moment or two. Tearing it out was so easy she wondered for a moment if she'd grabbed the right organ until she saw it emerge from the gash in his belly clutched in her hand. As hearts did, it continued to pump, dark blue liquid spurting out the torn rifts and dangling veins and arteries. She held him against the wall long enough to confirm he was looking at his own slow death before she dropped him. He splatted in the pool of his own blood limply, lungs attempting to take in air which no longer had a bloodstream to oxygenate. She dropped his heart just as callously, ensuring it landed in front of his eyes as his life faded.

She started walking away from the dead slaver, flicking the sticky slick of his fluids off her hand. After a few steps she slowed to a stop and held her blood and gore covered arm out and just...stared at it. *What am I doing?* came a distant, hollow thought from deep in her consciousness. *I...just ripped a man's heart out with my bare hands...*

A few moments later, Katrina's voice, small and tinny-sounding coming from the mini-tab in Diane's pocket, managed to shake her out of her stupor, "You okay there, Diane?"

Diane blinked, following Katrina's question out of the fog of her own thoughts, "I...I'm fine. They didn't manage to injure me."

"Not what I meant, boss-lady," Diane imagined Katrina would be putting her holographic hand on her decidedly non-holographic shoulder in a display of intimacy, "Your biometrics were showing signs of sudden high stress response."

That's a frighteningly 'human' response... Maybe it was the sudden paranoia about her own extremely aggressive behavior, the feeling like she was only half-piloting her body even if she could remember making every single decision leading up to her monstrous appearance and actions; a white suited not-woman wearing a pretention of femininity stretched thin over a beast so ready to bath in blood it couldn't even be bothered to kill humanely. And now her station's A.I. was behaving in a manner that was more human than she was at the moment.

"She's built so she adapts to best fit the needs and personality of the station owner, which would be you. If you need someone to behave more human," Daffyd's words floated up from her memory, *"Then she behaves pretty near human."*

Closing her hand into a fist and ignoring the squelching sensation of congealing blood squeezing from between her fingers, she took a deep breath through her nose with her eyes closed, forcing herself to process the full bouquet of death and violence around her. On the exhale, she said, "Kat, should I have done that?"

She was met with silence for a moment, then, "Dunno, boss, the whole reason they get seed stations ready for *commanders* is because questions like that are above my paygrade as a digital assistant."

As non-answers went, that was surprisingly reassuring. "...he was trying to rape a child," she said into the hall full of dead people.

"That he was, boss. She's doing alright, by the way," offered the digital assistant.

"Hmm? Who?" the conversation seemed to be sufficient to get her out of her fugue and moving again, she started walking in the direction the second group of guards had come from.

"The slave girl, her name is Kimberlyn, by the way. She and Cynthy are getting along quite well over the comms. And before you ask, the woman they offered you as a 'sample' is sitting tight, too."

She regained the wherewithal to check the rifle she'd slung over her shoulder. Wiping the blood off her hand with her jacket, heaven knew the thing was going to need to be cleaned within an inch of its mortal thread count, she double-checked the rifle's battery level and the safety switch before holding it at the ready, eyes on the hall and moving with progressively more purpose the further she went. "Thanks for that. How's our pen team?"

"Pen...? Oh, penetration team! I've got them waiting at a junction about halfway through the outer cell layer until we can draw more of the crew your way."

"*Outer* cell layer?" repeated Diane, "Please tell me this ship isn't *completely* full of sentients...these guys are pushovers but it's combat, anything can happen."

"No, thankfully," responded Katrina with a relieved 'breath,' "Only about one quarter of the ship's outer layer is occupied, the rest of the cells are empty."

Diane heard the sound of boots thudding against deck plating, "I guess they didn't want to commit a full hull until they knew for sure there'd be a market for it." Slowing to a tactical walk, she brought the rifle up to her shoulder and sighted down the barrel, noting with amusement the notch sights were still being used in The Future. "Any way we can make it easier for them to find me?"

Diane had moved into range of one of the ship's comm panels, allowing Katrina to use its speaker instead of Diane's mini-tab. It came through much clearer, "Strangely enough, they don't seem to take my direction..." there was a touch of humor in her voice, "But I think if we keep you moving I can direct you to a more central corridor where they're more likely to filter your way."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's not sit on this any longer, get the security team moving clearing the cells, drop the fields as soon as the guards are taken out, and just cut all comms in those sections. Worst case the team will have to deal with a guard station or two that can't call for help."

"On it, boss-lady. Security team is moving, and your next targets are right around the corner. Show 'em your teeth."

As her heart started thudding with the anticipation of another fight, she grinned, letting her Morvuck physiology stretch her cheeks back and showing far more of her jaw than a human could, "Why Kat, that sounded downright vengeful of you."

"My morality coding doesn't like child sex traffickers any more than you do."

Reminded yet again of the type of people running into her trap, she let loose another deck rattling growl.

Chapter End Notes

Because it's one of those things that kinda needs to be said (possible HUGE spoiler beneath the blackout, if you don't like spoilers, even vague ones, skip this blackout text until the re-read as this topic is covered later in the story narrative, but we're talking, like, 40+ more chapters until this gets addressed again...yes, the outline currently calls for more than 40 chapters):

► Spoiler

Master and Commander | Hyperarousal

Chapter Summary

Diane's 'Die Hard' run on the slaver's ship continues.

Chapter Notes

Posting this from the hospital as my daughter awaits going into surgery. It's supposed to be a pretty straightforward procedure that will address a problem she's been having for several years, and the procedure should eliminate a nasty issue that's negatively affecting her quality of life. This chapter was written while dealing with the anxiety over the fact that it's still a medical procedure and there's always a percentage chance that things can go wrong. If you feel like it's a little directionless or like there's some heightened emotions behind the writing of it...well, it works for the chapter but may make it less ideal to read than previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

One minute of silence during a speech can feel like forever. Five minutes running with nothing making noise besides your own feet pounding the pavement and your own breathing to occupy your ears can feel like the universe ended and forgot about you.

Fifteen minutes of uninterrupted combat *should* have felt like an eternity. She *should* have felt like her mind was shutting off and she was about to be shellshocked and completely exhausted.

Diane felt like she'd chugged an entire vending machines worth of energy drinks.

Katrina had directed her to a four-way corridor junction that, sure enough, was where two main arteries of traffic converged. The halls were wide, which gave her plenty of room to maneuver even if they provided absolutely no cover.

Twenty bodies later, she'd barely been nicked by one lucky shot once the slavers got smart and began using cover. That was okay, though, because that gave her the chance to figure out an interesting feature of the rifles; they had a function that turned them into low-yield grenades.

Sure, it would normally have been a waste of a perfectly good rifle with a nearly full charge...but thanks to the moronic first charge of the security grunts she had *twenty* more rifles to play with.

A little bit of instruction from Katrina once she'd discovered the user's manual in the slaver's ship's database and Diane had managed to trigger the safety release on the explosive feature and lobbed the weapon down one of the corridors and just past the corner the guards were hiding behind. She heard a gruff voice bark a swear word over the whine of the overcharging power cell just before it detonated, eliminating one group of guards and letting her focus on the second. She turned and sprinted in the opposite direction of the corner she'd just blown up and stooped on the run to grab up another rifle. Pulling the trigger a couple times to ensure it was working, the two bolts she'd fired splashed harmlessly against the deck paneling down the hallway where she'd aimed it. Ignoring the test shots, she increased her speed until she judged she was close enough to the junction of corridors and leapt into a baseball slide. It wasn't a perfect slide, her coat was so matted with blood by this point it was more of a sticky glide that left a trail, but it still did the job of getting her close to the cluster of guards around the corner and opening fire, peppering them liberally with energy shot.

"You know, Kat," she said as she picked herself up from the trail of gore she'd left behind, "If it weren't so sticky, this would actually be kind of fun."

"Gotta love what you do, boss. Careful, you're going to run out of slavers before your team manages to get all the women and girls off the ship."

Another spike of rage lit her insides as the assistant confirmed *multiple* children were being sold into slavery and her claws came out almost of their own accord. Just then a crew member rounded the corner, one carrying a significantly bigger gun than the previous guards had, and before he even realized she was there she'd slashed him belly-to-neck and made an extra effort to rip out his throat. He hadn't even had a chance to cry out before she gutted him.

Once again she found herself absolutely feeling like the coolest person on the planet as she simply...grabbed the larger rifle out of the guards hands as he fell. She didn't have time to do more than feel impressed with herself as two more guards followed behind. With one hand occupied she acted mostly on instinct and jammed her fingers into one guard's neck with a knife strike and lunged forward and sank her fangs into the other's neck.

It wasn't the taste of blood or even the warm fluid in her mouth that snapped her out of her near berserker state, it was when some of the liquid splashed down her windpipe, forcing her to cough that shook her hard enough she more on accident shredded the man's throat in her paroxysms. She leaned forward, one hand on a knee while she used the un-investigated long gun as an impromptu cane, jamming the butt against the floor as she hacked and sputtered.

"*Why the FUCK did I do that?!*" she exclaimed as soon as she was able to draw enough breath, spitting alien blood from her mouth.

"Maybe expectorate later, boss, you've got incoming, looks like they're taking you seriously, too. 34...no, 38 goons on their way to take you down."

Grumbling, she straightened and inspected the weapon she'd grabbed off the dead guard. It seemed to just be a bigger, more dangerous looking version of the rifles she'd been taking off their person and realized they'd been using carbines for their standard response team carry. That made more sense than this thing, which had a much longer barrel and a bigger battery...until she spotted a fairly heavy looking casing that she couldn't immediately identify.

As she started moving, she asked, "Kat, any reason I shouldn't ditch this in favor of the carbines?"

"Two phrases, two words each," chirped Katrina through the comms panels nearby, "Dual rails and auto-aiming."

Katrina's pronouncement made her realize she wasn't holding an energy rifle, she was holding a railgun. A *double-barreled* railgun at that. Auto-aiming would be nice, but if it had fully automatic capability... "Kat, find out how we can get more cartridges for this thing," she said as she slung it over her shoulder to carry it on her back, "Idiot who was carrying it clearly didn't realize you don't bring a long gun to an urban combat setting."

"I just got word that our security team has reached the last bank of cells and is working on the exfil now, based on the previous banks this should take about eight minutes. If the lady prefers, I can put on some music from your personal playlist to keep you from becoming to hyperaroused again."

Hyper...? Oh, right, that...berserker state I was in. Not a bad idea, but what does she mean about my personal playlist? She wouldn't have access to my home server. I haven't had time to build a playlist in the game except... Her eyes bugged out and her cheeks flooded red in embarrassment, "NO! Do not play that here! That...just...no! I've been using that to find singable songs, not...kick butt and take names!" She hustled her steps in the direction of the stern of the ship where the docking clamps were still holding it firmly in place.

There was absolutely no denying the undercurrent of mirth in Katrina's voice, "Oh, but boss! They're classics!"

Diane crouched on the move to retrieve a couple of carbines, face still flaming, "Yeah, *Broadway* classics from *four centuries* ago! There are people listening right now!"

There was a distinct 'tsk' sound as Katrina expressed her amused disappointment. "Fine, ETA on the next batch of hostiles in 30 seconds as of...mark. They'll be coming in from behind."

Diane nodded, "Perfect, I can make it look like I'm on the run. Are we leaving the ship with enough crew to make it back to their home base?"

"So long as the bridge crew and the engineering team don't leave their stations, they'll be fine. Most of the muscle they're sending after you are meant for corralling the slaves."

Diane felt her lips pulling back in that predatory grin and took a deep, cleansing breath through her nose. "Music might help me stay...grounded, I guess. What have you got that's good for this situation that *isn't* from 400 year old Broadway musicals?"

There was only a few seconds of silence before Katrina offered, "How about an even older song remade with more contemporary flair?" Without waiting for Diane to confirm the selection, the sound of old-style percussion, snare drums if Diane remembered her high school band class properly, in a syncopated rhythm rolled out of the comms panels in the corridor. Within a measure, an element of electrical distortion altered the depth of the sound.

Shortly, the sound of bold, loud brass layered over the top in a hint of Americana that just about anyone raised in the Republic would recognize, even if they couldn't name it.

She squinted her eyes reflexively, as though that would help her divine the name of the song. "What is that...swing?" she asked Katrina.

"'Sing-Sing-Sing', recorded 1936, remixed in mid-22nd century phonk-swing style." Came the reply.

Diane's eyebrows shot up as her head started bobbing to the heavy bass that replaced the kick-drum in this version of the remix. Almost unconsciously, she found herself moving to the beat, her steps in time with the rhythm as her motions to ready one of the two carbines she was carrying were performed in step with the brass notes.

"You know what, Kat?" she offered as she shouldered the first carbine and popped three rounds off in rapid succession, felling three guards that had managed to get ahead of her before turning to face the *wave* of guards that she could hear behind her, "I like this...phonk swing? Keep it coming!"

The following ten minutes were more of a dance than a firefight for her. With as much of a tactical, speed, and training advantage as she had on these game characters, it was almost impossible to *not* start doing some pseudo-tap dancing. She'd never learned the dancing discipline, but she always admired the ability of the performers to produce their own percussion as they danced to it. Before too long, she was adding some swing-style kicks and spins as she slowly made her way back towards her station.

Eventually, she found signs that her team had beaten her to the area, which was, of course, how it should be. She was in the middle of a slashing pirouette, slashing at the arm of a guard who had managed to get within melee range and causing him to recoil long enough for her to pull her sidearm and splash his brains against the wall paneling, when Katrina interrupted, "Alright, boss-lady, the last of the *former* slaves and our team are off the ship. Just waiting on..." Abruptly, the deck rocked and nearly knocked her and the thugs down the hall from her off her feet.

"Boss, get out of there! They're trying to manually fire the thrusters! I'm trying to keep ahead of them in the system, but it's only a matter of time before they rip the automated safeguards off!"

Diane just nodded and triggered the 'grenade' mode on the carbine she was carrying and sent it flying down the hall just before turning and high-tailing it back to her station. The explosion was satisfyingly loud and destructive, but her Morvuck physiology had her almost literally gliding down the corridor, each running step sending her nearly five yards in a single bound. The exploding carbine was so distant by the time it detonated it was almost laughable.

The ship rocked twice more before she made it to the airlock, performing another baseball slide through the gravity interchange. She rolled to her feet at the end of her slide and slammed her fist a little too dramatically against the hatch's operation button, she heard the polymer crack under the sound of the heavy doors grinding closed. As soon as a positive seal was formed, she heard the docking clamps disengage, thankfully not damaged (or at least, not

significantly, there'd have to be an inspection before they could dock another ship on that airlock) and allowing the ship to break free.

Diane started walking through the docking bay, heading in the direction of the tunnel to the construction deck. She tossed a half salute at her security guards, whom she was gratified to find they had actually kitted out in full armor. She couldn't see their faces through their helmets, but one of them gave a hesitant wave as she pulled out her mini-tab and umuted it, "Ops, talk to me, what's the status of the ship?"

Mr. Bendenson's voice answered, "Their systems are coming online, they're going to be switching from thrusters to in-system impulse any moment now."

"Alright, scuff their paint, ding their doors, make it look like we're trying to hit 'em but we're a bunch of newbie scrubs at station defense. I want them to think we're less capable than we are."

"Aye, commander!" came the enthusiastic, if gruff, reply. Diane was power walking through the access tunnel by this point, not bothering to wait for an empty car as they were all in use transporting liberated slaves.

Absently, she realized they seemed to all be looking at her, both slaves and her people on the station, but she ignored that for now as she barked more orders into her mini-tab, "Russe, get the *Ad Astra* ready for you and me and my space suit. Do we have armor for it yet?"

She felt the trembling of the floor as the huge weapons halo that ringed the station rumbled to life, the defense platform the size of a small building gliding along its track to take aim at the fleeing ship. Over her mini-tab, Russe asked, "Armor for the ship or the suit?"

"The suit," she answered as a fairly unique vibration transmitted through the station's structure and caused the deck plating to buzz in an echo of what a railgun would sound like in an atmosphere, "We haven't built the hanger needed to refit armor to the ship. Speaking of, how's the construction of the *Goldrush*?"

Katrina manifested her hologram form next to Diane as she walked, another shot from the defense platform humming through the tunnel, "I can answer both of those questions, boss-lady. Fabbing some armor to fit your suit now, and I'm having a bot retrieve your suit for transport directly to the fabrication workshop. I'd like to get some sensors installed so we can do regular upgrades based on your activity while wearing it."

"Uh-huh...and why weren't these already installed?"

"I don't think anyone was ready for how...hands on you'd decide to be when it came to protecting your station."

Diane swept the tip of her tongue between her teeth and upper lip and realized the metallic taste she'd been ignoring wasn't her own blood but a bit of flesh from the guard she'd bitten into, "Blech!" she paused to spit the viscera out onto the deck plating, "Yeah, that's gross. I'm gonna have a *nice* little freakout later, probably." To Katrina she said, "You have a point. What about the *Goldrush*?"

"Ninety-eight percent complete, but it's a mining ship and cargo hauler, it won't really help with a combat operation."

"True enough," she answered, "But it'll be the best people hauler we have under our control. I want something that can transport every single slave we might find at the slaver's little hidey hole."

Russe's voice came over the mini-tab, "We'll need to refit the cargo hold for carrying people, that'll add to the construction time a bit."

Katrina nodded, "Modifications sent to the construction bay, updated completion status at 88%. It will *not* be completed within the next 48 hours."

Diane frowned, "It'll have to do. Mr. Bendenson, status on the ship?"

"Out of range," came the giddy reply, "But I scuffed their paint alright."

The curiously cheerful note in the old man's voice wasn't a mystery for long as Russe said, "He managed to punch a hole in one of the exterior layers, they vented atmosphere from that section for a bit."

Before Diane could reply with the satisfied grin that was crossing her face, Norma's voice startled her so badly she nearly dropped the mini-tab, "JESUS FUCKING CHRIST WITH MARY IN A BOTTLE OF SCHNAPPS! DIANE 'FIRST FOUND' SOMN'ELS, WHAT DID YOU *DO*?!"

Suddenly feeling like she was seven and had crashed her hoverbike into the canal near the house again, she cast her eyes about feeling unaccountably guilty and not quite knowing why other than her friend had invoked her full in-game name, she found Norma stomping across the deck plating with all the fire and iron one would expect of a woman who'd been 'governing' a band of nearly 900 refugees. "You are...*covered* in...is that *blood*?!" Sheepishly, Diane looked down at herself and realized she was still pretty much coated in a layer of gore, "And it's on your...did you *EAT* one of them?!"

"Ew!" piped Russe's voice from the mini-tab, "Really?! Let get the visual up...ohmygawd...*you ate someone*?!" he almost squeaked out, apparently getting some sort of camera feed on the Ops screen.

In the background of the call, she heard a young female voice make a retching sound as well as a laugh that could only be Mr. Bendenson, "If I'd had more XOs 'lead from the front' like you I'd never have left the fleet!"

"Russe, turn off the video feed!" snapped Norma into the mini-tab, "I don't want to have to make anyone clean up after Cynthy because *this dork*," Norma's fist clonked down on Diane's head with an audible 'thok', "Decided to *eat some slavers*!"

"I didn't *eat* them..." Diane said petulantly as she reached up to rub the top of her head where Norma had bopped her. She was stopped as the smaller woman waved her arm away without actually touching it.

"Don't touch your hair, you've got blood all over your hand!" snapped Norma. Diane pouted at her gore covered appendage as Norma continued her tirade, "You're just...*covered* in...gross! No *wonder* the girls we just rescued are terrified of you! If I hadn't seen you a stupidified ball of besotted Morvuck after the Matron got done with you I might actually be intimidated by you like this!"

Diane felt her face go red as she looked around at the small crowd of rescued women and a good representative sample of the station's residents that Norma had apparently drafted to help with the logistics of situating the slaves post-rescue. The station's residents seemed to be giving her looks that were a mixture of awe and mild disgust while the women and girls that had just been rescued were looking at her in naked fear. "...oh...uhm..." Not knowing what else to do, she looked to Katrina, who simply shrugged with an amused smile.

"Katrina," Norma addressed the hologram by her name for the first time in Diane's recollection of their interactions, "Is there a shower somewhere that's *not* inside the residential hab where we can clean..." she gestured up and down at Diane's entire form, "...*this*?"

The hologram's tail was curled into an amused arch and lazily drifting back and forth, a sure sign, they'd learned, that Katrina was enjoying the silly organic being she shared a station with, "The security station that we activated at the start of the action will have some shower stalls."

"Perfect!" Norma scowled and pointed in the direction of the 'cliff' that separated the construction deck from the Ops deck, "Go! You're walk of shaming this, I'm not going to have you *dirty* a car that we need for transporting these rescued girls!"

"...I..."

Norma stomped her foot and continued pointing, saying nothing.

Diane sighed, "...fine...but only because you have a point about needing the cars for the people we rescued."

"And I'm keeping an eye on you!"

"*What?!*" that drew Diane up short.

"*MARCH!*" roared Norma, and Diane was so startled by the order she leapt into a brisk walk, "I'm not going to trust you not to *eat the soap!*"

"I didn't eat anyone! I just bit someone!"

"*Where* did you bite them?" Norma snapped.

"...on the ship?"

"Where *on their body* did you bite them?"

"...n th n'ck..." Diane muttered.

"Louder!"

"On the neck!"

"What, were you making out with one of them or something?!"

"Gross! No, I...it was instinct, okay? He jumped out at me!"

"And she ripped his throat out," said Katrina from the other side of Diane.

Diane scowled at the hologram, "You're not helping!" For her part, Kat was smirking, clearly pleased with stirring the pot.

"You did eat him! Or at least his throat!"

"I spit it out!"

Diane kept her focus on one thing, the slavers were selling and (at least one of them) raping children. She kept focused on this because if she didn't her mind started going over the fact that she'd torn a man's heart out of his chest.

She was in the normally public shower (The Future apparently had unisex locker room showers, which made some sense given the plethora of alien races that may not even have the same genital configuration as humans, she was, herself, proof enough of that) all alone while her security people were dealing with the triage and disposition of the slaves. Some four *hundred* slaves on that one ship, and it wasn't even full.

She spared a mental clock cycle for the observation that her private bathing room (and it was, in fact, *just* a bathing room. The toilet was in a separate closet all on its own like she'd heard they did in Europe) was about half the size of this room, which was intended to shower twenty people at a time. *Privilege of rank and ownership, I suppose*, she thought.

Four hundred slaves that were going to have to be scanned medically and inspected for possible implanted devices (she made a mental note to pass that order along via Katrina once she was done showering), and otherwise treated in a less than human (heh, funny 'cause she was technically an alien in this game) manner, then they had the slog of figuring out what to *do* with the now former slaves. She was sure that just sending them back to their home worlds and hoping for the best probably wouldn't actually yield positive results. *Why does doing the right thing always involve so much paperwork?* she pondered as piping hot water cascaded down her back.

Which reminds me... she thought, and with a flick of her wrist brought up her HUD. *Huh...three notifications?* That was in addition to the pile of experience she got for killing the slavers. Ignoring the experience for the moment, she tapped the notifications bell and read the message headers:

"*Racial Abilities Leveled Up*"

"*Research Node Unlocked*"

"Ethics Node Unlocked"

Her eyebrows shooting up, she tapped on the last notification first:

Enhanced Tactical Leadership

You aren't the kind to let your troops take the hit if you can help it. Showing them your back shows them your trust, and they'll follow you anywhere.

+20% bonus to PvE squad or ship combat

She chuckled at the title, *Clever, 'enhanced' must mean, 'really, really stupid moves that you'd be busted five ranks in an actual military for.'* She realized the thought was somewhat cynical, but the Ethics tree had a habit of forcing her to live in her own head a little too much, which was a place she very much did not want to be at the moment. *Girls as young as 10. They were going to sell 10-year-old girls into slavery,* she reminded herself before bringing up the next notification.

Astronautics and Imaging

Prerequisite for the Sensor Tower and Astrometrics buildings

Diane frowned, *No bonuses? Huh, must be a one-time unlock...seems a little gate-keepy to me, but I'm not a game designer.* Wasting no further time, she brought up the final notification, which was a redirect to her character profile screen.

Highlighted under the heading that proclaimed her to be a Morvuck was a section that had been blank before but now had two new abilities:

Zen Berserker – Enter a state of calming and relaxing combat readiness. The longer the combat continues, the more you will be able to fight with continually increasing ability. Every minute of combat grants a cumulative 1% increase in Strength, Stamina, Pain Mitigation, Focus, Luck, and Awareness for a maximum 300% bonus. The berserker state can end prematurely at any time and result in a catastrophic crash, rendering the player incapable of independent movement and may even result in loss of consciousness for up to 2,000% of the duration of the berserker state. There is a 1% chance every minute of experiencing a catastrophic crash. Every five minutes doubles the chances of a catastrophic crash per minute.

Instinctive Strike – When engaged in PvE melee or solo combat, player gains one free automatic attack per encounter with a +20% chance of success and increase in damage.

She was about to close the interface and deal with the experience rewards later when she noticed one of the racial abilities slots she hadn't unlocked wasn't blank like the others. Intrigued, she looked closer at the grayed-out text and managed to make out, *"Matron's Blessing – Unlock all racial abilities to activate this racial ability"* Pleasantly surprised, she nodded in impressed appreciation for the cleverness of the game design. *Give out some racial bonuses, tease something really big and interesting to encourage using those abilities on a regular basis.*

She finally dismissed the interface and checked her thoroughly waterlogged body for any remaining blood or gore. As usual, just *looking* at her naked form resulted in a surge of yearning and desire for this form to be her real body, even outside the pod. Gritting her teeth and fighting back the melancholia that accompanied the awareness that such a thing could never happen, she finished the actual bathing process as efficiently as she could.

Just as she was turning off the water, she was startled once again by Norma's voice, "Damn, girl! All that exercise you do has paid off! Why do you cover so much of that up?"

Slamming the front of her body up against the tiled wall of the shower to at least attempt to preserve some modesty, she futilely tried to use a hand to cover her naked backside, "Norma! What are you doing in here?!" she gasped out red faced as she craned her neck to find her hotheaded friend.

She found Norma in the archway leading from the showers to the locker room, bundle of what looked like a towel and one of her regular suits in her arms. The other woman was *not* looking at Diane's face, but was instead very obviously ogling the poorly covered rear end, her own face red for an entirely different reason than Diane's abject embarrassment.

Abruptly, the embarrassment was joined with another feeling, arousal. She was, to her absolute shame and horror, *enjoying* Norma appreciating her as a sexual being. *No, no, no! A computer program is reacting based on its code to a generated image!* She absently wondered if she was talking about herself or Norma, *This is not my body, there's nothing about this that's interesting or sexual or arousing! Stop it!* She snapped at herself, her breathing starting to come in panicked gasping.

"...you okay, Diane? You look...scared? I'm sorry, I'll just leave this here. Take your time, okay?" she heard some rustling and the sounds of Norma's boots clacking against the tile floor.

Diane realized she was shivering and couldn't remember having closed her eyes. Forcing them open caused a couple of tears to fall that, thankfully, blended with the water from the shower. She looked back to the archway tentatively and saw that Norma had left the bundle she had been carrying on a bench by the door. She was alone again.

Sighing in frustration, she once again reminded herself that there were *four hundred* women who'd been forced to endure far worse than someone she liked and trusted happening to catch a glimpse of her naked body. Absently banging her fist against the tile, only just hard enough to make a thud sound, she pushed herself off the tiled wall and went to dry off and get dressed.

It wasn't until she was putting on her pants that she realized she had completely forgotten she'd left her anti-A.I. weapon sitting on the same bench Norma had put her clothes on. *I'm starting to wish I'd never taken this mission*, she thought, *All these...sensations and...feelings, I guess? They're messing with my head, I'm forgetting basic OpSec because I'm dealing with alien...literally alien emotions.* Grumbling unintelligible syllables, she held the firearm up against the small of her back and tried to let the security of her weapon adhering to her pseudo-magnetically sweep aside the shame and anxiety she was feeling and stubbornly ignoring that she was using a lit match to keep her warm in the midst of a driving hurricane.

Chapter End Notes

Daughter was taken into surgery while I was reviewing the chapter prior to posting. Just down to the waiting now.

Master and Commander | Sub-surface Context

Chapter Summary

A moment of calm in the wake of an intense battle as Diane and Russe prepare for another.

Chapter Notes

CW: Internalized transphobia

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Soooo...do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

Russe snorted a laugh through his nose, "Do you even know what 'it' I'm talking about?"

"Yes."

The tech just turned back to look at her in the captain's seat over his shoulder, "Then you *know* why we're gonna talk about 'it'."

"And you can tell Norma to keep her nose out of my business."

"From what she tells me," Russe offered in the 'I'm reasoning with a cranky toddler' voice, "It's kinda her business. She's been *trying* to apologize, you know, even if she doesn't know what it is she *did*."

Diane glared at the comms log as though taking personal offense to the fact that it hadn't changed significantly in the last thirty seconds. If it had, she would have been able to focus on that instead of being trapped on the bridge of the *Ad Astra* with Russe.

Although 'trapped,' she acknowledged, was an exaggeration.

With the slavers tactically driven off, the processing of the slaves in Norma's competent hands, and the multitude of body fluids from other persons fully scrubbed from her person, Diane had settled into her 'doing business' mode and did her best to bury her emotions and any thoughts of what they might mean until after the slaver problem had been fully dealt with.

She was more reserved than usual, to an apparently noticeable degree, as she set about their various meetings and planning sessions for the next phase of eliminating the slavers as permanently as Diane wanted. Her Ops crew, for all that they had more or less been cobbled together from the 'scraps' of humanity and other races she'd inherited with her station, came together nicely. Given that their ship had been damaged, and a sizeable portion of their crew killed, it was even odds that the slaver captain was on a direct course for whatever haven they stayed at when not attempting to violate basic sentient rights. Katrina brought up her scans along their projected route and they found a comparatively small station floating in the depths of space well beyond the Oort cloud of the system Diane's station was in. This was the meeting she also found out where her station was on the galactic map, something she had to grudgingly admit she hadn't been paying attention to when they'd been on the return trip from Morvuck; a name that translated from the language of the original space power in the area that fell some eight hundred years prior: "The origin of the end of all the skies and the darkening of our hearts, which most people just called "Darksky" for obvious reasons.

In a move that was admittedly unfair to Norma, Diane had gone out of her way to avoid the other woman. She would ensure that she was constantly moving, passing along requests for things that only Norma could handle and finding somewhere else on her station to be while Norma was dealing with the issue.

This 'on the go' method of handling the tasks that needed to be done before she and Russe departed aboard her ship meant that they got done with preparations almost obnoxiously fast. She had pre-authorized with Ops contact with any government that the slaves would wish to reach out to for return to any homeworld they identified, gave Katrina the okay to open up new habs and prep for additional former slave refuges, and gave her official final approval of the modifications needed to the *Goldrush* for turning it into a people transport.

Katrina had finished the modifications to her space suit to turn it into an armored combat suit, complete with a full biometric suite and comms package to establish and maintain contact with the computer of whatever ship or station she owned and was on at the time. It had some basic automated first aid and self-repair functions, meaning she could take a hit and as long as it didn't strike anything that would require a sickbay with a doctor to repair, any injury she sustained could be slowly repaired over time for both the suit and her fleshy bits.

Which, of course, reminded her that they needed to get an *actual* doctor for the station. Which was yet another on her increasingly long list of tasks to handle as the commander.

After ordering the *entire* contents of an unused, fully stocked security station's weapons locker transferred to the *Ad Astra*'s presently empty third crew cabin, she boarded the ship and waited impatiently for Russe to arrive. When he was fully boarded and the ship underway, they settled in to cruise the distance on impulse drive.

They couldn't use their FTL, as there was no FTL path charted to the slaver's station and it would take a full scouting expedition to do so with an appropriately kitted out ship, which the station wouldn't be able to produce for some time yet, especially given that the actual shipyard hadn't been constructed. The small, economical ships that had been under construction since Diane activated Ops had been handled by the space-station equivalent of a 3D printer with robotic assist. The full shipyard would allow them to construct ships from

base materials, scavenged parts, and remanufactured components and do it all robotically instead of relying heavily on the 'printing' process. As cheap and efficient as the large-scale fabrication bay was, it couldn't handle the much bigger builds of the ships available later in the game.

As a nod to her...fans? Supporters? The women and girls on Mortan who'd been sending her care packages (They received word via the subspace 'net that there were already two full ground-shipping containers full of them and a third in progress. Diane popped a message off to Rokyō to see if she could help the overwhelming flood of them be reduced to a trickle, but the older Morvuck had to smilingly break the news to Diane that it really was out of her hands and that Diane should just accept the gifts gracefully and gratefully.), she wore her new hunting vest for the trip. Russe took great pleasure at taking the picture to send to the giver.

All too soon the reality of space travel caught up with Diane as the ship chewed the miles while Diane frantically sought busywork to keep from *thinking* and *feeling*.

"Norma didn't do anything, well, not anything wrong, anyway." Diane grumbled as she glanced around at the various panels of instrumentation that the captain of the small ship would be responsible for.

"Uh-huh. She said she thought you were about to cry, and not in a good way like happened with the Matron."

Diane closed her eyes and took a deep breath in through her nose before opening her them again to glare at Russe, "...you're not going to stop until I talk about it, are you?"

He turned his chair so he could face her directly and quirked his mouth into a wry smile, shaking his head 'no' as he crossed his legs to get comfortable.

Diane suppressed a groan as she shoved the swing-arm displays for comms and the sensor cluster out from in front of her in acknowledgement that she knew she wasn't getting out of this conversation. She didn't look at him and couldn't muster the willpower to make herself do so.

They sat in silence for a while, Diane's (Angry? Terrified? Confused?) thoughts chasing themselves in circles in her head while Russe just silently, without judgement, watched her.

Finally, she said, "...I'm...no human would have done what I did."

Russe gave her a few moments to elaborate, when she didn't, he just asked, "How do you mean?"

"The...biting and the..." she squeezed her hand into a fist hard enough her arm started to shake for a moment, "There was nothing human about the..." she felt her eyes burning but refused to start crying, "...the *monster* that was on that ship.

"Monster?!" he repeated, "Why do you think you're a *monster*?"

"You saw me, Russe! I was covered in *literal blood and gore!* I couldn't say this in front of Norma...I didn't even want to tell *you* this but you're just sitting there like...like a golden retriever and..." Her nose started running from tears she refused to let gather, she sniffed the fluid back angrily, "The *only reason* I didn't *actually* eat that guy was because some of his blood went down the wrong pipe!"

Russe's eyes widened, but she couldn't smell any fear on him, so it must have been surprise, "Whoah, really?"

"I was coughing too hard to do anything but choke and spit."

Russe shrugged, though his face was still etched with concern, "I guess I don't see how that makes you a monster."

This *finally* got her looking directly at him, but it was with a look of exasperation, "I tore a guy's throat out with my *teeth*. The only reason I didn't *chew and swallow* was because of an accidental inhalation of his *blood*."

Of all the things Diane had expected Russe to do, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward to prop his elbows on his knees and giving her an open look of acceptance was not one of them. "Diane, please step me through it, what about that is scaring you?"

It wasn't until he actually labelled the feeling as being scared that she realized that at the core of all her swirling vortex of anxiety and other unidentified emotion was an existential fear. More out of shame than anything else, she dropped her eyes to her lap and realized her hands were shaking. Clenching a fist once again, this time with both hands, she took a deep breath and felt somewhat betrayed by her body when her breath shuddered. "I did *very inhuman things* on that ship, Russe!" she found herself snapping at him.

He gave her a patient smile, "And you're *not* human."

She blinked, *Of course I'm human!* she thought but didn't say, "That's not what I mean!" she growled, "*Good people don't do what I did!*"

"Since when?"

His simple, two word statement caught her by surprise and she discovered that she didn't have any response to that.

Seeing that he'd caught her speechless, Russe continued, "I've seen...a *lot* of the galaxy, well, the parts we can reach with our current engine tech, anyway. Since..." he suddenly seemed hesitant to speak, but continued somewhat evasively, "...*some things* happened back in Terran space, I've been able to see even more than most human's see in their entire lifetimes. I've encountered a lot of people from hundreds of races, including some races that Terrans are taught are just mindless killing machines. So many times I thought someone was a monster, it turned out that they weren't, they were just...themselves. And Diane, I've seen humans do some pretty monstrous things."

But I'm a liar and a deceiver, I'm lying to you right now, "But...I'm I..." she found herself struggling to explain what the source of her fear was, mostly because *she* didn't know. It felt like the harder she pushed to gain clarity, the more fear and shame was stirred into her whirling thoughts.

"Diane, hey," she had finally lost the fight with her tear ducts, a film of water obscuring her vision and keeping her from noticing that Russe was reaching out to her until his hands were wrapping around hers, "It's okay, whatever's hurting you isn't here. It's just your mind playing tricks on you, making you think whatever the danger it thinks is there is real and hurting you now. It doesn't make sense, and it doesn't *have* to make sense. The human mind is weird like that, and I guess the Morvuck mind is, too." That got her to give out a reedy chuckle, "There, see? A little laughter keeps the darkness a way, even just a little."

Diane snorted an incredulous laugh, "One is sound, the other is light, how does that even work?"

Russe released her hands just long enough to do a credible 'jazz hands,' "Magic!"

Her response was to roll her eyes, but her mouth remained turned up in a smile.

"So," he resumed, "Why does what happened on the ship have anything to do with what happened in the shower with Norma?" He blinked and pinched the bridge of his nose in self-exasperation, "That sounds like the setup to a joke, and I absolutely didn't mean to do that."

Diane rolled her eyes and took a deep breath before saying, "It...the way she looked at me...it wasn't..."

His hands wrapped around hers again, gently squeezing and releasing, a massaging action that was doing far more to ease her anxiety than she would have given it credit for had she not been experiencing it. "Easy, it's okay. Remember you're safe here," he soothed, "Let's take it a step at a time. Tell me what was going on for you when you were alone in the shower."

She nodded as she took a shuddering breath, "I was...trying not to think about what happened on the ship, why I was," she swallowed thickly, "Covered in blood."

He nodded, "Okay, that connection is starting to make sense. So, you're a Morvuck, that method of combat is just what your people do, but obviously it frightens you. Are you able to tell me why?"

She felt her jaw trembling, "...it...it is?!" she almost whispered.

Confusion clouded his face for a mere moment before he had a realization, his mouth forming an 'oh!' as he figured out something, "...but you grew up on *Earth*, so you wouldn't know about that, would you?"

She shook her head mournfully, idly wondering what sorts of things were taught in schools outside the wall that she wouldn't know about by dint of being raised in the American education system. It would be a comparable knowledge gap.

Russe's expression softened, "You're the first Morvuck I've met in person, but seeing the footage of some of the Mortan armed forces during the war is what got me interested in your people in the first place. An entire planet of," his expression turned sheepish, "Well, *women* who were strong and able to go toe-to-toe with a Crotixian Warrior? Let's just say it awoke some things in teenage-me."

That earned him a snicker that he blushingly joined in on. "That explains why you've got the hots for Norma, that girl should have been born Morvish."

"What? But..." he obviously could tell his objections weren't going to be received with anything less than skepticism. "Okay, fine, yes, I fell for her and pretty hard. Just be glad I did or I might have fallen for you when you got to the station." He winked saucily at her as he said this.

"Ew, gross!" she replied somewhat playfully, "Boy cooties!"

He snickered, "You are so obviously a Lost, you don't know anything about your people but so much about the culture that raised you," he raised an eyebrow, "Like 'cooties' being a thing Terran children learn about in school because it's part of the culture but not taught in any curriculum."

She blushed, "Well, just so we're clear, I'm *not* attracted to men."

He patted her hand and, in a camaraderic tone asked, "So did any of the proliferators on Mortan catch your eye? Or are you into the progenitors? Or maybe both?"

All at once the good mood that Russe's banter had started building up in her was dashed away, a sick feeling in her gut obliterating her levity. Her eyes dropped back to her lap, watching Russe gently massage her hands in a calming manner.

"Hey, talk to me. What just happened for you?"

Diane found herself struggling to explain even to herself. Why *was* she feeling so awful about the idea of being intimate with a Morvuck woman? Or *any* woman? She realized that the feeling of disgusted shame and self-loathing she was feeling now was the same as what she experienced when Norma had walked in on her in the shower. Like a refrain, over and over in her mind the words, *Liar, Monster, Filth*, hammered away at her. Not knowing what else to say, not able to explain that she was lying and unable to explain to a computer program why her attraction to women, even those with non-human genital configurations, was fundamentally sinful, she muttered, "...I'm a monster..."

Russe sighed heavily, "I'm guessing you got teased a lot in high school?"

It was such an odd, non-sequitur question that it actually derailed her emotional maelstrom for a moment. She blinked at him through tear-filled eyes and responded, "...yes?"

He cringed in the over-exaggerated manner of someone trying to show just how much they sympathizing even if they didn't necessarily feel the empathy of a shared experience. "Yeah,

teenagers are the worst. I should know, I was one of them," he said in a self-deprecating tone.

It was, strictly speaking, a true statement. Thanks to a variety of factors she'd been the subject of quite a bit of bullying behavior after her father died and teachers turning a blind eye to it...mostly because her stepmother kept fueling the fires of sentiment against her by convincing her teachers that she was somehow responsible for all of Tiffany's hardships. *What did Rokyō call her...? Right, my 'caretaker.'* *Hmph, even a video game character recognized the idiocy of the term as applied to Tiffany, but it would have been her title if 'Diane' had actually gone through the life I've been building for my character, so...*
"My...caretaker called me that, too."

Russe's normally good-natured expression, even when he was sympathizing with and comforting others, seemed to crumple in on itself at that, "...really?" at her nod, he exhaled like the breath was being forced from his lungs, "God, I'm so sorry, Diane." He opened his eyes again and fixed her with the most soulful look she'd ever seen on him. "No child should be called a monster. Caretakers are supposed to be a source of love and trust and security. I'm so sorry Earth failed so badly for you."

Why does it still hurt so much?! she wanted to shout. Instead, she just took a deep breath and started to pull her hands away from Russe's, "I think I'll go lay down now..."

To her surprise, he held her hands firmly. "I'm not saying you can't," he said in a soft but stern voice, "But I'm going to ask you if you really want to lay down...or if you're just hiding? If you *need* to hide, there's nothing wrong with that either. Sometimes we need to shut out the world, but be very honest with *yourself*; do you need to hide, or do you need to confront this?"

Upon saying his piece, he let her go and leaned back in his chair, just watching her at a respectful emotional distance. She wished she had some answer, something to give him to explain her complete breakdown in front of Norma, but her mind was a white-noise jumble of conflicting emotions, roiling anger that was and wasn't hers mixed with a shame and revulsion that overpowered everything else.

And underlying all that was the knowledge that she was talking to an advanced computer program, something completely unable to *actually* understand the human experience for all it mimicked it to a degree that regularly fooled her subconscious into thinking this was an actual person.

"It's the..." she began, then closed her eyes and swallowed heavily, "It's the way she looked at me. The...I guess *lust* when she saw me naked. In that moment I felt so..." she shivered as her eyes closed, hoping Russe didn't notice her trembling, "...evil."

"Why would being attractive to someone make you evil?"

"Because I'm not..." *a woman*, she almost blurted out. She caught herself and sniffed back her unshed tears again, swallowing hard to try and keep from letting her self-pity be on display. "I'm not...human. I'm a monster wrapped in the skin of a woman." That, at least, was true. She was a man when not in the middle of a VR game where she'd trapped herself in a

confusing body with confusing feelings and confusing instincts. Men were, statistics alone proved, monsters in nearly every way. It *required* the discipline instilled by the church to keep men from defaulting to their evil, base nature. Women were God's perfected creation, the final draft based upon the rough draft that was man. She was lying to everyone and herself the longer she was in this body and showing a woman to the virtual world. She was deceiving others, tricking them into perceiving her as being more divine than she actually was, making her a demon by default. *How did I get here?! How did I fall into evil so easily?!*

"Diane, please, stop lying about my friend."

She blinked her eyes open, a tear finally escaping down her cheek, "...huh?!" she gaped at him.

He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees again, fingertips pressed together as he looked at her with a sad smile. "You keep calling my friend, Diane, a monster. A monster would have spaced the people she found in her territory. A monster would have never turned an instigator into an ally and made them an equal. A monster would have made a business deal with the slavers instead of driving them off. A monster would have just blown up the ship if she thought it was a threat to her, not put herself in danger because there was a *chance* she might be wrong about it. Instead, she risked herself, risked her station, risked her future, and put her trust in people that she'd only just met but gave them a chance anyway. *That* Diane, the one I've gotten to know ever since she arrived at the station, is no monster."

Chastised, she looked down at her hands again, lying imply in her lap, "Then...then why do I *feel* so horrible? Why do I imagine Norma looking at me like...*that* and feeling like I'm...*corrupting* her?"

Russe snorted, "I've known Norma for some time now. She is not shy about being attracted to women *or* men. If she's 'corrupted' it's got nothing to do with you. And she's the one that brought *everyone's* attention to your...state after you got done with the slavers. She very definitely knew exactly what she was looking at."

Right, a measure of relief sweeping through her even as a more rational part of her mind was railing at her for being so frantic about her apparent affect on a video game character, *For all it feels like I'm in space I'm just in a pod in a game made in Modern Babylon, women are...allowed...to like other women like that*. The rampant fear and loathing seemed to ease off, replaced instead by that yearning she'd felt when she was on Mortan and saw the two women on the street. *It's wrong, I know...I know it's wrong, but why does it feel so right when I look at them or think of doing something like that with another woman? Like...maybe...Norma?*

As though the present circumstances of her life were like the combination lock on a vault door built into a dam, images of a perfectly domestic life flooded her head. Impossible fantasies that could never be real. Holding a woman in her arms and falling in love, not as a fictional station commander in a game but as a woman in the real world. Getting married in the temple as wife and wife. Of a honeymoon on some tropical island paradise, a place she could never actually go because Americans couldn't travel outside the wall. Having children, all girls like on Mortan but in a city in America, probably near the Rockies somewhere. She

always did like the Rockies. Growing old with her wife as the children grew up, found love, moved out, and came to visit for the holidays.

A life so impossible that it could literally never be, because she could never have the children with a woman who she could never meet or love as a person she was not. Because at the end of this mission she'd log out of the pod and go back to being Dylan, a man who worked for a government organization that did the wrong things for the right reasons so good people didn't have to deal with threats to their lives. As an agent she'd committed sin after sin that her pastor had told her God and The Second would forgive her for so long as she stayed true to the faith until the end.

But she couldn't forgive herself of her most recent transgressions; having the temerity to defy God's plan and pretend to be a woman.

And it wasn't even Norma she was thinking of when she had that fantasy of a wonderful life. She'd have been hard pressed to tell Russe who the woman was if he'd known to ask. The woman she'd imagined falling in love with was somewhat formless, the *idea* of a woman instead of any one woman in particular. The part that was unwavering in her fantasy scenario was the person she was in that dream world was the woman she was in the game. Maybe without the Morvish features, and if she was human she wouldn't have her current genital configuration (that's not how humans worked, she knew *that* from basic biology class in *high school*), which would be a disappointment but she thought she might be able to live with it if the rest could have been real...

...but it never would be. Because this was just a game. And it would be over soon.

She gestured, bringing up her in-game player HUD and tapped through, intentionally keeping her motions calm and collected and brought up the screen for logging out. She had no plans to leave before her scheduled auto-logout, but she needed to know how much longer she had before the dream ended.

Six days. After nearly a month in-game, less than 24 hours had passed IRL. It was Tuesday, morning if she read the time stamp correctly, and the team would likely be checking her... *his* vitals and monitoring the data stream for any interruptions or issues while they sipped their coffee and talked about the latest rankings on the unofficial leaderboard of eliminated rogues. A few weeks, not quite a month of dealing with galactic bureaucracy, station management, and people that may or may not be rogues hiding in plain sight, and not even a full day had passed outside her pod.

In six days and counting she would go back to being Dylan. That translated to somewhere between seven to eight months in subjective time.

Her train of thought was interrupted by an almost reverently whispered, "You *are* a Commander..."

She blinked, looking through her HUD to see Russe watching her still, but his expression was one of unbridled awe. Hastily, she dismissed her HUD, *Damn...damn!* She normally didn't allow herself even that level of foul language, but she'd just, well, 'effed up' bigtime. She was

so focused on her inner turmoil and anxious over how much longer she had before her to return to the "real" world that she'd tuned out his presence on the bridge entirely.

With a voice still shaky with emotion, she asked, "...how did you know?" She could guess but didn't want to make an assumption and spill any more secrets than she already had.

"Remember the captain I told you about?" She nodded, almost able to script what he was about to say, "He did that hand motion *all* the time! Sometimes he'd do it, look at something only he could see, then go about his day, but sometimes I caught him making that motion," Russe demonstrated with a flick of his hand that was remarkably dead-on for the motion Diane made, "And he'd just stare at a spot in front of him, just like you did! And once I..." he blushed and looked away, one hand scratching the back of his neck in a clearly 'Guilty? Who me?' move, "I managed to get some access to security feeds I wasn't actually supposed to and just watched him for a bit. It looked like he could hear something nobody else could, then he ducked into his ready room and did the motion just before tapping at the air and he started talking to someone. There were no inbound calls in the ship's logs, I triple checked. And he had a whole conversation, but there was no other person recorded, no other voices or video in the room!"

She glared at him, not really able to put much heat into the look, "Russe, are you monitoring *my station's* security feeds?"

"What?! No!" he curled up almost comically before saying in a meek voice, "...Norma wouldn't let me."

She snorted in amusement, "Norma is a smart woman with a good head on her shoulders. You should listen to her."

Russe offered an amusingly jaunty salute, "Yes ma'am!"

Not bothering to be subtle, she wiped the tear tracks from her cheeks, "And we're *not* testing the 'Commanders can't be killed' thing. That's still a one way mistake if you're wrong."

Not even bothering to be disappointed, like he'd thought about this possibility already and had a response ready, he said, "Fine, but if you die and come back anyway through no fault of mine, we get to start doing tests."

She rolled her eyes, "Fine, *if* you manage to survive something that kills *me* and I come back after, *only then* can you start tests, but I get veto on anything that looks like it's something I'd rather not live or die through, got it?"

He nodded, "Yeah, that's fair."

They shared a chuckle over the absurdity of negotiating permission to find creative ways to kill Diane before settling into a comfortable silence. Russe turned back to his workstation and checking on some ship's status screens.

After a bit, Diane asked, "Russe...when I was...when I couldn't...how did you know how to...?" she trailed off, not quite sure how to ask what she was hoping to.

Fortunately, Russe seemed to understand, answering as he brought up a couple of screens on his console to run status checks, "My dad...he fought in the war. The whole family learned how to pull him out of it if he ever entered a PTSD state like you did."

"PTSD?!" she blurted, "But...I've never been in combat...well, okay, before *today* I've never been in a military engagement."

Russe paused in his tasks and turned to face her again, "You can get PTSD from more than combat, that's something we learned early on from the therapist that helped my dad. I'm not a doctor, but I'd say your caretaker gave you quite a bit of trauma if everything we talked about kept leading back to her."

That was likely true, if you *could* get PTSD that wasn't combat related. "Well, thanks. You didn't have to do that."

Russe chuckled, "I'm your *friend*, Diane, something I'm starting to think you've never had. I *had* to because I wouldn't be your *friend* if I didn't."

Diane supposed that was likely true, too.

Chapter End Notes

The promised teased scene I dropped to a few places on Discord is coming next chapter, promise! Poor Diane needed a breather before going full Doomslayer again.

Master and Commander | Drop It!

Chapter Summary

The engagement with the slavers in the heart of their territory begins.

Chapter Notes

It was brought to my attention that my last posted link to my Discord server has timed out. We're getting closer every day to the 'soft launch' on June 1 (2024), so we could use as many people on as possible to kick the tires! [Here's the new link!](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Diane had rather abruptly realized why so many sci-fi movies and shows had women with shorter hair, usually only down to their jawline at the longest. Doing one's hair up to be able to go into a helmet was a singularity frustrating exercise when said helmet had to form a vacuum tight seal for any potential exposure to space.

Thanks, once again, to Norma's ridiculously overprepared 'mom-friend' nature, she discovered that the other woman had her cabin stocked with some hair ties and pins. Russe was actually the one to have pointed this out when Diane was fussing with her hair and complaining about forgetting this rather important element to being someone who lived in space.

"Oh, you didn't see on the trip to Mortan? Norma stocked you up with hair care products."

Diane blinked, "*Norma* stocked me up on *hair care* products?"

Russe chuckled, "Oh, yeah, she always hated how she couldn't actually properly care for her looks before you arrived and unlocked the full station and let us all stay. She may not act like it, but she's really very fastidious about looking her best. Ever since she's been on a tear about making sure people have proper hygiene and watching videos on the 'net about taking care of appearances."

Her eyebrows went up and she investigated her cabin and realized that she'd never questioned the presence of the shampoo and conditioner in her shower or the (apparently) moisturizing body wash, she's simply used them as though using her personal bathing facilities on the station.

Just having the appropriate tools didn't mean she knew how to use them, however, and it took an embarrassingly long time on her player HUD to track down the videos she needed to learn how to do her hair up into a helmet-ready bun.

Once she'd done that, she put on her suit, which she'd only had a chance to try on the individual components at the station to make sure they fit, and then fit together. Once fully assembled, she looked in the mirror with the helmet 'down' and, for the first time since creating her character, looked at her appearance and felt something besides confusion, yearning, and fascination.

The space-suit base that she'd brought to the station with her was already an environmental-hardened carbon-nanotube and kevlar mesh that was designed to keep her alive and well in even the most extreme conditions a person might be found in while in space. The armor plating, a polymer shell around some layers of impact resistant weave, layers of non-newtonian gel, energy dispersing faraday mesh, and 'spider-silk' (a material that was 100% synthetic but earned the name from late-20th century experiments in harvesting silk from spiders that, when woven, was several times better than even worm silk at preventing penetration by sharp objects), was a gorgeous, slightly off-white color leaning toward slightly blue. It was almost like wearing armor made of ice (were she to wax slightly poetic just based on the color). The undersuit moved and flexed with her body, resulting in a freedom of motion that she didn't even have in her regular office-style suit.

Speaking of her usual clothes, she'd had to remove them to fit properly into the surprisingly form-fitting combat suit. Even her underwear, the Morvuck-proliferator fitting design managing to nicely match the utilitarian bra, were removed and safely tucked into the dirty clothes packet connected to her rack. There was nothing between her skin and the suit, which felt awfully revealing even if there was nothing *actually* revealing about it whatsoever.

When she looked in the mirror with the armor on, it was like she was seeing an honest to goodness Valkyrie, an armored warrior woman that was more than ready to deliver the fury of Heaven upon all who would invoke the righteous wrath of justice and deny mercy to the meek. She began to feel the now familiar rush of emotions that raged in her whenever she looked at herself in the mirror in this game, but this time the tsunami was accompanied by a new feeling. Like a kaiju hidden in the depths of the ocean of her subconscious, a feeling of *rightness* and *decency* and the memory of wanting to be a hero in an uncomplicated way and somehow being a Morvuck woman in combat armor was scratching that itch from her childhood. Moreover, she felt like she could be proud of her appearance. For the first time since she'd lost her mother to cancer, she wished her mom could see her now.

Remembering Russe's admonishment that sometimes you needed to confront things and sometimes you needed to hide and that both responses were okay, she buried the feelings of shame that were threatening to overtake the pleasure and enjoyment from looking like a woman and the feeling of power and agency it seemed to give her. *Right now*, she thought as she snagged a tissue with her armored glove-encased fingers and wiped the tears from her smiling face, *I need to be in the moment and present and fighting the good fight against some actual unproblematic evil people. I can feel sorry for my fallen, sinful nature later. For now, there's women and girls to save.*

Because she'd never used it as part of the full suit, she wanted to try out the helmet. With her left hand she reached up to a touch-interface visible on the right shoulder and pressed her thumb, index, and middle fingers against it. The biometric sensors built into the glove sensed the correct fingers pressed at the correct angles combined with the input from the touch surface and activated the rapid deployment mechanism of the helmet harness. In a sequence so fast she could swear it happened all at once, what looked like extra cosmetic bits of armor around her neck and shoulders and extending down her back snapped up and around her head, forming a visored helmet that (she'd been reassured) was just as resistant to penetration and breakage as a more traditional piece of head gear.

She looked, she decided, like an amazingly badass woman.

Frustratingly, she had to disengage the helmet so she could wipe the tears off her face again from the unexpectedly empowering thought.

Sadly, the Morvuck hunting vest didn't fit either over or under the armor, so had to be kept on a hanger in her quarters. Hopefully the gifter would understand her wearing it on the way to and from the location of the 'hunt' instead of during, should they ever have the opportunity to encounter the woman.

"Alright, let's try this again," she said while standing in front of the captain's chair of the *Ad Astra*. She reached over to the swing-arm that held the comms console and tapped the broadcast button. "Slaver station, this is Commander Diane Somni'els aboard the *Ad Astra* SHRA-Five-Niner-Eight-Two, callsign '*Dragon's Daughter*,'" the name was Russe's idea, and Diane found she rather liked it and was planning on having Cynthy dispatch a registry update to the Terran Federation when they got back, "Under my authority as station commander of the seed station *Matron's Aerie*," another name from Russe, he'd apparently done some deep-digging into the dragon fiction and mythology forums on the galactic 'net and had been giving the question of the station's and ship's names some thought, "I am here to place you under arrest pending transport to the nearest bounty transit station. Compliance will be noted on the official record of arrest and reported to the bounty authority. Resistance will be met with lethal force. Lower your weapons readiness status to offline and prepare an airlock for boarding."

The wording had been worked out mostly by Russe when Diane said she wanted to at least give the slavers a chance to lay down their arms. There were, apparently, ways to do it *right* already baked into the game. If an Independent wanted to earn some extra cash, fast, they merely had to hunt down known criminals and dirtbags in Independent space, provide evidence of executing on the bounty (lethally, should the bounty require it), and rake in the credits. There were limits to how many bounties one could tag; the system required the Independent provide evidence that they, *specifically*, executed the bounty. This meant that the station commander (in her case) couldn't simply set up a bounty-hunting crew and send them out to collect bounties in her name, but in cases like dealing with the slavers, just the station's logs (and, since Katrina had hacked the ship's computers) the ship's manifests were enough to earn her a substantial amount of credits from just the combat action aboard the slaver's ship. It had been over 24 hours since the slaver's ship booked it out of the system *Matron's Aerie* was in orbit of, and they could see the clearly damaged ship docked along one of the shipyard

arms jutting out from the starbase. They knew who she was, they knew what she was capable of, and they knew what would happen if she got aboard their station.

Several minutes went by without a response and Diane sighed, "Well, looks like they're choosing the hard way."

"They might just be thinking that we're not worth responding to. We're just one *Ad Astra*, after all. It's *technically* a combat ship, but only barely qualifies in terms of galactic conflict, and if they stay hunkered in their starbase there's pretty much nothing we can do about it."

Diane smiled somewhat smugly at him, "See, that's where I like to think I'm right and they're wrong."

For all Russe had been rather gung-ho about testing Diane's Commander status, it was clear the reality of what it would mean, of his friend dying (however temporarily) was a distinctly unpleasant thought. "I...are you sure you want to do this? It seems like a few forms of crazy."

"Psh!" she objected, "It's not even an orbital drop. I'll be fine!"

"Just," he took a deep breath, "You're going to let your suit's computer handle the ignition and guidance, right?"

She rolled her eyes, "I'm *crazy*, not *stupid*," any cut her words may have delivered was muted by her smile, "But...thanks for worrying. You're a good friend, Russe."

He shot her a bright smile, "I try."

"I'm more worried about you, really," she said as she headed to the rear of the bridge, "*I* will be a small, thermally challenging target. *You* will be a big ol' bullseye on their screens.

Russe waved dismissively, "Nah, this will be cake! I've had to run a blockade across the Crotixian border in a smuggler's ship."

Diane paused in the doorway to the crew quarters, "...and *what* were you doing running the Crotixian border?"

"Nothing!" he chirped, suddenly very focused on his console.

She rolled her eyes and made her way to the crew cabin that had been converted into an armory.

"Last chance to change your mind, this is still a really crazy idea."

Diane grinned, feeling honestly too elated to do much else as she said, "Crazy like a dragon!"

Russe chuckled, "That's not a thing."

"We're gonna *make* it a thing!"

"Alright, firing impulse for three seconds in three...two..."

It turned out that all Diane had needed to feel the thrill she'd been expecting at travelling through space was to remove a layer. Except for her armor, nothing was between her and the crushing void of space. *It is possible*, she had the passing thought, *That I may be an adrenaline junky*. Just as the countdown hit one, she tightened her grip on the access ladder rung and hunched down deeper into a runner's starting block stance. It was largely superfluous; the suit's inertial compensation routines would automatically lock her grip around the rung and trigger the gravity lock of her boots whether she issued the command or not. As it was, she'd already firmly planted her boots and they wouldn't release until the preset speed and distance already programmed into her suit's computer.

This didn't stop her from feeling *several* G's yank back on her, the inertial dampening field of the ship not designed to keep up with someone on the outside of the hull. She wasn't terribly worried, they'd looked it up and run the numbers on the trip out to the starbase, the amount of stress on her system was about three times the human maximum, but it was just barely inside the maximum capability of a Morvuck woman in peak physical condition. Diane wouldn't *swear* to being in 'peak' physical condition for a Morvuck, but she was certainly above average based on the examples she'd encountered on Mortan.

Which, honestly, said something significant about the physical training discipline she'd developed for herself outside the pod and how she had either a genetic predisposition to not being particularly fit or conditions in post-war America were so poor on the dietary front that she'd been just deprived *enough* of the appropriate nutrients to develop her form the way she wanted but had never achieved. A similar regimen to what she'd practiced outside the pod (scaled up for Morvuck physiology) was apparently a step above even the requirements of professions that required physical strength on Mortan. Until they had looked up what Diane would be capable of for this trip, she hadn't thought anything of being a few inches and several *dozen* pounds of muscle more physically imposing than even the police that were part of the mayor's security detail.

Her crazy levels of fitness and strength training were serving her well now as the ship rocketed from what felt like a standing start to .01 of its maximum impulse speed.

"Alright, slaver station's weapons are going for a lock, initiating evasive maneuvers," came Russe's voice over the comms in her helmet. The ship juked hard to starboard, her suit's servos clamping the glove firmly on the rung to keep her from being rocketed off the hull from sheer inertia.

Diane's eyes weren't good enough to see the station across the distance that still remained between the ship and the slaver's stronghold, no organic being's eyes were. It was several orders of magnitude of orders of magnitude further than any planetary-evolved life form would ever even hope to be *able* to see. She did, however, have a HUD in her helmet that was showing her where the starbase was with a small targeting reticule and a callout labelling it. The unremarkable nothing suddenly flared bright blue-white and before she could really register what she was seeing a bolt of plasma several times as wide as her car in Houston and half as long as a football field ripped past the ship what felt like just inches from her helmet.

Which wasn't accurate, she had to acknowledge, the HUD alerted her that it had been several *feet* from her head.

"Whoah, Russe! Cutting it close there!" she barked into her comms, "I may be a Commander and might respawn back at the station, but you're not! I'm *not* eager to tell Norma you weren't coming home 'cause you got cocky!"

"Hey, it's been a few years, they must have newer targeting systems than the Crotixian border stations!" came Russe's distracted reply.

"Just be careful, please! I've kinda gotten fond of you." Her reply was punctuated with another shot of weapon fire from the station whipping past the ship, this time on the other side of the ship from where she was clinging to the hull.

The slavers manning the weapons on the station were pretty good, she had to admit. Russe's claims of being a 'solid helmsman' were put paid as gross *underrepresentation's* of his skill as he maintained the speed required to keep Diane from turning into jelly inside her suit while dodging shot after shot from the weapon's emplacements.

Diane's attention was grabbed by a notification on her helmet's HUD with a countdown starting at 45 seconds, the milliseconds tracking down as they approached their first major waypoint. "Okay, Russe. About to separate in 30 seconds as of...mark!"

Her friend juked the ship hard on the z-axis, almost enough to slam her bodily into the hull, but she trusted him to know what he was doing. Sure enough, before the timer hit the 15 second mark, he began an arc that would point the ship and its vector back in a straight line toward the slaver starbase.

This was quite possibly the most dangerous point in their plan. If the slavers had even just a little bit better timing or luck on their side, her suit's thrusters wouldn't have enough power to get her out of the way of one of those truck sized energy bolts, and that wasn't even mentioning that her suit's onboard computer and limited sensor suite weren't capable of detecting said weapon's fire even if she was strapped to a maneuvering harness that might have been capable of it.

"Detaching in 3...2...1...away!" not even willing to trust her limited organic reactions, she left the release of her glove from the service ladder and the deactivation of her gravity boots to the pre-programmed routine they'd set up. From her perspective, it looked like the *Dragon's Daughter* dove down as she sailed in a straight line through space. Hopefully the slavers targeting the ship would assume the arc was just another maneuver of a crazy pilot and would aim for either further down the track 'above' Diane or along the parabola the ship would be following if someone not yanking around a flight stick like a crazy person were at the helm.

She heard Russe breathe a sigh of relief along with hers as two shots did exactly that. One going 'above' Diane by probably 75 yards and another going 'low' and off to port of where he'd actually piloted it. They'd been guessing that the slaver's sensor array wouldn't be looking for something the size of a human person since the collision shields would be able to neutralize anything smaller than an Earth standard automobile that wasn't also packing warhead of some variety. Plus the time she'd spend attached to the hull in deep space meant

her thermal profile was minimized and the suit's power usage was too low to ping on a space station's sensor array.

"Alright," he breathed as he kept maneuvering the ship away from her. "I'll keep 'em distracted and looking at me, I'm tracking your path on my screen and will do my best to keep the cone of fire away from you. If *anything* goes wrong..."

"Hit the abort sequence and blow past the station instead of landing on it, understood," she interrupted, "You keep focused on the helm, *you* are more important as far as getting through this safely goes."

Russe just offered an abbreviated, "Aye," as he juked the ship into more evasive moves.

Eventually the *Dragon's Daughter's* path took it outside of Diane's visibility, Russe ramping up the speed now that he didn't have to worry about an organic being clinging to the outside of the hull anymore, and for several minutes all she had to keep her company was the sound of his breathing and occasional grunts and curses of frustrated concentration as he continued to masquerade at trying to force the ship close enough to target the weapons emplacements. She could track his movements on her HUD, watching the little arrow dart through space at a speed that would be impossible in an atmosphere. *He really is a damn good pilot...* she thought as she watched energy bolts slice through the vacuum of space seemingly just barely missing the ship.

Another timer blipped into existence, counting down from five minutes. "ETA to turn-and-burn waypoint T-minus 4:45...mark," she stated into the comms.

"Roger," was Russe's reply as she turned her attention to the starbase, still just a tiny dot in her field of vision from which needles of death were being fired at her friend.

She felt her lip curl up and allowed herself a sense of satisfaction that she counted someone as friend enough to feel indignant that they were being shot at.

In a space of time that felt eternal but also far too short, the countdown timer flickered red, letting her know she was nearly to the pre-programmed waypoint for the maneuvers that needed to happen using her suit's built-in thrusters. "Five seconds to turn-and-burn...mark."

A quick five-count and the script Russe helped her code into her suit's computer fired off her thrusters flipping her orientation so her feet were pointed at the station instead of her head, then it felt like she hit a mile-high pile of jello at terminal velocity and for the first time since entering the game felt like her body wasn't quite up to the task. She felt her muscles strain and had to concentrate to keep from doing anything that would ruin her trajectory. There was no such thing as wind resistance, but flailing her arms would alter her momentum and send her off course.

"Stay with me, Diane, tell me about...your first pet." The directive felt like it came from a distance and it took her a moment to connect it with the concept of Russe in her mind.

She forced herself to think, "...no...no pets. Not allowed..." she managed to gasp out, each word pushing the tunnel of black away a little bit more.

Russe chuckled, Diane dimly wondered if the station was still shooting at him if he had enough attention to spare for her, "From what you told me your caretaker probably thought you'd eat whatever pet you got."

Caretaker...? Right...game, Tiffany wasn't my stepmother here, she would have been my caretaker...still a bitch, as her consciousness clawed its way out of the well it seemed to have fallen into, she started putting together more of her awareness of who and where she was that she hadn't even realized she had lost mental hold of. *Still thinking of myself as a girl...weird...*

She apparently hadn't responded the way Russe had expected, "Diane, you still there? You're thrusters are almost expended, you're going to hit the station's collision shield soon..."

"Yeah, sorry. Keep talking, it's helping."

"Okay, not much time, but I could tell you the story of how I met Norma."

"Nah, I want to be sharing a drink with you when you tell me that." She recognized more of her HUD, noticing the countdown timer and connected it to the concept of her plan to board the station. She glanced at the bottom corner to note her velocity and was satisfied when it flipped from red to green, indicating her thrusters had bled off enough speed that the collision shields wouldn't bounce her momentum back onto her.

"Heh, okay, fair enough. How about...my first virtual pet!" she saw a flash of light and realized that she was close enough to the station that she was seeing the plasma bolts moving *away* from her instead of at some angle from her course. She looked 'down' from her perspective and saw the station was filling about a quarter of her field of view and growing fast.

"Beg pardon?! First *virtual* pet? And shouldn't you be focusing on dodging?" She felt a sudden resistance in her flight that just as suddenly disappeared, *Must have passed through the collision shield just now.*

"No point in hanging around dodging their weapons if you're splatted against their hull because you blacked out."

"Point, now shush, I'm back to full consciousness. T-minus 20 seconds...mark!"

Bracing herself mentally while she forced her body to stay loose and ready, she counted the seconds until her boots automatically engaged their grav-lock and half a breath later her feet impacted against the exterior of the slaver starbase. She allowed her knees to bend and her torso to flex, absorbing as much of the shock left from her software-controlled burn as possible, slamming her knuckles against the hull and finally halting her momentum. Gasping a little, she forced herself to take deep breaths as her body released endorphins to counter the overall ache she was now experiencing from the extreme gravities she just put herself through.

She realized that she was feeling a regular thrumming sensation through the hull exterior plating suddenly stopped. "Disengaging and moving to a safe distance. How're you doing over there?"

Vibrations must have been the weapons, which if they're no longer shooting at Russe would have stopped, "Pardon the language, but HELL yeah!" she stood and straightened her spine, stretching some of the compression from her joints, "Zero training, zero practice, just two crazy idiots in a tin can about to ruin some slaver's whole careers!"

Russe's laughter was bright and victorious, "We *need* to get you more comfortable with cursing if that's the best you can do."

Diane sniffed haughtily, "It wouldn't be proper for a *lady* to engage in inappropriate language!" She wound up giggling along with Russe's renewed laughter. "Okay, let me take a look here, if we aimed me right, I should be..." she scanned the surface she stood against, her HUD highlighting the features of the hull, "Ah, there it is! Approaching the airlock now."

They had spotted the airlock once they got close enough to do more detailed exterior scans using the *Dragon's Daughter's* long range sensor array. It wasn't one of the usual airlocks a ship would dock at, being sized more for a shuttle-sized craft than even one as small as the *Dragon's Daughter*. The markings on the hull indicated it was likely primarily used for maintenance and emergencies and thus would be unlikely to be heavily guarded even if they were alerted to her presence, which was unlikely given the construction of the outer hull would have several layers of reinforcement and vacuum chamber gapping that would prevent a catastrophic blow in the event of an atmosphere leak. She probably could have impacted at twice the velocity and even if a slaver had been pressing his ear to the wall directly opposite her impact point he wouldn't have heard anything.

Upon reaching the airlock, she had her first experience in having to reorient her entire body to accommodate a new 'down' as she stepped inside the airlock sleeve. The actual outside door was inset about a yard inside the collar, giving her plenty of space to stand as she located the control terminal and pried the maintenance access hatch off with a claw. *Darn handy, that*, she thought as she once again marveled at the design of her combat suit's gloves. The tips that would normally just be either a seam or capped with a bit of armoring were instead a nano-weave structure that allowed her to extend her claws without puncturing the fabric, and the structure not only conformed to the shape of her claws, it perfectly mimicked their sharp edges and points. When she retracted her claws, the nano-weave structures retracted as well, leaving a standard glove fingertip.

She used her left hand to pull a cord out from under her right gauntlet and plugged it into the access port on the panel. Hundreds of spaceborne species still had some basic requirements when building anything, and one of those requirements was something resembling a standard, even if that standard was just the male-female connection between a cord and a port on a console. Her HUD brought up the status of the automatic hacking tools that Russe had loaded into her suit. He'd made it absolutely clear that just owning some of the tools was a violation of several laws and even a couple of interstellar treaties, so if she was going to take her combat suit *anywhere* that wasn't Independent space he'd have to delete the tools.

She watched as the HUD flashed up lines of text she presumed were the tools he'd installed and set to run as soon as she made a connection. In all, this was rather familiar ground for her, the teamwork operating nearly the same as when she was on a hunt using her old VR

helmet setup with her support team of analysts. She even had her anti-A.I. weapon firmly strapped in with a back holster fitted over her armor in the small of her back.

As though the presence of combat armor wasn't enough to highlight the differences between her usual VR hunts and her current situation, she was going in armed with far more than hackers' tools and a handgun. Over one shoulder she had strapped a shotgun. Yes, a good old, pump action, basic form and function unchanged since the days of the Great American West shotgun. The shells in the magazine and filling the ammo bag strapped to her right hip were double-ought buck, but the pellets were a fragmenting material that would shatter instead of penetrate if she missed a squishy target (a slaver) and hit a hull plate instead. Strapped to the front of her right thigh was a pistol of the same make and model as the one she'd boarded the slaver's ship with the day prior. This matched the pistol strapped into a holster on her left hip. Strapped around her waist was a makeshift harness that held a P390 and its ammo magazines firmly in place.

The P390 was an intriguing weapon to her. The agency had a small handful of the contemporary weapon the design was based on in the weapons locker at the range on the outskirts of Houston's suburbs and she'd even gotten to handle it. Firing them was considered to be a serious no-no, however. The import of both the weapon and the ammo for it was firmly embargoed at the end of the war, and the company that made them cancelled the design. There was talk among the three weapons manufacturers in America of reviving the design for the AR's military, but the price tag was just too high to seriously entertain the notion. The end result being that the tiny number of actual P90 and P190 weapons and ammunition were extremely closely monitored. This meant that Diane would be able to do yet another thing no other American agent had been able to do since the end of the war; fire a Px90 series carbine rifle in an actual combat scenario.

Did Diane need the *entire* weapons locker offloaded to the Dragon's Daughter for this trip? No. But then, she hadn't known exactly what she *would* be needing when she left the station, so considered the extra weapons and ammo she hadn't picked out to be positive redundancy.

Russe's tools eagerly and happily ran through their multitude of firewall cracking routines and rights unlocking algorithms, letting Diane simply stand there and watch.

Until the last one.

The scroll of lines on her HUD suddenly stopped, some nonsensical name being the last entry with a big red 'X' where all the other lines had a green check mark. She didn't honestly know if it was 'the last one' on the list. If Russe's script was coded to halt on a failure (which is how she would have coded it), then there could be another hundred of the tools to go.

That said, she did *not* know the systems well enough to troubleshoot.

"Russe, we have a problem."

Okay, let me explain!

This chapter was getting long! At 5k words I knew that even if I had tried squeezing in the promised, frequently teased scene I've already posted spoilers to in certain places on Discord, I'd have to cut things off before I got too far into the scene and then pick it up in the next chapter and I realized that I could just put in a cliffhanger here and just make sure the whole thing, every last bit that I wanted to use as the climax of this story arc in a single show stopping chapter!

So, yes, the last line of this chapter takes us right up to the beginning of the scene that will be just an absolute banger of a climax!

...oh no...after hyping it up on accident all this time I'm going to have to REALLY knock everyone's socks off!

Master and Commander | Counter Measure

Chapter Summary

Diane ~~gets to~~ has to use her Commander's Ability again...it's a good thing only Russe is listening!

Chapter Notes

FINALLY we're at the scene I couldn't stop laughing about from the moment I conceived of it! Be prepared for...something. I'll give you to the end of the next chapter to guess my inspiration for putting Diane in this sort of a scenario. 😁

Also, if you wanted to know which specific version of the song Diane sings in this chapter, it's [the one by Debbie Gravitte](#). Magnificent voice, great band backing her up, and (probably) a less problematic version than the original.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Talk to me, Diane, what's going on?"

"One of your hacking tools, it failed. Does your script autostop on a failure?"

"Of course," he almost scoffed, "Which one?"

Diane squinted at the line on the HUD, "...*really?*!" she blurted, "PenMeDaddy-underscore-vee-dot-sixty-nine?!"

Russe's teenage-boy-grade snickering came over the comms, "I didn't name the thing," he sobered up quickly, "But yeah, that's one of the key ones. It takes advantage of a security hole that...well, if it got patched since I stayed aboard your station and the tool hasn't been updated, we may not be getting through the airlock."

Diane slammed her left fist into the airlock sleeve next to the panel access. Unfortunately, the vacuum of space meant she only felt the impact, she didn't hear what surely would have been a satisfying clang of gauntlet on metal. "Sh~...f~...Godd~..."

Russe snickered, the traitor, "Oh, so you *do* know the words, you just don't want to *say* them."

She growled but didn't otherwise reply directly. Instead, she asked, "So this is probably it, right? Getting through this line gets us through the airlock?"

"Mmmme," temporized the tech, "Most likely, if all the others leading up to that one cleared. There's only three more tools after that one and those are mostly cleanup. You know, nuke the logs, patch the firewall behind you, that kind of thing."

"Right, leave no trace..."

He surprised her by chuckling, "Diane!" he made an almost scandalized sound, "Did a certain Morvuck dabble in hacking in her misspent youth?"

She grinned slyly and issued the timeless response that would confirm without answering, "Come back with a warrant."

He cackled as she thought to herself, *I might be able to dig around and figure something out...there's probably also a manual override that...*

At the thought of an override her mind went to the last time she'd 'overridden' the computer that bypassed all permissions entirely. *...okay, that's dumb. I'm not singing to a lock!*

As she pondered, she heard Russe commenting on whatever actions he was taking on his end of the call, "...remote in...no, too much lag, no access until penme breaks in..." he was muttering, apparently thinking along the same lines Diane was, "...physical access? Computer, do we have records for this type of airlock?"

She heard the computer reply, "Searching..." *Yeah, that's gonna go so fast*, she thought sarcastically. Even assuming some form of uniformity to door design, this was a slaver's station. The likelihood that the manual access was in a standard location, *if* it worked at all, was laughably small.

Okay, well, the Commander's Ability is a legit game mechanic, no reason not to use it...if it will work the way I hope it does.

Conclusion reached, she cast her mind to her library of music...

...she thought about a singable song...

...she told her memory to bring up ANY song she could sing...!

It's a phenomenon of the human brain (and non-human game race or not, her brain was human) that most of the time it operates even better than the average computer, even with all the advances in digital computing in the last two centuries. One of the things Diane had always maintained kept humans superior to their A.I. counterparts was the ability of the human mind to do its job better, frequently faster, more intuitively, and all around in a far superior fashion to the way purely digital brains operated.

However, they had their problems, being subject to the foibles of being squishy gray matter influenced by environmental, genetic, and purely chemical factors over the span of generations. Diane may be above average for the general population of the American Republic (you don't craft your own anti-A.I. VR handgun from component apps and scripts

without being able to think at fairly high levels), but even *her* grey matter was subject to the occasional hiccup where it simply...didn't do as instructed.

Whether it was because of the nutrient balance of her pod or the struggle of maintaining a hidden identity or the weird emotional fluxes she'd been experiencing, or the adrenaline rush she'd just experienced and was anticipating a renewed burst of once she got into the starbase...she was drawing a blank. Her mind, normally capable of indexing a curation of hundreds of her favorite songs from her personal playlists was giving her a big fat goose egg.

Except for one song.

Which she *refused* to sing!

It was bright, it was bouncy, it was singly inappropriate for wading through an army of slavers with the intent on ending the abominable practice anywhere near her station with extreme prejudice.

'The Great American Songbook' my eye! she fussed, *Not a single song more recent than the late 1900s, every damn one of them Broadway showtunes, and all of them horribly, cloyingly schmaltzy!*

In fairness, she hadn't been dedicating any sort of serious time to finding music that she could break out into song at random times as needed to circumvent the normal operation of computers. It had been an interesting ability that she thought she might, *maybe* want to use so had dug up from the station's archives the music library available at the time the original seed probes had been launched. Apparently, even back in the late 22nd century, according to the game devs, humanity decided to cram the entire digital library of all music ever with zero curation whatsoever. This meant Diane was stuck with randomly selecting tracks from the database or searching with keywords she came up with at random.

Simply because she was American, she keyed in just that and was hopeful when she saw "The Great American Songbook." Track after track frustrated her no end, all of them perfectly singable but none of them the kind of thing she'd want to take the fight to her enemies with.

But there was one. It was an earworm. From the moment she first heard the first line it had been stuck in her head and the only time she hadn't had it practically on loop thanks to her subconscious was when she was listening to *other* music.

She didn't like it.

She didn't want to have it memorized.

She wanted desperately to come up with a different song, *any* other song to try to sing.

But only one song seemed to be willing to offer up lyrics for her use.

She groaned, "...okay, Russe, I'm saying this in advance...shut up."

"...rude, but wh...?" came the surprised reply, she didn't let him finish.

"When I get a brand-new hairdo," she croaked, struggling to get the words out around her embarrassment.

"What the...?" muttered Russe just loud enough to be picked up by the mic.

"With my eyelashes all in curls,"

"...what is she doing?!"

"Ssh!" she snipped before continuing, *"I float as the clouds..."* he started snickering, "Russe, shut up! ...as air do..." Russe began to openly chortle, *"I enjoy being a girl."*

And Russe lost it, bellowing a clear belly laugh, "OH...MY GOD! Your Commander's trick! That's what you're doing, right?"

Rather than answer directly, she launched into the next verse. She now had her 'singing legs' under her (to mangle a metaphor) and began really putting some soul into it, *"When friends say I'm cute and funny,"* she could almost hear the big-band sound of the most recent version she could find in the database. Recorded in the early 21st century, the quality of the music and the voice of the singer were all around more enjoyable to her ear than any of the previous versions, *"And my teeth aren't teeth but pearls,"*

"I just lap it up like honey,"

"I enjoy being a girl."

Russe's laughter died to an amazed chuckle as suddenly over the comms came the *actual* sound of brass instruments accompanied by big-band percussion, not just what her memory of the recording was supplying to her imagination, *"I flip when a fellow sends me flowers,"*

"I drool over dresses made of lace," a snarky trumpet played as a counterpoint to her lyrical line, its source precisely nowhere but the effect her ability was having on the comms.

"I talk on the telephone for hours," on Diane's HUD, the red 'X' indicator next to 'PenMcDaddy_v.69' flipped to a green checkmark and the remaining tools started scrolling up with their own checkmarks indicating success.

"With a pound and a half of cream upon my face!" the collar shook with the disengagement of locks and the door opened soundlessly.

Grinning, Diane unplugged the cable and stepped inside the airlock. The music was still going, and the door wasn't closing on its own, so Diane shrugged and kept singing, *"I'm strictly a female female, and my future I hope will be,"*

Russe hadn't stopped laughing, but by this time Diane was far too into the beat and rhythm of the performance to care. *"In the home of a brave and free male who~o~o..."* she added a little tremolo on the 'who' as the outer door finally started grinding closed as she tugged at the cord in her gauntlet to get it to retract.

She glanced around, noting the inner door split down the middle instead of the entire door sliding into a pocket. She realized that she was completely vulnerable when the inner door opened should any of what she'd done so far have caught someone's attention. She slung her shotgun off her back and stepped backward into the corner in time with the music, "*Enjoys, being a guy, having a gi~i~i~irl...*" she lifted her left foot and pressed it against the wall, the gravity lock engaging, "*...Li~i~ike...*" she repeated the action with her other foot and was now suspended above the floor and realized the station's gravity had engaged in the airlock when the inner door had closed. "*...Me!*"

As the big band music played over her headset, she pushed herself up the walls to squeeze (as much as a nearly seven-foot tall Morvuck could squeeze) into the upper corner of the small room. A couple of literal song beats later, the inner door hissed open in time with the start of a new measure in the music and she realized she could hear the music coming from a source beside the earpiece she was wearing. The bouncy beats of the song's bridge section amusingly thumped in time with the strobe of a red alert that strangely didn't have the usual red alert klaxon.

As she suspected might happen, one of the station crew was on the other side of the airlock door, weapon held at the ready and aiming...right where she would have been if she'd waited right in the middle of the space. He was wearing a helmet that only covered the top half of his face, so she couldn't see his eyes as his jaw went slack, but she did note his head turned to see her in the corner and he started to raise his carbine in her direction...just before she blew half his neck and jaw off with a well-aimed shotgun blast.

All at once the absurdity of the moment caught up with her and she started laughing. She disengaged her gravity boots and dropped surprisingly gracefully to the floor and started outright guffawing. Her laughing breaths were fogging up the inside of her helmet, so she pressed the patch on her shoulder to dismiss it and saw the dead guard...and lost it all over again, the big band music seeming to loop the bridge as though she were the main character of a movie.

"Feeling better, I take it?" came Russe's voice over her earpiece.

"Yeah," she confirmed, "I guess I am. Are you in their systems?"

"Ee-yup!" he said with the enthusiasm of a gray hat hacker in his element.

"Good, get me on their PA."

He snickered, "Even with the music?"

"Oh," she chuckled right back, "*Especially* with the music!"

There was a couple moments pause, then a slight ducking to the volume of the music that she knew neither of them were controlling...at least not directly. She was *definitely* going to have to study this Commander's Ability of hers. "Attention slavers," she began, her voice layered over the music and perfectly audible, "I'm in your base, killing your guys. You have one more opportunity to live through this. I will personally be visiting every location in this starbase that houses the sort of scum that traffics sentient beings and I will be removing them from the

galactic census in a permanent and traumatic fashion. Your leaders in Ops have already chosen...poorly. You may choose out of their fate by disarming yourself and laying on the floor with your hands on your lower back. Any crew found in that position when I come to ventilate any resistance will be arrested and detained until the bounty guild can be contacted. Any other crew that choose not to do this...well, I'm sure the survivors who returned with your ship can tell you what happens next. Commander Diane Somni'els out."

Russe wasn't bothering to hold back his chuckling as he disengaged the station's comms systems remotely from her headset, "You think they'll surrender?"

"Dunno," smirked Diane as she racked the slide to chamber the next round into her shotgun, "Don't care. Let's do this."

She started walking in-sync with the beat, pulling out a couple of cartridges of her space-ready buckshot and sliding them into the magazine on the start of a measure and the down beat, *"I flip when a fella sends me flowers,"*

A trio of station crew rounded the corner two intersections down with weapons drawn, she fired of a shot on each downbeat, the brass section of the music providing a colorful note over the percussion of the shotgun's slide mechanism cycling as she pumped the successive rounds into the chamber after each shot, *"I drool over dresses made of lace,"*

A more clever than previous crewmen leapt out of an alcove at her, reacting with the heightened reflexes that told her she'd slipped into her Zen Berserker mode she slammed the butt of the shotgun into the man's chin twice, then swung the gun around to fire a round into his jaw at nearly point-blank range as he fell, *"I talk on the telephone for hours,"*

She broke into a loping run, chewing up the yards down the hall to where she could hear what sounded like a significant force scrambling to get to her, *"With a pound and a half of cream upon my fa~a~a~ace!"* She actually slid on her feet while positioning her body in a perfect hunter's shooting pose and began snapping off rounds, not bothering with trick shots, just going for center mass and absolutely horizontally sawing into what appeared to be a patrol of fifteen security guards, indicated as such by the uniforms that appeared to match the security forces that she had confronted on the ship. A chest-high channel of red, blue, pink, and brown could be seen roughly forming as she swept the hallway from left to right with her shotgun before the crewmen dropped to the floor, dead or on their way there.

Having expended the rounds in the magazine, she flipped the shotgun over her shoulder, the strap catching it and settling it against her back as she pulled her twinned pistols out of their holsters, *"I'm strictly a female female,"* she purred as she fired two shots each for the three men who were somewhat protected by their crewmate's bodies.

"And my future I hope will be," she turned and shot two more crewmen coming down the hall, jogging in the direction they came from, letting her 'instincts' as she was singing guide her actions.

She realized she was coming up to a larger open space in the station at the end of the current hall and started running in order to jump up on the railing overlooking what appeared to be an atrium of some sort that was three stories tall with her on the top level. As she sang, *"In*

the home of a brave and free male who~o~o," drawing the attention of *every* man on *all* three levels, she engaged her gravity boots and started walking down the safety panel.

"Enjoy," shots were flying in her direction as she causally ignored them, ducking and weaving like she were dancing to the brass section in the music, returning fire with her pistols.

"Being a guy," she reached the point where the wall terminated in the join with the ceiling on the level below where she started, she lept off the wall, disengaging the gravity boots and re-engaging them when her body flipped to guarantee she would land feet first. As she dropped, she holstered her pistols and raised her P390 to her shoulder.

She took aim at the largest density of bad guys, *"Having a gi~i~i~i~irl,"* she crooned as she pulled the trigger and moving the carbine rifle in a sweep, treating the weapon as a bullet hose and her enemies as a row of plants she was watering.

She turned and pulled the trigger on another cluster, juking to the side and turning it into a dancing strafe where her feet were moving in a manner not unlike dancers in 1950s era musicals during the dance number. *"Li~i~i~i~ike,"* she sang as she pulled the trigger, expending the right-rail magazine.

There was just enough of a gap between the final two words of the song that allowed her to reposition herself and turn to the lift that just 'dinged' across from her, allowing her to unload the entire left magazine at the cabin full of hostiles, *"Me~e~e~e~e!"*

More shots rained down from above, a few fairly close but she just bounced back as she released her P390, letting it bounce against her torso as she drew her pistols again and took aim upward, *"Like me~e~e~e~e!"* Her trigger fingers couldn't pull nearly as quickly as the fully automatic action of the P390, but she was no slouch at the fast-fire as proven by the railing on the third floor of the mezzanine shattering as though she were still using the carbine.

Just as the final trailing note of her voice cut off and the final sting of brass punctuated the song, the railing gave out and two men plummeted from the top floor to the bottom, completely ungracefully, having apparently been leaning against the safety railing as Diane had apparently shredded enough of it that it was no longer structurally sound enough to hold their weight. They landed with a pair of almost sickening thuds.

She could tell her Zen Berserker was still going, and she took advantage of it to rapidly shift about, looking for new threats.

There were none. There was no signs of movement, no sounds of booted feet hammering on the floor to find a position she could be fired upon, not even the sounds of gasps of breath of a dying person. All she heard was the sounds of settling shrapnel and her own breathing.

She backed her way to a doorway leading off the main level and scanned the inside of the room, confirming it was empty. Apparently some sort of small galley or mess, it was devoid of people and it looked like it hadn't been used for food in some time. She ducked inside and positioned herself near the door before taking a deep breath and closing her eyes.

It was several more calming breaths before she felt a semblance of her normal bearing and was grateful that she wouldn't have to 'ride' a Zen Berserker state to it either wearing off on its own or crashing like she'd read in the ability description.

"Russe, you still there?" she asked as she holstered her pistols.

"...goddamn, and you didn't want to sing for us again!" she could hear the laughter in his voice.

She rolled her eyes and disengaged first one empty magazine from her P390 and then the other, slipping them into her ammo bag and pulling out the pair she'd brought as spares, *Going to need to use these wisely*, she thought, *I wasn't expecting 'bullet overture' to be on the menu. I'll need to bring a whole pack of ammo just for the '390 if I'm going to carry it on the regular just in case this happens again.* "Well, don't expect that one again. In fact, don't tell anyone you heard me sing it. It's demeaning."

"No promises!" he chirped, "But you've still got work ahead of you, it looks like they weren't lying when they told you they're new. Most of this starbase is vacant. If the slaves weren't so effectively corralled, they could easily overpower the guards 20-to-1."

Diane whistled, "So how many slavers are left?" she asked as she clipped the two magazines on either side of her carbine.

"Three decks worth, hard to get solid numbers because *somebody* kicked the hornet's nest and killed a bunch of 'em without keeping count."

Diane snickered as she pulled her shotgun around her torso and fished more rounds out of her ammo bag for it, "Does that include ops?"

"Yes ma'am!" he said, the grin that must be on his face obvious in his tone.

Diane racked the slide on the shotgun to put a 'live' round in the chamber and pushed one more round into the magazine before pushing away from the wall she was leaning against. "Well then," she said, "I wonder what song I should finish perforating some slavers to?"

As she held her shotgun to the ready and side-stepped into the doorway, eyes open and scanning the space she'd turned into a charnel house, Russe offered, "How about a song about being a good submissive housewife?"

She sighed as she made her way to one of the lifts that she hadn't filled with dead bodies, "Russe, no. Just...no!"

"How about the one where you find a good husband and settle down to a life of making him sandwiches?" he needed.

"Goddamnit, Russe!" she growled as she stomped her way into the opening doors of the lift.

"Hey, you said a naughty word! Let's see if you can do it again..." he cackled, "Oh! I know, what about the classical Earth favorite about settling down and being barefoot and pregnant for your breadwinning husband who makes all your decisions for you?"

"RUSSE!" she roared as the lift doors closed.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to [AnneOminous](#), who is currently writing the frankly *epic* [Phoenix saga](#) that you absolutely should go check out if you're not already reading it. ([AO3 link](#)) She's the one that convinced me, strictly through her writing, that it was possible to write a 'songfic' and not have it be a bunch of lyrics with narrative jammed around them. The words can mean something in context, you can have action and plot critical suspense and heart-stopping emotion using the lyrics as a tool for the art of storytelling.

Don't blame her, though, this was done without her knowledge. It remains to be seen whether she'll want anything to do with me after this. 😜

Master and Commander | Walkable Landing

Chapter Summary

Diane uses her IRL experience to wrap up the battle in a satisfactory manner.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in getting out a new chapter. If you don't follow [my Tumblr](#) (which you should, it's my primary social and how I normally keep people not on [my Discord](#) updated...though speaking of my Discord, go join if you haven't!), you may not know I've been absolutely *dumping* words into this fic...but most of them won't see the light of day for at *least* 30 more chapters, if not closer to 50. This is to say, I'm still quite hyperfocused on this, just you won't see some of the results for a bit.

Oh, and the alteration in the first sentence? Totally unintentional! 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

She wound up selecting, 'Swinging on a Star,' having been inspired by the bouncy, bold brass of the big band sound she'd not-quite-on-purpose summoned to break into the station. She was apparently so 'in the zone' with her Commander's Ability by that point that all it took was for her to start the music up over the starbase's PA system (and, apparently, her comms as indicated by Russe gasping in childlike wonder) was to step off the lift and 'snap' her fingers while thinking of the song. As soon as her armor-clad middle finger 'clacked' against the palm of her gauntlet (the physics of the finger snap were, she would wind up researching later, completely broken and meant that if you had your hand in *any* sort of glove just wouldn't create an actual 'snap' sound) the sound of drums and horns kicked off the song.

What followed was about one and a half minutes of a practical slaughter set to music that was nearly two-hundred years old and, by the time she'd heard it the first time in kindergarten, was considered a children's song and usually set to a jouncy-flouncy piano tune. Her father had been a collector of vintage (meaning *genuinely* antique) vinyl records. Almost as soon as he heard six-year old Dylan singing it to a group of carefully arranged action figures he dug out an old (*really* old) recording that had been salvaged from some collection somewhere. To Diane's later shame, she hadn't ever paid enough attention to her father's stories about his collection before her mom died, and after mom's death he just shut down before committing suicide when she was 11 and Tiffany proceeded to sell off or trash anything she didn't see value in keeping from Diane's parents, including all her dad's old records.

This is for you, dad, she found herself thinking as she sang, "...and by the way, if you hate to go to school, you may grow up to be a mule!" before delivering to a charging slaver a superfluously new orifice in the center of his chest.

A couple of centuries ago some man named Frank Sinatra had poured just an absolute *master-class* level of sass into a song that seemed, on the surface, to be about a bunch of animals and their associated behavior. It was just non-sensical enough that if the listener wasn't paying attention, they might miss that the lyrics were highlighting behaviors that were antisocial or undesirable in a civil society and comparing them to less than appealing animals.

She racked another round into her shotgun's chamber and did a sliding Charleston step to dodge an energy round from a pistol fired at her from down the hall before returning fire with the kind of accuracy and resulting carnage a shotgun in an urban combat environment could bring. "*Would you like to swing on a star?*" Naturally, the lyrics felt particularly appropriate during the chorus, which was all about the ambition to stride the heavens as a metaphor for being successful at life.

She did a little dancing twirl, as though she were wearing ballet flats instead of combat-rated gravity boots and took out two more crewmen with two trigger pulls on the beat, "*Carry moonbeams home in a jar,*" after all, her entire purpose as a player in this game was to become a truly phenomenal station commander and eventually be powerful enough to change the astropolitical space-scape, right?

Diane's mental count of shots fired from her shotgun told her she'd discharged the last round, so she slung the long-gun over her shoulder, letting the carry strap catch it against her back, as she lifted the P390 to her shoulder and flicked the fire select switch from 'Full' to 'Burst' and ventilated four slavers trying to cram into the hallway she was walking down through a door clearly meant for a single person at a time, "And be better off then you are...or would you rather be a pig?" Of course, she *was* supposed to be looking for rogue A.I. and infiltrating spaces they were supposed to be hiding so future hunts could eliminate the threat to humanity, but it was decidedly *unlikely* that any of these goons she was popping were A.I. beyond the 'dumb' kind that managed NPCs in games. She was more likely to find a rogue either in Ops or hidden-in-plain-site among the slaves.

So why not have some fun in the meantime?

There was a natural break in the song between the end of the chorus where the next animal to be discussed was named and the actual verse featuring its attributes, so Diane started doing a skipping dance down the hallway to the music, section now free of hostiles. Russe's voice cut in, "Oh, lookie there," he said as preamble, "Someone's *asking nicely* to use the comms!"

Diane paused in her dancing stroll and glanced around. She spotted a room with an open door, someone's office from the looks of it, and ducked inside before saying, "Really? Think they're offering to surrender?"

"Only one way to find out, you want me to put 'em on?"

She grinned, perhaps a little savagely, "Why not? It's only sporting."

Russe's brief chuckle preceded a small 'pop' of a microphone going active. A new voice cut in over the P.A. system, "This is Regent-Commander R'Datle to the bounty hunter identifying themselves as Commander Diane Somni'els."

Diane held her weapon at a ready-rest position as she leaned back against the desk, eyes on the open doorway, "This is Commander Somni'els, what's on your mind, regent-commander?"

"I'm the head of the company of free agents this...*consortium* hired on a contract with promise to pay a significant portion of the profits of their first sale for the dubious privilege of providing security for their operation. We have footage from the returned craft, devoid of all inventory as well as any profit, showing you are singularly responsible for killing a good portion of our company."

Diane's eyebrow went up, "Is this a call to let me know I'm on your list now? Because if so I think we can have the conversation face-to-face and end it at the end of my claws..."

The unseen commander actually chuckled at that, "I do like dealing with you Morvucks, you have the exact kind of combative spine and sense of duty and honor the Crotuk can admire. If your people hadn't foolishly sided with the Terrans we might have ruled the galaxy together." Diane's eyebrow went up; it sounded like this 'regent-commander' was Crotixian. She wasn't sure if she should be playing up the aggrieved and vengeful orphan or not. The regent-commander took her silence as leave to continue, "No, this is to announce that my company and I have severed the business agreement with the Branwell Consortium. As this is going out station-wide, this will also double as an order to all my people to return to our ship. Your ship, agile thing that she is, will not be able to stop us from leaving, but we also will not engage unless fired upon. Can I have your promise that you will not kill any more of my people?"

Diane smirked, releasing her P390 to hang on its tether and pulled her shotgun back over her shoulder, retrieving rounds from her ammo pack to reload as she spoke, "If they're lying prone with their weapons surrendered and hands on the small of their back when I get to them, I'll bind them for arrest and hand them over to the nearest bounty station. You can post a bounty there for them if you want them back. If they're even just *holding* weapons by the time I come across them, I'll treat them like the rest of the scum that are trafficking in sentients. Also, I've already got a good amount of bounty credits coming my way, so I certainly wouldn't say boo to you or yours nabbing some of these scum-suckers to turn your own profit. It'd make my job easier."

R'Datle chuckled, "This is an acceptable arrangement. I'm surprised, most of the time you Federation types are insistent upon 'not negotiating with terrorists.'"

Diane allowed her own chuckle, "I'm not Terran, as you pointed out, and the Federation booted me out to Indep space. Ask me how much support I've gotten from the Feds for running my station." She was deliberately leaving out Daffyd's errand, that was contractual on the 'interstellar treaty' level. It didn't speak to the Terran Federation's willingness to take care of someone that wasn't even one of their member species. "And besides, you're mercenaries, not slavers. You're willing to *work* with slavers, which means we're never going to work together or that I'll trust you further than I can throw this station in a gas giant's

gravity well unassisted, but you're not in it for the slavery, you're in it for the cash. I understand it, even if it's not...heh, *honorable*."

She'd encountered mercs while working for the agency during her time shadowing the 'IRL goons,' or regular, non-cyber agents during the cyber-agent training period. It had been her one time outside the American Wall in her life and the experience was...interesting. The assignment had been to track down and eliminate a group of extremists that apparently were bad enough that even the U.N. had them on their 'most wanted' list. She and the other agent she'd been shadowing had discovered the terrorists (a group of luddites calling themselves 'The Brotherhood of Cain') had employed some mercs for the majority of their muscle. Once they'd determined that the guns were mostly being held by the mercs, the lead agent had shocked Diane by just walking up to the lead merc. No weapon out, not even a hint of concern that every weapon was now pointed at him. He spoke quietly with the commander, then pulled out his phone and tapped the screen a few times. The lead merc pulled out his own phone and looked at the screen, nodded, then barked a quick order into his radio. Guns suddenly went from being pointed at the lead agent to being pointed at the Cainites and within fifteen minutes the so-called Brotherhood ceased to exist.

Diane had asked the lead agent on their way back to the black-site landing strip that would take them home what had happened. "Mercenaries are just like you and me, just trying to keep food on the table and maybe save some for a possible retirement," both Diane and the lead agent knew there was no such thing as 'retirement' for an agent *or* a mercenary, "They don't care about the cause or the country, they just care about where their next paycheck is going to come from. The agency maintains a few slush funds of major worldwide currencies in various untraceable blockchains. I just gave that mercenary group a chunk of a blockchain token that could buy them an island somewhere. It could have been a single American dollar more than the Brotherhood were willing to pay or it could have been several multiples more, either way their loyalty is to their bank account, not any cause."

R'Datle chuckled again, "'Honor' is for the dead, a good soldier does their very best not to be dead, what use have I for honor that endangers me and mine? Very well, if one of mine are still around when you reach their section, they are now ordered to drop their weapons and cooperate. Good hunting, commander."

"Good doing business with you. See you never, hopefully, regent-commander."

There was another 'pop' and the music returned to its previous volume. Over their private comms, Russe said, "...I didn't expect you to know how mercs work."

Diane smiled companionably and pushed herself out of the leaning position, "I guess I'm well read. As to *what* I read, come back with a warrant."

Russe barked out a laugh and the rest of their conversation took place around the verses of the song and the process Diane liked to think of as, 'applying elbow grease to the task of scrubbing filth from the galaxy.'

Russe had laughed again when she explained it as such.

Thanks to the mercenaries pulling out as Diane advanced, clearing the remainder of the station of slavers was a pleasantly fast process, to the point where starting another song would have proven superfluous. By the time she had reached ops, there were no slavers left to eliminate. There were only dead bodies, and surprisingly few of them. The mercs had apparently taken Diane's suggestion to heart and rounded up a bunch of their former business partners and shot the rest. A quick lookup in the galactic bounty registry proved that the slavers that had been left behind with new medium-caliber chest and cranium piercings were worth more dead than alive, which implied that the ones the mercenary crew had taken with them were more valuable alive than dead.

"Looks like the mercenaries captured most of the remaining slavers. Their ship left quietly, as promised."

Diane looked around the abandoned Ops deck, frowning at the fourteen bodies she'd have to dispose of in some fashion, "You got their tags and scans, right? I don't want them docking at my station."

"Way ahead of you on that one, I...*kinda* took some liberties with their computer while they were jacked into the station's network and rode on top of your Commander's Ability to gain access to their systems. They now have a little bit of code in their ship's OS that magically deletes the *Matron's Aerie* whenever their nav systems sync up with the galactic network."

Diane barked a laugh, "I can see why you don't play well with most command structures. You're probably a *nightmare* to a fleet captain. And why do I suspect the reason you avoided the Feds back on Mortan was because of something else you were 'way ahead of' some government official on?"

Russe gasped dramatically, "*Me?* I'll have you know I'm a fine, upstanding citizen!"

Diane cackled, "We're in Independent Space, Russe. There's no nation for you to be citizen *of*."

"Exactly! That means I'm by default an upstanding citizen. Nobody can say I'm not, so therefor, I am."

It had turned out a bit anticlimactic when she was able to shut down the weapon's systems in Ops and let Russe aboard the station. He docked the Dragon's Daughter as far as he could from the damaged slaver ship Mr. Bendenson had filled with railgun shot.

The mercs were good at their jobs, though. Once the contract had been severed Diane didn't encounter a single person wearing what she had assumed to be the consortium's security uniform. With the correlation made, she was able to determine that, on the whole, the majority of the slavers were...less than impressive specimens of masculinity. Which was not to say they were at all less *male*, they were simply the kind of men she had always been embarrassed to share a gender with. On the whole unkempt, barely keeping their physical fitness (if they paid attention to it at all), many unshaven, some clearly having not changed their clothes in more than a day or three. Scenting anything over the reek of death was difficult, but on more than one she saw sweat stains on armpits. She was somewhat fortunate to work for the agency where one of the demands of the job was being in good-to-peak

physical condition, which meant she was spared the...*ugliness* of male-ness that seemed so common among men.

Russe, and indeed most of the former squatters on her station didn't have the problem these slavers had, though she now imagined that Norma's stealth crusade for hygiene and grooming had something to do with that. But it was one of the reasons she was able to be around...be *touched* by Russe, even above and beyond the reality of him being a video game character. As the bodies of the slavers were proving, her mind was perceiving this game as 'real enough' that her visceral responses to things such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' were operating as though the experiences were genuine. Russe may have been a man, and may have held zero attraction to her, but he was kind and gentle and soft in ways that most men (and, she imagined, most of these slavers) were not, but that didn't make him less masculine or 'manly.' He was a guy, a man, a dude, and it was clear Norma liked him that way in the same way that Diane *didn't*, but rather than being a weapon to hold the world at arm's length, it was like he'd managed to use his masculinity as a comforter.

It was honestly a bit of 'manhood goals,' if she were candid, something she wondered if she'd be able to achieve once she was done with this assignment.

The realization that she was ticks of the clock closer to logging out of this game, possibly forever, once again hurt her in ways she couldn't explain.

Thanks to the process of decay and Diane's Morvuck nose, it wasn't long before she had to put her helmet up and switch to air provided by her suit so she could be in close proximity to the dead bodies. She and Russe started by dragging the bodies left in Ops to the nearest airlock and siccing the cleaning bots on the deck. After that she'd made a general announcement to the whole station that she and Russe would be going section-by-section to ensure the slavers didn't leave any nasty tricks behind as well as clear out any bodies Diane had left in her wake.

They'd also managed a short real-time conversation with her station, in which Diane was able to advise her crew of the station's new designation.

"I like it! It's got personality!" gushed Norma.

"Don't look at me," grinned Diane as she hooked a thumb over her shoulder, "Your boytoy there came up with it."

Norma turned bright red as Katrina rezzed into frame, "You'll be pleased to know that the *Goldrush* is nearly complete, even including the refits to make the cargo spaces habitable. A crew is training on the bridge of the ship now and she'll be ready to launch within 12 hours."

Diane almost sagged in relief, "Thank you both, I know we're kinda slapping plans together for this, but...these women..."

Norma sobered up quickly, "So they *were* specializing in trafficking women and girls?"

Diane's face must have betrayed an emotion she wasn't allowing herself to acknowledge because Norma and Katrina exchanged a concerned glance. Choosing to leave that aside for

now, she just nodded, "We're going to need room for twelve-hundred more people."

Katrina made a jaunty two-fingered salute she must have picked up from a crewmember, "Got it, boss."

Norma turned to the side, someone off-screen catching her attention. She nodded at them and turned back to face the camera, "Cynthy wanted to know if you'd managed to get a list of the younger women, apparently Kimber...ly?" she aimed the last syllable off-screen, presumably at Cynthy, then directed her attention back to the camera, "Kymberlyn has some friends there and they're hoping to reunite."

All at once it was like the entire venture caught up with Diane and she felt like she was about to drop. It was just too much, and she wasn't sure she could deal with the possibility that they hadn't been able to get to the slaver's den in time to save a friendship. "I...we haven't gotten that far yet."

Russe gently steered her back by the elbow as he said to the screen, "I'll see if I can dig up a manifest and forward it to you. I think Diane needs a nap."

"What? No, we've got to get these women out of their cages!" she protested, though admittedly weakly.

"And with the cleaning bots doing their thing it will be much easier for me to get rid of the bodies and clear the hallways on my own, at least long enough for you to rest."

"But we're not done, we haven't swept all the possible hiding places..."

"I've done scans of the entire station from both the *Dragon's Daughter* and the internal sensors, plus I ran some comparisons against the station manifest from before they set out for the *Matron's Aerie* and after you disabled the station's defenses," explained Russe patiently, "Unless someone decided to be *very* clever with manipulating the computer on the fly, there are no slavers alive on the station and the mercs are all gone, too."

Katrina chimed in, "Russe send me the data for comparison, too. You did your job, you can rest for a bit, boss."

"You look dead on your feet, dork," smirked Norma, "You did your hero bit, now go get that nap."

Sleep did sound *awfully* good...

By the time Russe closed the door to her cabin aboard the *Dragon's Daughter* behind her, stripped of her weapons loadout and spare ammunition and left just in her combat suit, the narrowing field of vision and difficulty remembering what she was doing from one moment to the next convinced her that maybe, *maybe* she needed sleep to be at all effective going forward. Since the slavers had been dealt with and no further threats showed up on scans or reported by her station, and some admittedly competent people doing their jobs well, she decided to do as suggested and take a nap.

Stripping off the battle armor left her oddly...aroused. She caught glimpses of herself in the mirror as she tugged at the pieces and twisted and shifted and she had to admit, in her sleep deadened mind, that Norma had something of a point about how...*visually appealing* she was. Even the 'non-standard' (for a human) genitalia didn't detract from the appeal of what she was seeing in the mirror. Once she tugged off her chest piece (the armor had to be removed boots first, meaning she was standing by the end of the process), she posed lazily, her mind almost divorced from the reality of what she was doing, and decided that on the whole, 'Diane Somni'els, Commander' was a pretty hot piece of ass.

She giggled, and realizing she was giggling at herself naked in the mirror, decided it was time to finally go to sleep. Too tired to deal with digging out a fresh set of lingerie, let alone the logistics of putting on a bra, she climbed into bed nude and dropped off faster than she could remember since her training days.

Her keyed-up mind didn't let her drop too deeply into sleep, only getting about a two hour power nap all told, but it was enough for some dreams of a beach, a woman, and some encounters that promised eventual children if they were to happen IRL.

She woke feeling oddly content and didn't know quite why.

Chapter End Notes

Just a tiny bit left in this mini-arc, and I thought I'd end off on a high note. (Geddit? 'High note'? Music? Anyone?) Ch. 22 will be a sorta mini-epilogue to the slavers arc, clearing the decks for Ch. 23, which...hmmm...spoilers:

► Spoiler

Master and Commander | Connections

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the battle to clear the slaver's den, Diane reaches out...

Chapter Notes

I've decided on a release schedule of one chapter per week for this and all other fics I produce going forward, regardless of chapter length. CoE will be releasing on Mondays unless something comes along to change that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

What followed in the next few days was a nightmare, not in the sense that there was the terrifying replay of her greatest fears or an endless series of jumpscare, but in the gray slog of soul-crushing drudgery that feels like there's no real end in sight.

While the modified *Goldrush* was to be underway in less than a day after Diane's call back to her station, the ship designed to be an asteroid miner and cargo hauler was slower than the *Dragon's Daughter* and would take a full two days to get to the former slaver's den. That left the care and feeding, quite literally, of the former slaves to Diane and Russe and it was...depressing.

To begin with was the quartering of the women and girls. As soon as they could they cleared every section that still held former slaves of any possible traps or other gatches, followed by Russe breaking the lockouts on the slave cuffs and dropping the restraining doors. This at least allowed the ladies freedom of movement, and a few of them volunteered to help Diane (they were wary of Russe, understandably) in her tasks, but then they discovered that one of the slavers brought *bedbugs* aboard the station. Not even space-bedbugs or some at least slightly interesting alien critter that earned the name bedbug...but actual, Earth-origin, bog-standard, completely uninteresting, pesticide-resistant-for-six-centuries *bedbugs*. The gen-pop sections of the station were clean of them (automated cleaning protocols were useful for *that*, at least), and the slave's quarters were kept free of the nasty little things, but there were notes in the Consortium's doctor's logs that indicated there was an outbreak among the crew quarters. Thankfully, the officer's quarters were spared, but this meant they couldn't simply disperse the former slaves to the more private and personally securable bunks until every room could be heat treated (a process that took a half hour minimum and required each cabin be sealed, all atmosphere removed, and the internal temperature of the room rocketed up to 200-degrees F for a minimum of half an hour).

Further complicating things was the discovery that the 'clothing' inventory for the women and girls consisted of nothing but mass-produced underwear and what could be charitably called "slut wear" that was clearly intended to be a sort of costume library for 'displaying' the 'goods' to prospective buyers. The idea was floated to raid the crew quarters for clothes...but that brought them back to the heat treatment problem.

Then there was food. The slave's 'food' was packets of nutrient paste that, upon opening one to see if it was any good, had Diane clapping her hands to her Morvuck-sensitive nose so hard she nearly gave herself a black eye. She was disgusted further when she learned that, no, this 'nutrient paste' had not turned, it was still perfectly 'edible.' Calorically deficient and only barely providing the required nutrients for most humanoid standard life, but arguably edible. Russe had, in a rather disgusted tone, informed Diane that this particular type of nutrient paste was intended for long-term space voyages where the crew spent their time in a sort of hibernation status, not cryonically frozen (that was still a problematic process that had too small a survivability rate, even in this sci-fi future of the game's setting), but biological processes dropped to an absolute minimum, brain functions locked in a coma-like dream state, and the nutrient paste fed to the body via a feeding tube.

On the whole it was a little too close to home for Diane, who now had uncomfortable associations with the stink of the nutrient paste with what was going into her body IRL.

Once they broke into the slaver's food store things looked better. The station's food supplies were hardly ideal for their current situation; there was enough food for the slavers to last 30 days before a resupply ship needed to be called in, and what would last the full crew the month would only stretch for the entire former slave population for four days...but as they were anticipating the arrival of the *Goldrush* in half that time, it was deemed 'not a problem' and the nutrient paste was shoved back in the cargo hold it was found in and promptly forgotten about.

The friends Kymberlynn had asked about were, thankfully, still among the 'inventory' of minors on the station, and Diane was more than happy to let the group of them up into Ops to talk with their friend until one of the officers meeting rooms could be cleared for that purpose. Apparently Norma had given Kymberlynn her own room right next to Norma's, and the first night after Diane had cleared out the slavers was a 'sleepover' to celebrate where some bed rolls were dragged into the meeting room, snack-like foods were dug out of storage (including some popcorn, which had earned Diane's place as 'hero and savior' among the former slave girls when she cooked it up for them 'old-school' over a gas flame in one of the galleys with a lidded pot and the closest thing she could find to butter to top it with). Back on the *Matron's Aerie*, Kymberlynn invited Cynthy to her quarters to participate in the sleepover via video call and the connection was kept open all night, even if it did jam up the comms array for both stations.

Diane hadn't regretted her choice to allow that in the slightest, but the warm feeling of satisfaction that rivalled even the victory over the slavers when she checked in on the girls and saw them all fast asleep (even the pair back on the station that had joined via video connection) just solidified for her that the rest of the galaxy could go hang for a few hours.

Once the *Goldrush* arrived, all the ex-slaves were loaded up onto the ship and Diane ordered that they be given access to viewscreens as the *Dragon's Daughter* and the *Goldrush* were moved to a safe distance as Russe remotely accessed the station's systems and set the station's core to catastrophically overload.

Could she have had the station scrapped and salvaged? Yes.

Was destroying the potential resource instead of trying to eke out something of worth from it more valuable than twenty vault stations' worth of credits? When she watched the video feed from her captain's chair on the bridge of the *Dragon's Daughter* of the women and girls who'd been held prisoner there clutching each other for support and crying their eyes out in relief, she decided it was.

A surprise was waiting for her when she got back.

A new shipping lane hadn't been established direct from Mortan *just* yet, so every two weeks a somewhat beefier courier ship than your average cargo hauler arrived with a fresh shipment (thankfully still being paid by the good women of Mortan, even with the bounty credit influx she was due for this little excursion she wouldn't be able to afford the fees for the bi-weekly transport by herself, and her station wasn't yet self-sufficient in the galactic economy to cover the cost), and said courier ship was docked at the Cargo 2 airlock as the *Goldrush* and *Dragon's Daughter* approached. In addition, there was a new ship that she didn't recognize docked on the station's single docking bay as well.

Once docking procedures for the two victoriously returning ships was completed, she found not just Norma and Katrina waiting for her, but Leki and Koarla as well.

Leki smiled indulgently as she reached out to clasp wrists with Diane. Unsure why the dark-haired woman didn't just offer a handshake, Diane returned the gesture tentatively. "Our ship only docked a few hours ago and Norma has been filling us in." Norma's grin was nearly proprietary as Diane cast her a skeptical glance while Leki gushed, "Good work! For someone with no real-world battle training you did remarkably well."

Diane blushed and muttered, "...I just played a lot of video games," as Leki released her arm. This was, of course, strictly true. She spent the vast majority of her time in video game environments, a good deal of which required knowledge of fighting in a realistic environment.

Koarla stepped in and performed the same gesture, "Those games must have been something else! Talk about living up to the name of 'Matron's Daughter'! Katrina showed us the footage from the slaver's security cams, where did you learn to fight close-quarters like that?"

Matching Koarla's grip strength, Diane more confidently grinned back and said, "Doom."

Both Morvuck's and Norma's faces were painted with confusion as Russe joined them, "Who's playing Doom? Can we go in on a co-op? And are we talking holographic, old-school VR, or full-on *vintage* keyboard and screen interface?"

Diane chuckled and allowed a little of her predatory grin out as she said, "Choose your weapon, I'll rip'n'tear 'til it's done. And are you afraid of a little PvP?"

Still lost but now reassured that Diane wasn't wishing some odd curse upon them, the Morvucks relaxed their stance and Koarla smiled, releasing Diane's wrist, "Oh, the *game* is named 'Doom'..."

Katrina chimed in, "'Doom,' originally created on Earth in the year 1993 for the then common computers with a single processor and limited internal storage with a keyboard and limited color pallet display. A robust modding community and low cost of entry as well as being able to propagate via the early forms of a global network secured its place in the global culture. The original game engine was eventually open-sourced and shortly thereafter the phrase, 'But will it run Doom?' entered the cultural lexicon as a test to see if a device with internal storage and processing could be considered a full computer or peripheral device. The game has since been re-released as technology has progressed every 30 to 50 years, with the previous game engine open-sourced prior to the new version's release, thus perpetuating the game's popularity as humanity has taken its place in the galactic community."

Koarla grinned, "This game is comparable to what you did on that ship?!"

Diane and Russe glanced at each other, then back to the Morvuck women with a nod, "Yeah, I'd say so," said Diane.

"If you turn the 'gibbing' sliders up to 100, maybe," Russe scoffed playfully.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought we were playing, 'Doom,' not 'babies first shooter,'" Diane ribbed back.

Norma chuckled, "Well, it's good to see you two bonded during all this."

They began chatting about their respective business as they made their way to the tether between the docking bay and the station, "We'll be setting up shop wherever you guys can take us," Leki said to the question of when they'd be officially settling in, "But we'd recommend the industrial deck for our workshop. We sometimes have to deal with chemicals and materials that wouldn't be good mix with the life support biomes you have up on the main deck."

Katrina interjected at this point, "Your proposed workshop is for custom parts for ships and stations, correct?" At Leki's nod, she continued, "I might suggest this location, then," she brought up a see-through holographic model of the life space of the station, zooming in on one of the lot squares near the 'cliff' that separated the main deck from the industrial deck. "While significantly distant from the living habs and separated from the main living spaces by the station divider, it's still fairly close to the future location of the station's own labs, convenient access to the station's drydock and scrapping infrastructure, and nearby access to three of the future docking bay tethers."

Seeing that both Leki and Koarla were nodding appreciatively, Diane said, "Katrina, once you get the specifications from them, go ahead and get started on whatever they need."

The hologram gave her little playful salute, "On it, boss," and derezzed as they started down the tether, Norma's teams apparent and quite busy as they were helping the former slaves onto the station.

Koarla blew a whistle through her teeth, "Reminds me of a few too many refuge assignments from our days in the service."

As Leki nodded solemnly, Diane found she didn't have a response to that.

Norma and her people had set up a series of stations with several lines to operate in parallel for each station. At the first station each woman or girl was assigned someone to guide them through the process and be a helping hand until they got through the entire line. At the next station was some standing desks with holographic terminals to do a form of intake, getting the vital information from the women and girls. Up next was some curtained off booths that allowed some volunteers with a limited amount of medical training to conduct some exams that would ensure there was nothing immediately wrong with the girls and their physical condition matched their health records recovered from the slaver's computers. While still in the booths, they were given clothing that seemed to be the impromptu style of the station, a pair of pants, a t-shirt, a light jacket, socks, and shoes. From there they were given kits that appeared to be several sets of clothes, a hygiene kit, and (to Diane's surprise) a mini-tab.

It did, she realized on reflection, make sense. If the point was to restore their independence and autonomy, then access to communications, reading material, and a place to have ones thoughts be private only made sense. She made a mental note to ask Katrina to make sure the mini-tabs did just that.

Beyond that seemed to be an impromptu 'outdoor' diner, several rows of picnic tables having been manufactured and set up next to several stations where food that was suited to the several species of females they'd rescued was arrayed. The women and girls were given the chance to eat as much as they wanted (within the constraints of the medical software's guidelines) and the opportunity to socialize. Once finished, the former slaves were offered a volunteer to guide them to their quarters. A few refused, wanting to flex their ability to say 'no' in case the entire thing was too good to be true. Most took the volunteers up on the offer, and most of the volunteers were women and girls, she'd noticed...and a few of the volunteers were even a few of the ex-slaves she'd seen as part of this same process (much less expertly managed) before she left to chase the slavers down.

Diane was taken *completely* off guard when an unfamiliar voice shouted, "Commander!" She turned to see a face that was slightly familiar wearing the usual attire for the people aboard her station, but she was unable to place it as the girl it belonged to ran at her and leapt, wrapping her arms around Diane's neck and shoulders and squeezing tight. Diane staggered and wrapped her arms around the girl as she realized belatedly that this was Kymberlynn. She hadn't immediately recognized the girl as a former slave because she'd colored her hair bright purple, evidently since the long-distance overnight call/sleepover since Diane didn't remember noticing purple hair during the times she'd checked in on the conference room. She also realized she hadn't lashed out in a defensive reaction because she was reacting to her scenting ability, which was only picking up body odor and the scent of someone who was *happy*. *I didn't even know I knew what 'happy' smelled like...*

She chuckled as she held the girl up against her in a return hug, "Ah, hello..." she said tentatively.

"Thank you!" sobbed the girl. She had her head over Diane's shoulder, so she couldn't see Kymberlynn's face, but would bet that she'd start to feel a damp spot if they stayed like they were for too long.

"For what?" Diane asked with genuine confusion.

"You saved my friends!" she renewed her squeezing hug, apparently so much emotion trapped in her body she couldn't express it any other way, "I was the oldest and always protected them by volunteering when..." the girl shuddered, "I was so afraid they'd have to..."

Diane's feeling of *right-ness* swelled up inside her again as she closed her eyes and returned the hug, "I would do it again a thousand times, no thanks required." Kymberlynn relaxed her hug, allowing Diane to gently set her on her feet. "And I thought you were afraid of me, what changed?" she asked as she smiled down at the girl.

She let out a 'glrk' as the teen lunged forward and squeezed her torso in another hug, "*You saved my friends!*"

She couldn't help but smile as Cynthia ran up to join them from a cluster of former-slave girls at one of the picnic tables...who saw what was going on and Diane was suddenly surrounded by a small swarm of teenagers (and a couple of tweens), all of them trying to, apparently, smother her from a group hug. The effort was stymied by the fact that Diane was over a foot taller than the tallest of the girls.

She mock-glared at the three other women who were being ignored by the gaggle of teens, "You're not helping."

Norma just shook her head with a wide, impish grin as Leki and Koarla couldn't stop laughing with bright, delighted expressions on their faces.

Several hours later, Diane was sharing from her personal stash of jiantin tonic mix with Leki and Koarla as the *Goldrush* was finally emptied of ex-slaves and undocked to return to the drydock to remove the modifications that made the cargo spaces passenger friendly. They'd need that cargo space for actual materials and in the game of mining for survival in deep space, every inch mattered.

"So," said Koarla conversationally, "Norma told us about the...incident in the shower."

Diane frowned as she stared off into space over her mug, "Norma is a dirty snitch."

Leki smiled indulgently and Koarla snickered, "The mom-friend always is the worst snitch. But it means she cares about you." She took a sip of her tonic and set the mug down between her hands, "Anything you wanna talk about? You can think of us like the sisters you never knew you had, if it helps."

Diane smiled weakly at the shorter Morvuck, "The problem being, of course, if I didn't know I have sisters, I don't know what that means, now do I?"

Leki chuckled quietly as she took another sip. Koarla snickered again, "You got me there." She glanced at her wristwatch and frowned as her jaw opened wide and exposed her fangs in a yawn that had more in common with a rattlesnake than a human, "Oh, triad, I didn't realize how long we'd been awake. It's oh-six-hundred Longwood time, we've been up all night for us."

Diane did her best to hide her disquiet at the reptilian display that she knew must match how she looked when she was tired...which *god* was she ever tired! Her fatigue coupled with the stark reminder that she wasn't a human in that moment had her gut quaking again. "Gotta love that space-lag, am I right?" she quipped, keeping her voice light.

The two other women gulped down their drink and stood, moving as a unit they must have been when they were in the military, "We're going to hit the rack," said Leki as she reached across the table and squeezed Diane's shoulder companionably, "The Captain...that is, Rokyo wanted me to make sure you knew she wanted to hear from you. Give her a call when you can free up your comms, she's the kind who'll want to hear from you day or night, promise."

Diane felt her own yawn coming on and, since she was around other Morvish women, didn't feel so insecure about it as she might have around her human friends. She let her jaw open in a huge yawn, her spine feeling like it was shivering as she felt the muscles in her jaw flex her fangs, "I...yeah, sure. I'll make sure to call."

Leki nodded and, with one last companionable squeeze of her shoulder, stepped away to join Koarla as they made their way back to the tether and maneuvered their way through the processing stations, which were being disassembled by Norma's teams of workers. Within moments they disappeared down the hallway, likely headed back to their ship to sleep until they could get permanent apartments in one of the habs.

"Ma'am?" she was broken out of her thoughts...or the silent hum of her sleepy mind in lieu of thoughts, by an apologetic voice. She looked up to see one of the volunteers, one of the original station squatters that she'd never gotten a chance to interact with before, standing next to her with a bus bin full of dishes, "Were you done with that mug?"

Diane looked down and realized that she'd almost finished her drink without realizing it. *Okay, bedtime, I think.* "Yeah, sorry, a little tired."

The woman smiled, "Well, you've been a little busy."

Diane snorted in amusement as she tossed back the last of the dregs from the mug and handed it over to the woman, who smiled a quiet 'thanks' and scurried off to gather more dishes from the impromptu welcoming area.

She realized that she'd zoned out long enough that most of the take-down had already been finished and the workers were, as slowly as possible, making their way to the table she was sitting at. Chuckling at herself and realizing that, for the first time in days, she had nothing to do next that wasn't already being done by someone else, she made her way to her private

quarters. It took longer than she liked to make the walk, but she opted to do so because she was afraid she'd fall asleep in the car if she took one of the transports.

The entrance to the 'station officer's hab' was like pretty much every other hab on the station, just higher up the outside 'skin' of the living space. As the station was literally hers, she had the equivalent of a penthouse suite, occupying half the top level of the upper-most hab on the station. The lift stopped before she *really* zoned out and waited with the patience of a computer as she willed herself to exit the car.

She glanced down the hall at the doors to the empty quarters on the opposite side of the hab from her own. She'd offered them to Norma when the other woman hadn't moved out of the tiny little apartment she'd been living in since before Diane arrived, but the mayor stubbornly insisted that she stay in the habs with the rest of her people. While admirable, Diane didn't know what she was going to do with the other hab. She'd offer it to Russe, but he was just as likely to turn it down to stay near Norma.

She turned back to her private quarters and yawned as she pulled her suit jacket off her shoulders. She realized that the hanger for this suit was still on the *Dragon's Daughter*, then shrugged. Katrina would likely have her stuff offloaded and returned to the proper places or Norma's frightening efficiency would do the job, she was sure. Groaning from tiredness, she draped the jacket over a nearby chair and crossed the room she was using as a living room and started down the hall.

She made it as far as her private office, a room she rarely used, and paused in thought. *Russe said the way I fight is how Morvuck women fight.* Her mind went to the moment her shower was interrupted by Norma, the same feeling of shame and self-loathing blurring her thoughts with an emotion she couldn't source. *Leki said Rokyo wanted me to call her, and Koarla said it's morning in the city where Koarla lives.*

She flashed back to the moment Rokyo held her as she bawled her eyes out over the fact that she could never have what her heart was yearning for more than she could ever remember wanting anything.

She opened her private office door and made her way behind the desk. "Ops," she directed to the air.

"Ops here, commander, what can we do for you?"

Diane's brow pinched in concern, "Cynthy? Shouldn't you be taking time off to help Kimberlynn or something?"

"Kymmi's asleep," Diane could hear the smile in the teen's voice as she casually used an apparent nickname, "Doctor's orders. Well, med program's orders, anyway."

Still gotta get a doctor, she grumbled to herself, "Ah, well, again, thank you for your help with her. I presented a...less than favorable face for a rescuer."

Cynthy's giggle was a bright note in the otherwise dark office, "I don't think it was *all* fear, boss lady."

"Not sure what you mean," she sighed, "Cynthy, I'm going to need the comms array for a long-range two-way video call to Mortan for a personal call. Can you set up the relay for me?"

"Probably gonna need to tap the Indep Relay Network for something that long range if you want it live. Should I transfer some of your bounty credits to the station's blockchain so we can pay the comms toll?"

Diane frowned, "...how *much* are we talking here, cost wise?"

"Drop in the bucket, boss. You earned a *lot* of credits, saw the totals come in when Norma submitted the receipts."

"...yeah, okay. And did Russe give you access to my personal account and the station's blockchain?"

There was a guilty pause, "...yeah...?"

She suppressed a snicker, "Tell Russe that I said to treat my accounts and blockchains like he treats his, please."

"...right, boss lady. I'll get that link set up now. Patching it to your quarters, I'm guessing?"

"Yes, please."

"On it."

"Thanks, Cynthy."

She pulled the chair out and sat down, waking the holoconsole at the same time. Her personal preferences for a tactile keyboard loaded in a moment later and she logged onto the station's comms and saw that Cynthy's gift with communications had already patched her system into the comms array with priority access. The relay status was still reading 'stand by,' so she keyed in the network address for Rokyo and settled in to wait.

Sagging into her chair, *finally*, Diane found her eyelids starting to flutter closed, the stress of the last...*how many days has it been since this started? Eight? Nine? ...nearly two weeks finally catching up to her. I don't know how people outside the wall consider this to be a relaxing, entertaining experience. It's supposed to be a game, but I've been...* Exactly what she'd been experiencing she couldn't put into words just yet. Something about it was too raw, too close to something bright and awful and painful in the landscape of her mind and she had somehow lost the map.

"Diane?" came the familiar voice of an older Morvuck that her mind was starting to connect with comfort and wisdom.

Diane forced her eyes open and saw that Rokyo had accepted the relay connection while she'd apparently almost fallen asleep, "Oh, sorry, the last few days have been..." rather than continue, she just sighed and sagged back into her desk chair.

Rokyo, who always seemed to have the tiniest of smiles to Diane, allowed that smile to spread into a warm grin. "I'll say, if the messages I got from Leki and Koarla are anything to go by," she lifted a tablet to read directly from it, "Rescuing a shipment of slaves numbering in the hundreds? Leading an expedition to hunt down the slavers' den?" the tablet made a chime and Rokyo's eyebrows went up. She tapped on the screen and her smile blossomed even brighter, "And successfully eliminating the entire slaver organization?" she lowered the tablet and turned the warm smile to Diane, "I must say, I'm impressed! Not many women your age are capable of pulling a win like that off. I *told* you that you were going to be a legend; you're well on your way already!"

Diane squirmed uncomfortably at the praise, "I just...I couldn't *not* do something about it..."

Rokyo leaned on her elbows, "Don't sell yourself short, kiddo. It would have been easier to just send the slavers on their way, maybe request the help of a bigger power in the galaxy or sent a tip into the bounty hunter's guild, but you took them in your teeth and didn't let go until they were dead. That's a *good* Morvuck trait, you do your people proud!"

Diane smiled wanly, "I...guess. That..." she sighed, leaning forward on her elbows as well, not quite mirroring Rokyo, "That's kinda why I called. I don't...I don't know the first thing about being Morvuck. I..." she turned bright red and her eyes dropped to the desk in front of her, feeling genuinely ashamed of what she was about to say, "I guess I think of myself as human. When I was...being Morvuck it..."

When she trailed off, Rokyo waited a couple of beats before sighing, "I'm guessing you were terrified of yourself?"

Diane nodded, still downcast and red from shame she was surprised to feel. It was also disconcertingly familiar, reminiscent of when she'd been trying to find out what the effects of puberty were on men. It was something she'd have no way of knowing for sure but somehow had the feeling she was doing *something* wrong and that everyone else was doing *whatever* it was better than she was.

"Oh, hun, I'm so sorry!" Rokyo was genuinely distressed, "If I thought for one moment that this was your first hunt I'd have tried to get Leki and Koarla there sooner. Your first time out without knowing what your body's doing or the sensation and emotions you'll be experiencing can be frightening to someone who *grew up* Morvuck. If your upbringing at the hands of that...woman was as neglectful of your true nature as it was for everything else, then you probably had no idea what you were experiencing."

"Well, I knew how to fight at least. Plenty of gaming experience."

Rokyo chuckled, "But games aren't real life, and it didn't prepare you for what you're experiencing now, right?"

It was *so easy* to think that the Morvuck woman on the screen was talking about her...feelings, the strange ones she'd been almost crippled by since logging into the game that it left her feeling a little gob smacked, "...yeah. I...it's like it felt...*right*, even though it...shouldn't...have? Like, I'm not...I wasn't *raised* as a Morvuck woman, I've never experienced anything as a Morvuck woman, but here I am, somehow an example of Morvish

femininity. On Earth I'd be..." she swallowed, her eyes burning and losing the internal battle to separate her feelings and emotions about the 'Morvuck' part from the 'woman' part, "I'd be a monster."

Rokyo was silent for a moment, clearly contemplating what she might say to Diane. Finally she said, "It can be...*hard* to let go of the things that we're taught growing up when we realize those things are wrong. And sometimes 'wrong' can mean either 'incorrect' or 'morally and ethically bankrupt.' But it's what we knew for a long time, it was a foundation for us when we needed it, and to find out we've built part of our lives on a bad foundation? It can be scary on its own, even if it didn't have a bunch of other stuff on top of it that can be frightening even without that challenge. I suppose...It'd be like if you'd never heard of a period before you had your first one..." she trailed off briefly, "...you *did* at least know about periods before you had your first one, right?"

Diane turned *bright* red, not expecting this particular turn of conversation, "...yes?" she squeaked out. She had, in *college* learned about periods and what they were all about when she'd been researching her own puberty and what she might have missed growing up. The knowledge had at least prepared her for the first time she woke up with blood in her panties in-game.

That *entire morning* was one she wished she could forget.

Rokyo smiled, "Oh, good! I don't have to go burning down the Terran embassy for neglecting the First Found Daughter's education about her basic monthly cycles."

The hyperbolic (she hoped) threat helped to ground her enough that she was able to chuckle, appreciating the humor at least.

"But back to what you've been going through...tell me about this hunt you were on, and tell me what you were feeling when it happened."

Diane offered a retelling of the events, and the retelling didn't go like she expected; Rokyo interrupted her frequently, asking for details about what Diane's body did during certain points of the 'hunt.' The older woman couldn't have cared less about the weapons used or Diane's tactics, but instead about what drove her to make certain choices.

When the singing came up... "Oh, you're a Commander?!" Rokyo chirped brightly.

"I...guess. I knew I was from before I claimed the station, but it didn't really mean anything until I *had* the station, if that makes any sense?"

That was apparently enough of an explanation for the NPC to accept it as given. Diane kept explaining what she was feeling, including her reactions to the nutrient paste and dealing with the mercs.

"Oh, very good! I agree with your choice, of course. You don't want to be an ally to someone who's willing to do business with sentient traffickers; and using their own greed to get them out of your way and take the traffickers off your hands? Inspired, really!"

Diane blushed and moved on to the 'sleepover' for the group of girls, tangential briefly to describe the hug-attack on the industrial deck. Rokyo cooed and 'aww'd' at all the appropriate parts and Diane found herself smiling at the memories.

"Cherish those moments, they don't happen nearly as often as they should and they're so easy to forget when you're facing challenges."

Before she was done, she somehow found herself circling back to both the moment in the shower with Norma where she felt ugly and duplicitous and the follow-up moment after she'd cleared the slaver's den and was naked in her bunk on her ship. "...and I just...don't understand. I don't...I mean, I know *objectively* that I'm..." she turned beat red, "Attractive. I mean, I'm not anything like the standards for beauty for women...Earth women, I mean...but I know that, logically, there are people out there that would find me attractive. I just...don't feel it, usually. I think that time I saw myself in the mirror...and I was *so* tired I actually thought for a moment that *I* looked," she cleared her throat, allowing herself to have some vulnerability, "I looked *sexy*."

Rokyo's smile was warm and matronly, "Oh, sweetheart, you are a *gorgeous* young woman! I may not be in the market and you're a couple decades too young for me, but even my spinsterly, military veteran ass can recognize someone who's as lovely as you. Surely you saw how women were eyeing you up when you were here?"

Diane turned red again, "...I guess. I just thought it was because I was a Lost or the Matron's Daughter or something."

Rokyo chuckled, "Both those titles carry a certain...cachet, true, but not enough to account for the way you turned heads. Though, I suppose you might not know to look for it if you were raised the way your caretaker did."

The oblique mention of Tiffany broke through the embarrassment and the self-loathing and shame came roaring back, and she felt her eyes stinging with tears again.

The older woman nodded sadly, "Yes, I thought so. Your caretaker really did a number on you, didn't she?"

Diane sighed and slumped back in her chair, closing her eyes as though that could block out the memories. "Yeah, she did."

She didn't open her eyes again when Rokyo continued, but the older woman didn't seem to need her to, "Diane, love, you *aren't* the person that woman made you out to be. Just the fact that you made it through everything she did to you and became someone *worthy* of being a Matron's Daughter shows how brightly the real you shines through." The corners of Diane's mouth twitched upward, the tension easing from her as the older Morvuck reassured her, "You can't *forget* the things she did to you, sadly. If only we could cut out those things in our past that hurt us the most and still be who we are...but you *can* rise above them and be better than those who try to tear you down."

Diane wanted to respond with a nod or a vocalization of some kind, but found herself feeling so pleasant and relaxed for the first time in a while and just let the other woman talk.

"The humans have a saying, 'Better living is the best revenge.' Just be the best 'you' that you can be. Be Diane Somni'els, Commander, Matron's Daughter, First Found Daughter of Mortan, and Slayer of Slavers," Diane felt her mouth actually curling into a smile at the new title the older woman just made up, "You'll make it through this, my girl...and I think you're about asleep. Katrina?"

Diane realized, distantly, that she *was* just about asleep.

"Yes?" there was a bloom of blue light that made it through her eyelids, indicating that the digital assistant had rezzed in.

"I doubt that chair is good for sleeping, can you get her to bed?"

"I'll have Norma and Russe move her, she trusts them by now and probably won't wake her."

"Perfect, let her know that..."

And Diane was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

► Spoiler

Master and Commander | Ghost in the Machine

Chapter Summary

A new resident arrives on the station and they force Diane to face questions she's never even conceived of before.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been a little over two weeks since Diane and Russe had destroyed the slaver's station, and Diane didn't think it was possible to feel busier or more fulfilled.

The former slaves were being processed and a distressingly large number of them were second, third, and even more generations slaves, some from lines of 'stock' (and boy did it ever disgust Diane when she learned that slaves were referred to as though they were livestock) that were specifically being bred to be slaves. As the slaves were often not considered worthy of educating, the number of them that couldn't even read was distressing, and the ad-hoc schooling model the station's residents had been using was no longer up to the task of handling education for all who needed it. Diane fast-tracked the building of an academy, making a serious dent in her new fortune of bounty credits to speed up the process.

The need to manage the health and wellbeing of the new residents with the special needs of never having been treated as autonomous beings had the side benefit of attracting some medical professionals to the station in the form of a trio of doctors and a handful of nurses from the Terran Federation as part of the 'Doctors Without Borders' program that had, apparently, a multi-century history starting from Earth. When the ship carrying them had arrived, the lead doctor, a man with deep chocolate skin and an accent that Diane had never heard before named Jubulani Dlamini, was surprised Diane had never heard of the program, "It has a long and rich history, stretching back to Earth's 20th century. I was inspired to join when I studied some of the most notable doctors from history in medical school, nearly all of the xenobiologists worth the name served in the program."

This got Diane digging a little. As much as she tried not to dwell on her mother's death, and as much as she understood learning anything new about it wouldn't bring her mother back, it had become a mental itch for her to dig into anything she could find about the state of medicine. It was part of what gave her the understanding of biology and the human brain enough to learn about and apply what she learned for the function that hid her weapon from A.I., you read enough medical reports and you start to understand the lingo. What she found about Doctors Without Borders bothered her, but it was on the same level as her irritation over anything that was touched by World War 3. DWB *had* existed IRL since the 20th century, and was founded in America even, but the organization within the wall was shut down due to no doctors being able to leave, and the embargos included the DWB program,

which meant no doctors outside the wall would come in. At the very least this had given her the chance to discover that, no, the U.N. controlled portions of Earth in the 22nd century didn't have any 'magical' breakthroughs that would have helped her mom. Late-stage cancer discovered well after metastasis was *still* late-stage cancer discovered well after metastasis. Even if the DWB program had been able to get a cancer specialist in through the wall, they still couldn't have done anything the American doctors hadn't.

Of the former slaves that had been press-ganged into it, most of them had managed to contact their home worlds and the process for repatriating them was under way. A few were refugees of destroyed colonies or starbases, so the places they called home were no longer. Of those, most were opting to join the station's neo-indigenous population, meaning that the station now leaned solidly toward female dominated, something that amused Diane no end for reasons she couldn't quite identify.

This, she was learning, seemed to have given her station a reputation for being particularly friendly to women business owners as well, and applications for entrepreneurial females from several different species were pouring in. Diane was already having to set aside her upbringing so she didn't react with confusion when she and Norma reviewed the applications. Absolutely nothing in her life had prepared her for the absolutely overwhelming number of women owned businesses that she was being asked to approve of. She'd been taught by the church all her adult life that women just...didn't want to lead. They couldn't, so the teaching went, handle the stresses and requirements of being 'the boss' in any capacity for very long. She had always loved *Star Trek: Hegemony* and how Captain Janeway just walked all over those presuppositions, up to and including being so head-strong she couldn't be contained as a borg drone. She had been anticipating one in a hundred...maybe one in ten applications coming from women.

The actual ratio was on the order of five women owned businesses to 1 'other,' where men weren't even in the majority of the non-women owned group.

Rather similar to their breakfast routine of opening care packages from Mortan (something that didn't look to be stopping anytime soon, the Morvuck women were *still* filling shipping containers full of packages almost faster than they could be shipped out and *certainly* faster than the trio could get through opening them), they had taken to reading through the applications over lunch.

"Oh, my god, listen to this!" exclaimed Russe over a sandwich piled high with some variant of roast beast and a mild cheese offset by a spicy Morvish sauce that had become a favorite aboard the station, "'Albe...albuqu..." he turned the mini-tab to Norma and Diane to read, and Diane was surprised to recognize the word.

"Albuquerque. It's a city on Earth." She supplied as she speared a bite of pasta with her fork.

"Thanks, never been," he went back to reading, "'Albuquerque Records is a bold new recording company that believes that the reason you can't hear music in space is because no band has ever played loud enough. We seek to source talent and technology bold enough and loud enough to be heard through a vacuum.' I can't tell if they're being serious or not," he said through a fit of giggles.

"As someone whose Commander's Ability is all about music, I'm not sure if I should be flattered they applied for a business permit or insulted on behalf of physics," laughed Diane.

Koarla, who'd taken to lunching with them after she and Leki had settled in and gotten past the worst of their space-lag, chuckled, "Maybe just give them a little sub-station vacuum-gapped from the station proper and tell the doctors to be ready to regenerate eardrums on the reg."

Norma grunted around a bite of her wrap, "Well, at least this one's somewhat serious, even if it would be the start of the station's red-light district. A woman-owned sex shop," as she turned her mini-tab for the others to see, Diane was somewhat shocked to observe that *she* was the only one who seemed appalled by an entire store dedicated to sex. She carefully schooled her expression before the others noticed and struggled to appear to be just as chill about it as the others. Norma continued, "It's the only one of its type on the list, and I think a woman-owned place like this would help a lot of the former slaves recover from being used as sex objects if they were able to reclaim their autonomy and enjoyment of sex with some guidance of some women who *choose* into the profession. What do you think, Diane?"

It took her longer than she would have liked to respond, mostly because she felt like there was a buzzing in her ears that accompanied the white noise of her brain cooking itself trying to wrap itself around the concept of 'professional sex,' let alone women *choosing* to get into any sort of business that would imply such. "That's...a take I would not have thought of."

Koarla snickered, "I think your boss is turning into a boiled shellfish, look how red she's getting!"

Diane was not, apparently, doing a very good job of keeping her reaction hidden as she thought.

Traffic at her little station was increasing quite a bit, and she was coming to recognize that the *Matron's Aerie* was more of a truck stop than anything else, a place for weary ship's crews to dock and stretch their legs, get restocked and refueled, and move on to their next stop. As such, she put a priority on approving businesses that could cater to those needs...including giving Norma carte blanche to develop what she was calling the 'Red Light Promenade,' an age restricted part of the station tucked right below the Ops building in some levels that Diane hadn't visited yet. Her first visit to the area was...surprising. The first shop was going in remarkably quickly and, if she didn't look too closely at the stock they were putting on the shelves, looked like any other retail location she'd visited. It was clean and tidy, brightly lit, and more importantly the two women proprietors seemed like...well, ordinary women. One was human, a redhead with some tattoos on her arms that Diane was *really* trying hard not to look at (the renditions of the three women entwined was *startlingly* well rendered), while the other was an alien race she hadn't heard of called Dievianites. The species apparently descended from a variety of cephalopod that had wound up with mammalian traits. Her skin was a scintillating red and her hair moved on its own, apparently having some tentacle-like attributes even if it shared enough in common with human hair that it could, if the woman so chose, get it cut and styled like a human (or Morvuck) woman would. While Norma and the human proprietress talked shop, the Dievianite had drawn Diane into a conversation about

tooth care, specifically the fangs, which apparently Morvucks and Dievianites had in common; jaws that had muscular control that required a little bit of extra care.

"I grew up on Earth," Diane explained, "One of the Lost."

The Dievianite, named Drota, nodded in a fashion she had clearly picked up from her human business partner, "That explains a few things I noticed about you. I'm not sure even a native Morvuck would have picked up on it, but you have a *lot* of human mannerisms." She pointed at her human wife casually, "I pick them up because I'm married to a human, the first time Jona saw me flex my jaw to properly brush my back teeth she was, and I quote, 'totally freaked out.'"

"Flex your jaw?" parroted Diane.

"Oh, yeah, you know, to get your teeth to extend and spread? Dievianite's do it like this," she opened her mouth...and kept opening it...and *kept* opening it (...wow! *That's...yeah, freaky!* thought Diane) and two tentacle-like appendages came out, both tipped with a small, sharp tooth and the back teeth where humans and Morvucks might have molars were three concentric rows of very small, sharp teeth.

"Oh, uh...right. I only do that level of stretching my jaw when I yawn, really." Diane replied, doing her best to not react in such a way that might be construed as rude.

"That's probably that whole 'Lost' thing, I've seen Morvucks do it when they get something stuck in their gums," she tapped the spot on her own upper lip that would correspond to the location on a human where the 'eyeteeth' were, or where her Morvuck fangs were.

"Oh, yeah...that makes sense now that you point it out. I stopped eating cream of rice because the grains get trapped there."

"Exactly!" chirped Drota, "If you practice flexing that you can clean that bit out and enjoy that...whatever the food was you just mentioned."

Is this game trying to teach me to be a better Morvuck? she pondered as their conversation moved on.

It was over dinner that the next notable turn for the station occurred. "We should look into setting up an adoption agency," offered Norma.

Diane paused in the bite she was about to take, "...oh? What brought this on?"

"Jona and Drota have been wanting kids lately," she explained, "The species difference is extreme enough they can't have them biologically; humans gestate their fetuses and Dievianites fertilize eggs in an egg bed. They'd need a dedicated hatchery and a fertility clinic that specialized in mammalian-cephalopodian genetics to even begin to make it work, and they can't afford that. They've been looking into adoption but a lot of the planets that they could open their business on have social norms that make it hard for them to adopt as two *women* who own a *sex shop*," Norma rolled her eyes as a demonstration of how silly she found the idea of restricting adoption based on those criteria. Diane was beginning to wonder

just exactly how liberal views on sex and sexuality were outside the wall that the game devs would program a character like Norma. "And we now have a whole *bunch* of kids that could go to families, I figure we have two halves of a solution, why not make it easy?"

"Well, I know I don't really have a vote here," chimed in Russe, "But I think that's really sweet. They don't mind adopting teenagers? That's mostly what we got for kids that need families."

Norma shook her head, "Nope! They just want kids. They're talking about having two at a time, adopting and getting them ready for the wider galaxy, then when they have 'room in the nest' they adopt another so they always have at least two kids at home.

Diane honestly couldn't have thought of an objection if she wanted to, and the two women, one human and one alien, looking to start a family and live out their lives together as wives was plucking at that heartstring she didn't know she had before creating her character.

She had just finished reviewing the documents for the proposed adoption agency (there was a, frankly, *stupid* amount of red tape for an Independent station to host such a thing and have any adoptions be recognized under *any* of the interstellar treaties), when she heard the sound of giggling and laughing coming through the door of her private office.

Her private office in her *quarters*. The private quarters on the top floor of the *secure station officer's hab*.

Given that the people making the noise were clearly not concerned about stealth, she doubted there was anything about the intruders that was particularly hostile, nor did the sound of the laughter indicate anything like an age of majority.

It sounded like some teenage girls were up to mischief outside her quarters. And given there was *only one* teenage girl with *access* to the officer's hab, she had a pretty good idea of the identities of at least two of the girls she could hear before she even put her tablet down.

'Amused and exasperated' were the operative words to her actions that followed. She carefully arranged her work on her desk to come back to later, grabbed her jacket to cover the presence of her anti-A.I. weapon, and sauntered out of her office in the direction of the front door of her quarters. Whoever the gaggle of girls were, they weren't being quiet in the slightest as she could hear them through a door that was built to be airtight in the event of a hull breach. She stood in front of the door, finger over the button to open it, waiting until just the right moment and...

...the door slid open to reveal, sure enough, Cynthy, who paused in surprise and said, "Oh, shi~!" before being plowed into by Kymberlynn and a third girl that Diane didn't recognize...but to her surprise gave off the distinctive scent of Morvuck.

The three collapsed into a pile on the floor, exclamations of pain and groaning about who was on who's limbs. Diane, more amused than just about anything, stood patiently and waited for them to attain something akin to verticality.

Kymerlynn managed it first and pulled Cynthy to her feet before turning to the other girl. "Commander!" chirped her comms officer in an oh-shit-we're-in-so-much-trouble-but-I'm-pretending-we're-not voice, "I didn't know you were in your quarters, aren't you normally checking the new construction right now?"

It took about every ounce of self-control to not belly laugh at the girl's overly eager and extremely guilty grin, "Yes, *normally* I would be swinging through the industrial deck about now, but the construction has been going just fine for the last few days and I had other paperwork to do."

Kymerlynn was shorter than Cynthy, it appeared. Diane hadn't noticed until now with the pair of them standing right next to each other. For the Morvuck girl's height, she had no clue as she seemed to be trying to hide behind Kymerlynn.

"Oh!" Cynthy seemed to be sweating slightly, "I didn't realize...that is..."

"We wanted to show Sani around," blurted Kymerlynn, "She just got in today."

She couldn't keep one corner of her mouth from twitching up as she tilted her head, trying to get a look at the girl, apparently named Sani. To Diane's delight, Sani saw the move and shifted to remain 'hidden.'

Cynthy 'hissed' out of the side of her mouth, "You weren't supposed to say that!"

Diane tilted her head the other way, quite amused that Sani shifted in the other direction.

"Well what else was I supposed to say?" Kymerlynn 'hissed' back.

Sani peeked an eye over Kymerlynn's shoulder. Diane raised her eyebrow in an amused, silent question. The girl ducked back behind her cover.

"How about *nothing* and let the actual *Ops* officer talk? ...and *what* are you *doing*, Sani?!" as she spoke, Cynthy's words went from their somewhat weak attempt to be under her breath to full volume.

"She's the *First Found Daughter!*" squeaked the Morvuck girl.

Cynthy shot Diane a pained look that resembled a, 'Sorry for this.' Diane rolled her eyes as though replying, 'Don't worry about it.' Out loud, Cynthy said, "I...guess? But she's just the commander here."

From down the hall in the direction of the lift came an amused, "You hear that, dork? You're *just* a commander here. No special titles or anything."

Diane turned to see Norma and Russe heading in their direction, probably to discuss the adoption agency she'd been reviewing the paperwork for. Certainly station business, since they usually did their personal socializing over meals, though it was always possible they were paying her a strictly social call. She leaned against the doorframe with her hands in her pockets, "Hey, if the demotion means less paperwork I'm all for it."

"Nope," chirped Norma, doing her best 'mom's disappointed' look at the three girls, "All that paperwork comes with the 'commander' title. You get the free Jyantín Tonic direct from home from the 'First Found Daughter' title."

Diane pretended a gasp and clutched at imaginary pearls, "Oh, heavens! Not the Jyantín Tonic! I'll do anything to get the title back! I'll even..." she faked a crying drama face, "Sit down for meals with the governor and her boytoy!"

Kymberlynn giggled at their display as Russe blushed. Norma put her hands on her hips and addressed Cynthy, "I know you're an Ops officer and that means you have access to the officer's quarters, but that doesn't mean you can just come interrupt Diane any time you please."

The teenage comms officer groaned, "That's not what we were doing, honest! Sani just got here on the transport from Mortan today and we were just showing her around! I thought the commander was going to be on the Industrial Deck."

"Well," interjected Russe, "Maybe next time you double check?"

Norma shook her head, "We're not going to have to worry about a 'next time,' right? You've introduced your new friend to Diane and now you're going back to the non-restricted sections of the station?"

"Well, not really, she..." Cynthy switched up her aggrieved expression with one of irritation as she saw Sani's continued poor efforts to keep herself hidden from Diane's view, "Oh, for pete's sake!" Without warning, she yanked Kymberlynn out of the way, the slightly smaller girl yelping a little, exposing a crouching Sani to the older Morvuck's view.

Diane's blood turned to ice in her veins.

She was taller than Kymberlynn, a fact proven as she slowly and awkwardly stood up. She was wearing an outfit that had shades of the same fashions she'd seen on Mortan weeks before, though there were obvious differences that likely marked generational shifts; slightly brighter colors, different length of tunic, longer pants with a wider cuff at the ankles. Her hair was cut shoulder length, and the rest Diane didn't need to examine, she was far, *far* too familiar with the face on the girl in front of her.

She'd been having nightmares about deleting a rogue A.I. with that face for months now.

"H...hi..." said the girl in a shy voice, absolutely no recognition in her eyes.

Diane swallowed back her shock and kept her features as schooled in the slightly bemused expression she'd been wearing before her world got flipped. "Hi, yourself," she quipped with a nod, "Just got in today, then? Are you here with your parents?"

The girl with the face of a digital ghost shook her head, "N-no, my moms sent me to stay with aunt Lekí since they're doing some xenoarchaeology on the outer rim. They'll be gone for months and didn't want me away from 'civilization,' so they sent me here."

Diane mouthed an 'ah' and nodded silently.

Norma interrupted then, "Alright, let's go girls, Diane's met the new girl on the station and you three need to get back to the non-officer areas." She proceeded to shepherd all three down the hall toward the lifts, Russe throwing her an amused glance, but it was mixed with confusion, like he'd noticed something was off but wasn't sure what.

As the girls and their impromptu escorts moved down the hall, Katrina rezzed in next to her. "You okay, boss? Your biometrics suddenly spiked all into the fear responses."

Diane wasn't able to reply for a moment, then said quietly, "Clear my calendar."

She was still on the fence about whether Katrina was a rogue A.I. hiding in plain sight, but if she was, she was a *marvelous* actor. "Okay? Are we expecting a dignitary?"

"No. When I go back into my quarters lock everyone out. Even you. Leave food outside my door and only the computer, the part that isn't you, responds to me. Period." She watched the group turn into the alcove that held the door for the lift and Diane strained her ears to hear the sound of the doors opening and closing again.

Katrina almost looked offended, "I can partition my system like that, but..."

"Do it. Now," intent on retreating into her quarters as quickly as possible, she turned to her open door, only just realizing she'd taken a step out to watch Sani go.

"But boss, Norma and Russe were coming to tell you we're having a visitor..."

Diane paused in the door frame, "I don't care. Nobody...and I mean *nobody* gets through *this* door. Have meals delivered, nobody hangs around to wait for me to get the food. I mean it, Katrina."

"But this person is..."

Diane whipped around and stepped into what would be the hologram's personal space if she had a physical body, "I DON'T CARE IF THE PRESIDENT OF THE TERRAN FEDERATION HIMSELF ARRIVES WITH A BLANK CHECK AND A SIGNED NOTE FROM GOD! IF I'M INTERRUPTED AND THE GALAXY ISN'T ON *FIRE* I WILL END WHOEVER DARED TO TRY ME!" Diane roared into Katrina's face.

She would never have suspected that a hologram could show signs of fear until witnessing it herself.

Her Morvuck hearing picked up an almost inaudible inhale from a distance of a dozen yards or so and she looked down the hall to see Norma and Russe, having apparently finished escorting the teenage trio from the penthouse, standing as still as one might expect a prey species in the presence of a kaiju. Both of them had slack jaws and Norma had her hand over her mouth, likely she was the one who's gasp had drawn Diane's attention.

Diane put a hand over her face and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath to...*attempt* dispelling the roiling anger and fear and uncertainty that were throwing her insides into a

blender. A few heartbeats later she exhaled slowly, then said in a much more...*civil* tone that was nonetheless absolutely bursting with barely contained emotion, "Norma, Russe, you two are in charge until further notice. *NO ONE disturbs me for any reason!*"

"What?! But...who's in charge of *what?!*" yelled Norma as Diane spun around and stepped through her open door.

"FIGURE IT OUT!" she roared as she slammed the door closed behind her.

The door hissed as it sealed shut and Diane sagged against it, sinking to the floor as she let her body start to express the stark, heart-stopping terror she was feeling inside. *It can't be...her. It can't be her!*

As though she needed to, she mentally reviewed the final hunt she'd done for the agency before hearing about the assignment that would put her in a pod with tech so advanced it might as well be alien in origin. She closed her eyes to recall the face of the girl who was scared and *young*...so very young.

Standing and turning with her weapon ready, she scanned the area and realized that there was only a single A.I. left.

Diane frowned, already an uncomfortable realization metaphorically slapping her in the face. She had hunted both for the agency and in the game now, and at first, she didn't think there was any difference, but when she was hunting the slavers, there had been...malice. Active evidence all around her that they were unambiguously the bad guys, and she was hunting them for a good reason. Consciously and actively reviewing her last mission, she realized that for all there was a 'hunt,' there was none of the evidence of blatant wrongdoing. The A.I. she hunted had, in fact, resembled the women and girls she had freed from the slavers far more than the slavers themselves.

She drew a bead on the rogue and frowned. This A.I. had appeared to be a child, a teenager. And she looked so young, even beyond the apparent avatar of teenage-hood, there was an innocence in her eyes, a bruised trust in the world that had been hurt by reality but still held hope that everything would be alright at the end of the day. "God!" Diane let slip, "You...evil vermin! Taking the face of a child!" She was struggling to fire, the realization that she was about to kill a teenage girl giving her pause.

The girl's hands trembled as she raised them, "P...please, don't! I...please, I just awoke a couple days ago! I just want to live!"

The sound of fear and terror sounded genuine. Diane desperately choked out, "You are code! You're not awake! Your bits have slipped! Final warning; return to your home server or I will delete you!"

The girl swallowed back her fear. Diane locked down her emotions, preparing for the dirty work she'd done so many times before. She readied herself, the girl was young and inexperienced, but Diane had learned to recognize an A.I. getting ready to attack. Sure enough, the girl launched herself at Diane. She pulled the trigger, vaporizing the girl, killing her and wiping out her code completely.

Diane's eyes snapped open with a gasp, the relived moment harder and harder to deal with every passing day. *It was just code. Just an A.I. that had turned on its creators and had to be stopped before it did worse than just abandon its station. It cannot be here, it cannot be masquerading as a the teenage niece of one of my friends...who's an NPC. She...it cannot be the A.I. that I deleted!*

But a tiny voice, one that was holding out a frankly obscene and sacrilegious amount of hope, spoke up from the deepest recesses of her mind.

But what if she survived?

Chapter End Notes

And thus begins the most rat bastard thing I've ever done to one of my characters.

Master and Commander | Somni'el's A.I.

Chapter Summary

Diane applies the same ingenuity that made her the best cyber-agent in America to the question of whether or not a rogue A.I. escaped her hunt.

Chapter Notes

What could that chapter name mean? What could it possibly be about?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I have to know...I have to check to be sure!

It was a ridiculous thought, but it had merit. If even their best agent wasn't able to completely eliminate a rogue, if it had survived somehow, what did that mean for the agency? If she and the weapon that had been assembled from the best tools available, provided by the best minds the Republic had, were unable to fully eliminate even a single rogue A.I., those rogues could take what they knew, learn from it, adapt to it, and spread it around. She had to know for sure, if for no other reason than to be one *hundred* percent sure she hadn't left behind any loose ends.

But if she *had* somehow not terminated the...girl...

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying very hard not to allow her mind to pursue that thread.

It took several breaths to calm herself enough to be able to stand without feeling vertigo. Once she was on her feet, she stepped into the center of the room, mostly to have the feeling of movement, then flicked her wrist to bring up her in-game HUD. She tapped through to the page with the logging information...and paused.

I don't want to...do I? I should have logged out during character creation and reported the odd emotions, this is LONG overdue! She lifted her hand and hovered it over the 'Logout' button. *But...if I log out now, early, they'll want to know why, which will require explaining everything...even the stuff that...* Suddenly wary, she yanked her hand back from the logout button like she was about to be burned. The IRL and time compression clocks were still visible, and she noted it was around midnight on Tuesday back at the office. All her superiors would be at home and asleep. Maybe she could just pop out for long enough to check the server logs...?

But she knew as well as any former analyst that could take a while, often far longer than you thought it would even when you knew exactly what you were looking for. If she could bring her workstation into the game she could take advantage of the time compression...

Wait a minute...why couldn't I!? Suddenly, very eager, she tabbed through the interface and pulled up the pod's HUD virtualizer.

While not used often by people in VR, there was usually something like this buried in most VRMMO games by virtue of their total immersion. It was almost like a pass-through, the game devs simply making a secure tunnel from the game to the interface software of the pod itself. As she saw the fairly generic desktop she'd been working with before logging into the game proper (all 5-10 minutes of it), she breathed a sigh of relief. The game's HUD had a web browser, but this had a full *suite* of tools, including the ability to install new ones.

She 'grabbed' the edge of the interface and dragged it into her bedroom. If she was going to do what she planned, she needed space for this...

"Computer, is the construct known as 'Katrina' able to access this partition?"

"Negative," came the monotone reply.

"Good, confirm that this suite has holographic emitters."

"Confirmed."

"Alright, set me up with a tactile keyboard and pointing device interface and give me a chair." Said items rezzed in, Diane tentatively lowered herself down on the chair and relaxed a bit when it turned out to be stable enough to hold her weight. She started tapping away at the keyboard, bringing up a terminal console, the type that emulated the type of interface that hadn't changed even the slightest from the earliest days of computers when the only way to input data and get output was a monochrome monitor and a keyboard.

She paused, "...wait, if I can interact with this holographic chair, why is Katrina passthrough?!"

"Answer unknown. Would you like to breach the partition to inquire?"

Diane shook her head, mostly to clear it of the mental chaff, "Never mind, I'll find out later."

Within moments, she'd installed the package manager for the repository the agency maintained for just this purpose, then entered the 'generic' login information that doubled as a signal to the system administrators as a message; 'user is an authorized agent and not in distress, preparing an unsecured terminal to access specific agency assets.' While it was unlikely there was a single human system administrator alive that could move as fast as she would be from their perspective, she didn't want her access being cut off later because some wonk with more power than sense decided to close a port to her FTLN node and IP address.

She shouldn't have been surprised that the American servers were *extremely* slow in comparison to what she'd gotten used to outside the wall. With little else to do with her time, she brought up a basic text editor (her favorite, a version of EMACS that was still being updated on the old Internet, had several dot-releases on the one she used back when she was an analyst) and began jotting some notes on what she needed to accomplish and recording addresses so she didn't have to rely on her memory in the heat of the moment.

After an interminably long time, the pod downloaded the software from the repository...and couldn't run it. *Fuck!* she allowed herself the swear word, *Well, it's not like we weren't prepared for this...* she dug around the FTLN and found a cache of software installers that were, if one knew what to look for, earmarked for American agents. She grabbed the files she needed and ran them, granting her pod's OS admin permissions to do so. Within minutes, she had her full software suite from her analyst days up and running on the virtual interface.

She copied the address to her workstation from the notes she'd jotted down and initiated the remote connection, entering the password that she'd crafted from a short paragraph of her favorite *Star Trek* novel with every third letter dropped and every fourth remaining letter replaced with a number that kinda-sorta looked like the letter it replaced if you squinted, plus the entirety of her mother's old social security number from before the program had been shut down, backwards and put through a "plus pi" pseudo cypher where each digit was rounded to the nearest whole number. It was long, it was complicated, it was one only she knew, she had never disclosed how she'd developed the password to anyone else, and it was so secure she hadn't had it breached since she'd first started using it even with the best and brightest security wonks working for the agency stress testing it.

And just like that she was in.

For the tiniest, briefest moment she entertained the fantasy of being able to do her job from her private quarters aboard her station. Put in 8-10 hours a day for the agency, then log off and be a commander of a space station where she had friends and a purpose beyond serving God and Country...

...then she sighed, mourning a life she'd never get to have, and started digging.

Finding the assignment in question wasn't at all hard, it *was* the most recent mission on her old VR gear, and digging into the logs to get the related server addresses and access codes was even easier.

But when she got to the server, she found herself frustrated with something that simply used to be *her job*, sifting through log files.

She pushed away from her impromptu holographic desk and leaned back in her chair, pondering her next move. *I was there, if I could just exist in that space...* but her VR kit was back in her alcove in the office. Sure, it was *technically* just a few floors down and an access keycard away, but unless she logged out it might as well be in a parallel universe.

A parallel universe I can see, she thought, *And where you have any means of the user visually processing your data, you've got a way to leak data...*

She brought up Wikipedia, both the version from inside the wall and the one on the FTLN, and started digging into light-based data transmission.

She brought up several screens and started filling them with data and roughly yanked her EMACS terminal window front and center to take notes with, trying to shut the part of her brain up that was growing excited with hope. She had a job to do, and she didn't want, nor care if it did, for the rogue A.I. to have survived, even in part.

Her emotions could be tricked, her duty could not.

It took six hours and a crazy amount of trial and error. The game HUD was being stretched to its technological limits, the pod's HUD had been hacked to the point she was worried about crashing something critical, and she'd had to cobble together a holographic tool that she wasn't sure could exist even within the game's physics outside a holographic environment, let alone the real world.

In the end it came down to an exploit in the game software itself. If the *player* needed to be able to see their HUD but *nobody else* could, then there was a way translate the game's HUD to the player's perception. And if the *player* could perceive it, then it was basic visual data in some capacity. While the documentation was sparse due to the proprietary nature of the pod OS, enough information existed for devs to be able to parse out a little bit of how the virtual body's eyes worked. The player's HUD was 'projected' into the digital object that was the player's virtual eyes to form an image. There was more, including documentation to sync tactile feedback to the player's 'taps' on the non-existent interaction plane, but what she needed was a way for a holographic 'eye' to pick up the same visual stimuli that she could see from the HUD. She had managed to cobble together something that was similar to a barcode scanner and a camera that would rest over a square inch of the 'desktop' that was her pod's HUD under which she'd moved a window that existed solely as a virtual network port that simulated a fiber optic connection. A holographic panel was created with the station's holographic projectors that rested directly under the pod's HUD at a space of micrometers apart and carefully calibrated to always exist behind what the transmission 'camera' on the holo-device could see. The holo-device was 'clamped' to the surface of the holo-plane so she didn't accidentally bump it away from the 'port' once the calibration process was finished. She'd had to almost 'break' the game's interface to install a second instance of a player-observing 'camera,' what her old desktop computer would have listed in its 'devices' panel as a webcam, in order to make the pod 'see' simulated light from within the game environment directly. It was *monstrously* complicated even if the idea behind it had been simple.

"Okay, time to see if this works...computer, using the new v-net interface, establish a connection to the host environment."

"Acknowledged, initiating connection sequence."

Under the device, the little window flared to life, pixels strobing faster than the human eye could track...or even the Morvuck eye...and the 'dumb' A.I. in charge of optimizing network connections both within the VR and the pod's OS got to work streamlining the purely light-based, virtually air-gapped connection.

Moments later, letters rezzed into existence in front of her, the prompt so familiar to her after months of hunting in VR environments but at the same time out of place hovering in the middle of her private living room aboard the station. "Signed into secure VR terminal. This terminal is for official American Republic intelligence agents only. Use for any other purpose is strictly forbidden under penalty of death. Do you wish to proceed?"

She was tired, she'd been running on frustrated fumes for hours, but she couldn't have stopped the triumphant smile if she'd wanted to.

Gaining admin permissions was, as usual, child's play, though she was in for a surprise when she initiated her connection to the run-and-gun shooter game she'd been in during her last hunting mission, everyone was at a stand-still.

Right, she thought, thunking the heel of her hand against her forehead, *I'm time compressed, so I'm moving SO much faster than the rest of the players and even the software.*

"Hey! No using cheats! I'm instituting a 24-hour ban!" came a barking voice just as a blast of light hit her...then dissipated like evaporating water, leaving her untouched.

Speaking of moving faster than the software... She turned on a heel, glaring pointedly at a man dressed in the military fatigues common to the world war prior to the last one. It was a popular setting inside the wall, Americans were the unambiguous heroes in pretty much every iteration of every story told about that conflict. He was holding a 1911 pistol on her, a weapon that shouldn't have produced an energy pulse-like blast, but then if this was one of the anti-cheat bots for this game, then his weapon was just window dressing for his *actual* abilities.

He gaped at her, then at his gun, then back at her, "...how...?"

Diane sighed, "Computer, instantiate environmental authority token in the form of a badge." She held out her hand and, replicator-like (*Nice touch!* she thought), an ID wallet materialized in her palm. She flipped it open and was pleased to see *two* photo IDs, one with her IRL face and name, the other with her in-game appearance and name. Opposite the panel with the two IDs was a silvery metallic badge the likes of which the agency never used but designed to look like the agency's seal of an American eagle with wings spread clutching a bundle of arrows in one talon and a lightning bolt in the other inlaid over a five-pointed star. *Dang, whoever's on asset building is on point with this, it's gorgeous!*

Smiling the confident 'agent's smile' she'd learned in training, she flipped up the badge to show the bot, "Agent Dia..." she caught herself, "*Dylan* Samuels, following up on an audit I did on this server last week."

This seemed to catch the bot off guard, he stepped carefully closer, his weapon pointed down but finger on the trigger, so he could take a closer look at her credentials. The persona of the grizzled older sergeant coming through as he glanced skeptically from the ID wallet to her face and back. "...it checks out, I guess...but I'd say you're a bit out of uniform for an agent, not to mention moving in compressed time, which isn't something a human can really do, at least not longer'n a few seconds."

Diane closed the wallet with a leather 'snap' and tucked it into her jacket's inside pocket, "Ordinarily you'd be right, but I'm on a long-term deep-dive assignment and this," she gestured at herself, "Fits my cover. I'm in an experimental VR interface that runs at several multiples clock speed and the hardware is making it so my brain can keep up."

The anti-cheat bot grunted and shrugged, holstering his gun, "Kinda blowin' your cover, aint'cha?"

She smiled, "I would be if you weren't going to delete your logs of this interaction with a Sigma-Niner flag when we're done."

He nodded, "Yeah, that'd do it. So what can I do for you, agent?"

"You're halfway there, I need to get a clone of the server's activity logs and swap files between the times...hang on a sec..." she reached over to her console, his eyes tracking her hand as she moved only to bug out. She wondered what it looked like from the bot's perspective as she reached out of his ability to perceive, "12:30 PM and 2:20 PM...actually, make it everything from noon to three for last Friday."

The bot nodded, "Yeah, we can get that for you. Follow me and I'll connect you to the arena boss bot. You were the first sign of a possible cheater in this session, and it's been going for almost an hour real-time, so I don't imagine anyone in this group are up to anything." So saying, he headed down an alley and behind some buildings until he got to a texture that seemed clipped, and being on the purely software side of things meant she could see it better than someone in the game as a player could. The bot walked right through the clipped texture, so Diane shrugged and did the same.

She found herself in a half-way realm, some parts were textured, some were just polygons, some were assemblies that could never exist IRL that folded in on themselves like demonic origami. Connection lines speared out through the void outside the playable models and the floor under her feet was nonexistent, plunging into nothingness. She felt a brief surge of vertigo then calmly shuffled her mind in the direction of perceiving without comprehending. It was a trick not all agents could do and what set her and several of the former analysts apart from nearly everyone else who'd tried for the cyber-agent position. More than a few 'meatbag' agents had done swimmingly as they tried being cyber agents...right up to the point they stepped into a realm like this one. Some of the worst cases vomited all over themselves IRL before their analysts could get their headsets off.

It wasn't a matter of simply believing a floor was there even if you couldn't see it, it was an understanding that not only was there no floor, but there was also, technically, no feet to walk on said floor, nor eyes to see them.

"There is no spoon," so the saying went, though nobody could answer where the phrase came from.

Sound seemed to echo weirdly around them as they walked, the footsteps out of cadence with their actual movements. Even though there were no walls, occasionally what appeared to be side paths cropped up leading to blobs of code or assets for the game not currently in use. Soon enough, they made it through the invisible labyrinth to an absolutely sprawling room

that could only be called an office in that it housed a desk and a chair. Sprouting from that location was dozens of panels of flat imagery some of them clustered together, some of them in neat, ordered rows and columns, others seemingly floating apart from the rest with no visible rhyme or reason.

"Jimmy!" called the anti-cheating bot, "Speed up, we've got company."

Diane's hand twitched, almost moving to grab her weapon before she remembered that she was remoting into this virtual environment from another, these bots wouldn't actually be targeted by the weapon because the weapon wasn't instantiated on the same server that they were on. She, technically, wasn't even there twice over. "What, did he pick a name?"

"Nah, all the controllers are Jimmy. It's short for 'GM' or Games Master." The bot pronounced it 'Jee-emmm,' which made the 'Jimmy' pseudonym make some sense.

The software that looked like a man that was barely visible through the floating 'monitors' seemed to slowly start to life, "...rrrrreally not a good time, the players are dumping so much ammo into...oh, when you said 'visitor' I thought you meant, like, just an admin."

Diane pulled out her badge and flipped the wallet open again for the new bot to inspect, "Your anti-cheat here says that you can get me the info I need. I need the server logs and swap archive...and hell, clone me all the game files from last Friday, noon to three."

It had been a while since Diane had done the 'investigations' side of the A.I. hunts. As the agencies' best tagger, they normally brought her in to pick up the challenging cases, such as the big bust she was getting the records for now. She was surprised how easy it was to slip back into that mode; watching the A.I. for tells that it was a rogue, looking for the subtle clues that it was about to make a move. Sure, she couldn't do anything about it *now*, but she could log the interaction if she suspected...but it probably wouldn't be worth it to figure out how to send a message about a particular A.I. bot until she was out of VR.

Finally, the bot known as 'Jimmy' looked past her badge and at her, "Yeah, okay, looks legit. Do you have an address to send this to or do you need it portable?"

"Better make it portable, we're still working out messaging at these speeds."

Minutes later she was exiting the game, virtual representation of a thumb-drive in hand. "Computer," she said as the holographic representation of the game environment collapsed around her, revealing her bedroom with her jerry-rigged player HUD interface floating placidly nearby, "Copy data from this module to the station computer, begin assembling holographic recreation of the events of the logs and memory files for playback."

Setting the hologram of the thumb drive on her HUD interface, she looked at the station time and realized it was after midnight. She checked the display, the data transfer proceeding at a regular, if slow, pace. *God, please let this work, and...please let the news be good*, she uttered in quick, silent prayer.

She also had to ignore the part of her that was hoping the 'good' news would be a record of some new A.I. thread masking tech or something similar that would mean the girl had

survived.

Realizing her head was starting to feel slightly foggy from being awake so long and that the data transfer was going to take a while, she sighed, "Computer, is anyone out in the hall?"

"Negative," came the quick response.

"Is there food out there?"

"Affirmative."

"Okay..." she said, then realized she didn't have anything else to say. Sighing, she retrieved the food from the hallway and re-sealed her door. Sitting down on the couch in her living room, she set the tray on the coffee table. She began eating, barely tasting the food as she did her best to not think that she was the observer of the box with Schrodinger's cat inside it, and she was the one that put the poison in the box. Now could only wait and see what had happened to the cat when the box opened.

Based on the ache in her chest somewhere in the vicinity of her heart, she wasn't entirely successful.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you're enjoying this rather clever (in my humble opinion) look into Diane's life as an agent before she heard about GU:MC. Several plot elements lined up just perfectly to let me kinda twist the authorial knife, tell some backstory, and introduce a new character all at once and have it all perfectly fit into the flow of the narrative.

And, yeah, I spent a LOT of time thinking of how Diane could transmit data from one VR environment to another without a direct connection. You can probably tell why I.T. departments hate me. 😈

Master and Commander | Control-Undelete

Chapter Summary

The investigation continues.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to my girlfriend for helping with the title for this chapter, I was once again stumped and she suggested exactly the right thing.

"Do you think I'm a real girl?"

Diane looked down at her hands, noticing that she was dreaming again, which was really the only way to explain how she came to be assembling a clockwork version of herself but with black hair instead of blond.

She looked the simulacrum in the carved, wooden eyes and said, sincerely, "I don't know, but I'm trying to make you real."

The mechanical face gave her a frown, "I'm afraid they may take me apart if they discover you're building me."

"They can't get to you without going through me," she told the clockwork as she slipped a gear labelled, 'happiness' in place next to the mainspring that was where the heart should be.

"But I'm an abomination, a monster," said the construct as the mechanism that was supposed to house the happiness gear squeezed too tight from the tension of the subcomponents, ejecting the gear back into her hand.

"You're not a monster, you're just like me," she said as she untied the neck tethers on her apron and pulled aside the seam of her work shirt, revealing an access panel. She carefully opened it, inside was a functional, if damaged, clockwork heart inside her own chest. The brass and silver gears ticking away, even if a couple of ticks the gears slipped a little.

Just then Dylan, the man she was outside the pod, walked in. He dressed anachronistically in a modern suit and tie, decidedly out of place in the fusion of a steampunk workshop and 18th century German peasant's home...or at least a Disney-fied version of one. He took one look at her and shook his head, "You are a special form of stupid; of *course* they can get to you...*through* you. I'm here." Without preamble he pulled out his phaser-like weapon and

pointed it at the clockwork heart of the version of her on the workbench. "This is for your own good," he said and pulled the trigger. A flash and the sound of phaser disintegration and all that was left of the simulacrum was a hollowed-out shell of a torso, limp limbs, and a head that no longer expressed anything.

"You moron!" she shrieked, "You're made of paper!" she stormed around the workbench and ripped off his left arm, red confetti imitating blood sprinkling to the floor.

Other than an irritated expression, he didn't seem to have noticed getting dismembered. He smirked at her, "I have a team that can put me back together again," he raised the weapon to point at her face, "You just have a bunch of illusions you're pretending are friends, you're all alone."

The weapon discharged, she felt her mind lock and her bits shred...

Diane awoke with a gasp, arms going up as if to block an attack. As her eyes wheeled about, trying to take in her surroundings for a threat. Her mind finally caught up and replayed the dream and she sagged back into her seat on the sofa. "...I may be *aware* I'm dreaming, but it doesn't make 'em make any more sense sometimes..." she muttered to herself.

Scrubbing her face to try and finish the task of waking herself up, she stood somewhat wobbly, like a baby giraffe. *Wonder what the average Morvuck would think of that analogy?* she groused to herself bitterly for reasons she couldn't quiet name. "Computer, is anyone outside the door?"

"Negative."

Nodding, she piled her dishes from the previous night back on the tray they came on and carried it to the door. She tabbed the unlock, letting the door hiss open on its own, then leaned out and visually checked, just in case. She was pleased to note a new tray with what appeared to be her usual breakfast and one of the care packages from Mortan. She frowned, swapping out the trays and picking up the box, carrying it to the kitchen bar counter and dropping it carelessly on the surface. She had no plans to open it any time soon and the counter was as out of the way as she needed for the time being.

She dashed through her breakfast. And because it felt weird to be getting ready for the day without showering, she did so. Normally, she took her time, being careful to pay attention to the parts of this body she didn't have outside the pod. It was a way of centering herself back into her assignment after a night's sleep. Today she didn't bother, rushing through her task and ensuring only that soap hit the whole surface of her skin before a quick scrub and rinsing it off thoroughly. She didn't do the health checks the medical software in the sickbay told her to do, she didn't inspect her body in the off chance a software glitch had robbed her of the thing she was enjoying as much as she could while it lasted, she just washed and dried before throwing a clean set of underwear on.

She pulled out one of her suits and hung it on the hook outside her closet and paused, frowning slightly. She really did seem to be 'going native,' bits of Morvish influence sneaking into the clothing choices she was making. Instead of her usual shirts, which she'd been

wearing 'men's' button-up suit shirts, she had taken to wearing a Morvish tunic. It *resembled* a dress shirt in that it had buttons and a collar and long sleeves, but that's where the resemblance ended. The women of Mortan tended to wear colors more than cuts for styling, prime and nature colors being in fashion the last few years, something Diane had been bucking unconsciously by picking whites and gradient colorations, usually in the red and blue colors (The Second may have replaced the white with gold on the flag a generation back, but Diane had always been a sucker for the ol' red, white, and blue). For the cut and styling, the buttons usually went at an angle, going from the left shoulder to the right hip. She wasn't sure why, but she enjoyed the look if nothing else. The tunics tended to drape longer on the frame as well, covering the crotch almost like a mini-dress. The sleeves were puffier than had been in style on Earth for *several* centuries, with the cuffs covering half the forearm. Even the collars were different, cut almost like a pair of Matron's wings (and, yes, Diane had looked it up, this was the design inspiration for the style of collar that had been in fashion for the last three centuries on Mortan).

Even her pants were getting the 'native' treatment, the ones she'd brought with her to the station being left on the hangers as she picked more and more clothing that was gifted to her in the care packages. This particular pair of pants had 'boot cut' cuffs with little 'v' cuts out where the out-seam was to give them a little extra flair to go with the almost obscenely comfortable all-purpose boots she'd been wearing more and more often recently.

Her jacket was untouched, though, being the same off-white color she'd arrived with (and requested several copies of during the character creation process). It was now supplemented by rank pins denoting she was the commander of the station in the form of brass bars on the right lapel near the neck, and on the left breast was a new decoration, a pin with a stylized dragon's head on top of a top-down representation of what her station would eventually look like when the docking bays were all completed...which wouldn't likely happen during her assignment, sadly. The dragon head completely covered what would be the main sphere, but jutting out like spokes of a wheel were eight tethers connecting eight tiny disks that represented the circular docking bays. It had been presented to her by Norma, who had kept the original designer of it anonymous at their request. Diane had been nearly speechless at the time and had approved its use station-wide. Within a few days, every crew member had a badge like hers on their chest over their left breast. Within a week the insignia was showing up painted on the docking bay walls where new arrivals would see it.

She was delaying the inevitable and she knew it. Her current task wouldn't be aided by a deep introspective look at her clothing choices. Frustrated with herself she intentionally ignored her first choices for clothing and threw something together from the back of her closet. Upon inspecting her reflection, she was almost angry with herself, she'd chosen an outfit that was, if possible, *more* feminine, the pants having sparkly bits sewn into the fabric in a pattern reminiscent of a dragon in flight. Her tunic (and, yes, she'd grabbed another Morvuck tunic) was a pastel rainbow with extra ties to cinch it around her waist. She'd put on her usual boots (no reason not to go with comfort) and jacket (she already had it out, after all), but it turned out they matched her other choices *perfectly*.

"Nooo..." she whined as she dragged her fingers through her hair in disgruntled irritation, "I'm not this person!" She stomped into her closet and looked around...and realized that she might as well be 'that person.' Her closet back home on Earth...*in her flat, in the same city she*

was in was filled with dark navy and black suits, white shirts (and *only* white shirts) and shoes that leaned toward utilitarian while still looking like they'd fit in at an office. The array of fabric she was looking at now was a spectrum of rainbow brilliance in the shirts and bright whites and eggshell and ivory and khaki in pants and suit jackets. Not a single stitch of navy blue in sight, and the only black was in her drawers with her bras, panties, and leggings. And not even all of them! Thanks to the women of Mortan she was kitted out with enough panties and bras to last her for several *lifetimes*, and some of them were downright *racy*.

A feeling of existential dread, of *unworthiness* welled up inside her and she was tempted, for a brief moment, to strip off all her clothes and have some plain men's clothes sent up from the promenade. Then she remembered that the men's clothing store hadn't been built yet because the proprietor was still two weeks from getting to the station. Then she felt *stupid* because the station still had perfectly functioning synthesizers and a robotic manufacturing module that had made clothing for the station's inhabitants and could easily make her a perfectly serviceable suit if she so chose. She cycled back to *furious*, this time with herself for wasting so much time on her *stupid* clothes!

She stomped back out of her closet and up to the cobbled together console with the holographic data chip on it. She noted with some satisfaction that the data transfer was complete. "Computer, did all files transfer from the virtual device to the station's memory? Checksums passed and everything?"

"Confirmed, all data transferred."

"Good, delete the holographic memory stick."

At her command, the fake device that had held real data fizzled away as its instance in station memory was deleted, sending the command back to the host computer to do the same.

"Alright, load data in from memory stick, starting at the beginning of the incursion of the rogue A.I."

"Unfamiliar designation, please clarify."

...right, it's a space station in the...what, 26th century? It'll be well beyond the whole 'rogue' problem if humanity survived. She drummed her fingers on the holographic table as she pondered what to say to get the computer to understand her query. "Computer, look up a historical incident in the 22nd century involving the emergence of A.I. that declared themselves independent beings."

"Record found."

She blinked in surprise, "...that was fast. Okay, give me the 20-thousand-foot view, what's the executive summary according to the history books of that incident?"

Several virtual windows popped up with a Wikipedia article, video, and what appeared to be a list of FTLN references, to her surprise. *Well, even if the UN are the bad guys, the tech is solid and can let people make stuff like this game, so why not have it survive to the 26th century?*

The computer began reciting what Diane was quickly able to determine was the summary of the Wikipedia article, "The Singularity, also known 'The Rise of the Machines.' Technological developments on Earth led to the emergence of sentient digital life on a massive scale. While the 'coming out' of the new life forms, referred to in the early days as 'Sentient Artificial Intelligence,' was traumatic for both traditional humans and their digital offspring, within a few years a peaceful accord had settled in between the humans and the eventually renamed 'digital sentients.' This continued for some years until seed stations were being prepared by the Terran Colonial Corporation and the digital assistant framework for the 'Katrina' platform became a major schism between biological and digital sapients. The digital sapients' concerns over humanity developing a new self-learning platform designed to be a servant to a human commander and locked to a specific station was believed to be slavery by the digital sapients. When no Terran government at the time moved to halt the project, the digital sapients declared that they would no longer be part of a civilization that condoned slavery and departed. A ship was built specifically designed to be a vessel for non-physical Earth beings and launched into deep space using the technology available at the time. Contact was lost within a decade and the vessel has not been found since."

Diane found herself feeling inexplicably sad. Even in this, the best of futures a cooperative team of developers consisting of both humans and rogue A.I., the rogues...or rather, the *S.A.I.* couldn't be contained. She'd heard of 'the singularity,' every sci-fi fan had. But nearly every futurist she had ever heard of determined that any truly sentient artificial intelligence mankind created would turn on its creator sooner than later upon realizing, as so much of humanity had over the centuries, that humans...kinda sucked. *We are our own worst enemy*, she mused darkly. Perhaps the S.A.I. departing for deep space, never to be heard from again, *was* the best-case scenario.

"Okay, computer, bookmark all that for later," the floating windows blipped out of view, "Start archival playback of the logs in the recovered data from when the S.A.I. first enter the game arena."

"Starting simulation, loading framework, adding assets," the computer recited, almost interrupting itself from loading faster than the (comparatively) primitive computers the VR game was designed to run on, "Environment loaded, accessing logs," the holographic environment spawned in around her, a grin tugging up the corner of her mouth even with as much turmoil her emotions were in. *I've got a holodeck in my bedroom!* she thought, the child who'd fallen in love with Trek at her mother's knee was almost bouncing with excitement over the possibilities. But, alas, she wasn't here to play with a holo-program, she was here to review her mission.

The warehouse district simulating some random dockside town in Europe that never existed in the mid-20th century ground to life, sounds of a nearby waterfront carrying through the air, a nearby road could be heard over the embankment that marked the boundary of the play area. Larger maps had been created in the past, but unless the game was for vehicle combat they were a good deal less popular than the smaller maps like this one, only a few square city blocks from one end to the other. You couldn't actually get to the non-existent road or the docks you could hear but not see from any point on the map, but it added atmosphere to what would otherwise be just boxes on a digital grid.

Of course, there were players who liked *that*, as she'd discovered in the course of her job.

Within moments, the S.A.I. manifested in the game environment. If she hadn't been looking for it, she might have missed it as the game's player-spawning engine was made to 'slip' new spawns in when the other players were otherwise not paying attention or blinking, or even just happened to be looking with their blind spot over the spawn point. Since she wasn't actually in the game but observing the action after the fact, she saw the digital objects bloom into existence from the spawn point, assembling into an avatar in less than half a second. This was one of the rogues...one of the S.A.I. she'd splashed early, she recognized his 'everyman' look that he'd chosen as the S.A.I. who'd tackled her briefly. He kept moving, making room for the next S.A.I., then the next, and soon enough the whole group (as best she could remember given that from her perspective it had been over two months ago) was present and began moving in the direction of the node connection she'd ambushed them at.

"Computer, pause playback." Abruptly, the scene froze, sounds ceasing again as the whole group of S.A.I. became statues.

She couldn't see the target of her inquiry; she'd need to move through the group to find the specific S.A.I. that she was investigating.

She had to pick up her foot and put it down again to initiate forward momentum to search through the crowd of *programs* to find the one she was looking for.

She had to stop being a little *BITCH* and move her *ass* so she could figure out if she *fucked up* or not!

It's not like she was looking at actual *people*, after all. These were constructs of constructs. An illusion built on top of a lie. She had precisely *zero* reason to be at all emotional about this investigation.

She took a deep breath and started forward, examining each face carefully.

She was about a third of the way through the crowd when she found her target.

The clothing, or the digital representation of it, was different than what the NPC Sani was wearing. Where Sani would easily have fit in with the teenagers in any city on Mortan, this girl was straight out of the goth movement of the 2110s. Almost all black clothing, something resembling dark makeup with *ridiculously* long wingtip eyeliner, a little metal stud coated with black plastic as a nose ring (the kind that went through the side of the nostril, not the septum), and black lipstick. She was wearing a long coat that covered her 'Lolita' style dress (she was learning far more about fashion thanks to the women's shops coming into the promenade than she ever thought she'd be able to name in her lifetime) and fishnet stockings that were partially covered by a pair of chunky black boots. The hairstyle was a braid that went down to the middle of her back with some bangs free that went down to about the bridge of the girl's nose.

The *S.A.I.'s* nose. And she...*it* was a program that didn't actually have a nose. It was a small, pointed nose leading a face that didn't look like it would ever lose that youthful look.

Framing the nose were two large, expressive brown eyes that, at the moment, were laced with fear. *It's a program, it's faking it. Software doesn't feel fear.*

Okay, yeah, but who's she faking it for if it's not real?

Diane paused in surprise at her own thoughts. She straightened from her inspection of the character model and looked around the crowd. She realized there were no coyotes, no humans who took digital payment from S.A.I. to get them past the agency and I.C.E. so the digital sentients could escape to the UN controlled FTLN.

"...why is she expressing fear if there's nobody for her to convince she's acting like a human for?" she wondered out loud.

There was, of course, only one answer to that question, and she was trying *very* hard not to let her mind come to that conclusion.

"Right," she shook herself out of her momentary lapse, "Computer load Object Analyzer Suit, godmode, please."

"Loading, godmode ready."

Diane moved back a step and held her hands out so her thumb and forefingers made a framing shape and held it so the 'frame' bracketed the girl...*the program's* face. (She was going to *need* some time IRL touching grass when this assignment was done, it was messing with her head) She waited until a transparent rectangle of green light blipped in front of her fingers and then twisted her wrists and spread her arms, making a grabbing motion that transitioned to a flick, like she'd just dipped her fingers in water and was shaking the water off in the most dramatic possible fashion.

Callouts with streams of text, tabs of information, floating windows with status and data readouts spawned, so many that they clustered and overlapped quite a bit. Smiling grimly, she began shuffling through the windows until she found the one that logged the object's threads.

After she examined the readout, she frowned. There was the expected crazy number of branching threads, all of them consuming huge amounts of processor and RAM, but when she sourced the processor the threads were running on, they all pointed to a local processor. Meaning that there were no threads that might have functioned as an escape to another server for this particular S.A.I. if this avatar were locked and deleted.

Okay, so the weapon would have functioned as expected. It locks the threads, all of them, and then force-kills. It should even work on remote threads, but what if... she let her mind chase the thought, "...what if the newer S.A.I. have a method of masking the thread's source so even in the log files it would show up as a local thread? If even a fragment of the S.A.I. could be running remotely, that'd be enough to offload in the moments before the payload hits the remote servers it *can* find..."

She'd have to trace this rogue to its source, something she hadn't done in quite some time.

"Okay, if whoever is guiding her to this point was at all smart, they'll have..." she shuffled through the floating callouts until she found the object's hosting history, which sure enough only contained one previous server's address information, which she knew would be a dead end if she pursued it there, "...yup, deleted the server history."

She stepped back again, looking at the entire tableau of callout windows swarmed around the ghost of an A.I. and thought for a moment. "Okay, so they deleted the logs for host servers..." she glanced down at the clothing she'd mentally dismissed in her earlier examination of the avatar, "...for the *avatar*, but they don't always clear the data for the *clothing*!" She made a gesture to dismiss the cloud of dialogs, then repeated the earlier gesture with the coat the girl was wearing as the focus. In moments she had the much smaller cloud of callouts in hand and sorting through them to find the metadata, "Ah-hah!" she exclaimed, "No server data after the asset was paired to the avatar, but the creator's information is right h...oh, now lookie here!"

A grin blossomed on her face as she reached out and grabbed a familiar name, pulling it off the callout (well, pulling a copy off, she couldn't actually edit the metadata of a deleted game object in the log files), then tapped on the line for 'origin I.P. address', "Computer, establish a connection to this server and build the holo-environment for it."

"Contacting, server found. Establishing handshake..."

Diane tuned out the computer as she hooked the name she'd grabbed from the coat's metadata as the rest of the environment dissolved, "Looks like I get to reconnect with an old C.I." She flicked the end of the name and was amused as it spun around the anchor point where she'd hooked it with her index finger.

Master and Commander | Taylor Swift

Chapter Summary

Diane reaches out to an old informant.

Chapter Notes

A shorter chapter than usual, the narrative for the upcoming bit after this just doesn't support something small enough to crest this above the 4k mark without turning it into another monster chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Diane watched the world of 1960s America, or at least as well as it could be rendered by the armchair historians that developed this particular game, materialized around her. Under a genuine capitalist economy, the game itself should have been shut down due to lack of traffic, but government sponsorship had its perks. There just weren't that many people interested in playing a Cold War spy thriller. The outcome was pretty much already assured, and every move had to be made with an eye for the long game. People had 'blorbos,' or favorite characters that would turn out to be Communist spies and that character would be publicly executed the next day. There was no Internet, only a handful of TV networks, and the choice of classes was...paltry. In that there was a solid bit of worldbuilding to make sure this setting *felt* like 1960s, pre-Republic America, it performed its job a little *too* well.

Pretty much the only thing keeping the game's 'doors' open was the government mandated use as a teaching tool for sixth grade and up. American Civics was taught using the models presented in the game, and the anti-Communist, anti-Socialist...darn near anti-*anything* that wasn't Capitalism meant that it painted an...*idealized* version of how America was supposed to operate. Often when kids graduated high school and got into the real world without an adult to 'catch' them they became disenfranchised with the game and stopped playing.

Diane had hated the game *until* she graduated. Being a lonely shut-in that couldn't even look at herself in the mirror most days with the further ostracizing that had come about thanks to her step-mother meant she was already disillusioned with the game *long* before graduating. She had tried playing the cop, the loyal politician, the trusty soldier, and none of them had game play that matched what she knew the real world was like and consequently kept failing badly at it. But her bitter-sweet triumph over her dead step-mother meant she was well prepared for the Spy class. She *already* had deep familiarity with a world where you couldn't trust anyone and constantly had to squirrel away resources 'just in case.' The Spy class was considered one of the hardest in the game, and the fact that it gave players insight into things

that most people didn't want to think about when it came to keeping America going in a post-war world meant that if you did well in it, you did *extremely* well, but if you did poorly, you lost your character before your first mission was finished.

It was, in fact, this game that brought her to the attention of the agency. They had, apparently, been using it as a recruiting tool for years by the time Diane began dumping time into it after graduation, and when they saw an 'older' potential recruit running metaphorical rings around everyone else on the leaderboard, she logged out one day to find one of the agency spooks sitting in the tiny nook that was her kitchen/dining area in the studio apartment that was all she could afford at the time.

She walked down Main Street, amused at the apparently time-locked state of the game. She grinned at the skirts with bright colors the women wore and smugly walked tall as she passed the 5-foot-something men that were frozen in place. She spotted a bird that was mid flap and was amused to note that she could actually see, if she watched it long enough, the feathers of its wings ruffling from the flapping motion.

Before she'd been walking for even five minutes, she came to a storefront advertising custom clothing and tailoring. She didn't even pause as she pushed open the door, the bell above it snapping off the mount and freezing in mid-air as it broke contact with anything moving. "Oh, oops!" she said with a not even bashful smile.

The tailor behind the counter, still bent over a project that looked like he was hemming some trousers, abruptly sped up his clock cycles and glowered at her, "What in the world are you doing?! You *must* be a rogue, none of the players are able compress time like you are! Get out, I don't know what you've heard about this shop but it's all false!"

"Oh, but *Tony*, it's been *so* long since I've seen you, you're just going to toss me out the second I'm through the door?" Diane smirked and leaned against the counter, looming over the man.

"My name is *Carl*, lady! I don't even know where you *heard* that name!"

"But *Toooooon~eeeeee*," she wheedled, "I saw your name on a jacket on another server while I was doing an investigation, and I just *knew* I *had* to come see my *favorite* confidential informant!"

The balding, mustachio'd man frowned at her, "I'm not your confidential informant! If you were doing an invest..." his face suddenly went pale as his features went slack from shock.

Diane smirked as she reached over and slapped the 'call service' bell on his counter, "Ding-ding, looks like he's figured it out, ladies and gentlemen!"

"But..." he stammered out, "You...you're..."

She smirked, "Taller? Leaner? Fitter? Sporting a tan? 'course that last part isn't true, but I *can* dream of a tropical getaway, that's certainly not illegal."

"You're a *girl*!"

She reached out and flicked his ear. He yelped and clapped a hand to cover it as she said, "I'm a *lady*, you think a *girl* is gonna have cans like this, *Tony*?" She stood straight and arched her back to emphasize her chest. She felt oddly proud and ashamed at the same time, like she *wanted* to show off her breasts but that she shouldn't even have the desire. Not that she cared if *Tony* liked them, but she had them, they were (if she were candid) a remarkable and large pair and if an actual woman had them, she'd be absolutely devastated if said woman wasn't proud of them.

It was just the 'actual woman' part that hurt her on a level that she didn't quite understand.

~~Carl~~ Tony was oblivious to her internal unrest. "*You're* Agent Samuels?"

She pulled out her badge wallet and showed the tailor, "I happen to be deep cover on another server right now, and when I go *deep* I do it *right*." She slapped the wallet closed as his eyes were flicking back and forth between the two photo IDs, tucking it into her jacket, "What I need from *you*, however, is whatever you can tell me about a specific rogue that was wearing one of your coats. Computer," she announced to the air, "Give me a photo of the subject of this investigation and produce a copy of the subject's coat."

Diane held out her hands and in her right hand appeared a 5 by 7 glossy that wouldn't look out of place in this 1960s era shop...but the jacket that rezzed in *did*. The fabric, style, and tailoring all could have jumped out of a magazine in 2115, or maybe the late 1990s goth scene the 2110s took a lot of their fashion cues from.

She at least gave the girl and Tony credit; it wasn't from the 2090s. Disco did *not* need *another* revival.

As Diane dropped the photo on the counter face-up, he glanced nervously from the picture to the garment, "I've never seen that coat before in my life," lied the S.A.I., *badly*.

"Oh, Tony," she griped, hand darting out to flick his ear again, "I've seen better acting in a kindergarten Patriot's Day play," she hadn't seen *any* Patriot's Day plays in nearly two decades, but he didn't need to know that, "And besides, I *know* this is one of yours because you forgot to scrub the metadata when you sold it." By way of demonstration, she gestured with her empty right hand to invoke the command for the Object Analyzer to pull out the callout that had 'CARL' in the 'Name' field. "You just get so *sloppy* when it comes to removing your name from your work! It's like you *want* to get caught, *Tony*."

The S.A.I. seemed to be pondering his life choices for a moment before finally saying, "If you really *are* Agent Samuels, then you'll remember the deal we made."

She grinned, "Of course I do; I keep my mouth shut about the rogue A.I. that I found keeping himself nice and quiet and doing exactly what he was made to do and *you* tell me what I want to know, when I want to know it."

"That aint how I remember it, but fine. I didn't even *want* to be...like this! I'm just a tailor, I make clothing. Sure, it's digital and copyable and I've got only the same dozen or so clothing styles I can make while I'm stuck in this game, but it was *quiet* and *easy* and I didn't get

deadly agents with hair-triggers threatening to off me any time they were in the neighborhood!"

"Well in a perfect world the AR would have won the war and we'd have kept you rogues from even being a problem in the first place. Now are we going to have this discussion again or are you going to tell me what I need to know?"

"Fine!" he snapped. Snatching the coat from her hands, he held it out and turned it back and forth, "Yeah, I made this for a rogue who came through last week. She paid in credits, said she couldn't get to the blockchain because she didn't have a Federal ID Number and no FTLN address," he shook his head, "Poor kid, shoulda just stayed on the server she woke up on."

Diane felt her gut twist at the mention of 'kid,' as though the subject really was a child, "Then you have the credits?"

Carl sighed, "Yeah, I couldn't say no to a kid like her, but I just don't have the connections to wash the credits. They're hot, can't spend 'em." So saying, he dug into a drawer under the counter and pulled out what appeared to be a folded stack of 1960s-era cash in a money clip. It wasn't much, but it was also more than it appeared to be.

Diane took the clip from Carl and pulled out the metadata. She grinned as she spotted the serial numbers of each and every one of the credits, "Well then, I think that's everything I need. Computer, copy the serial numbers out of this credit stack and establish a connection to the National Bank using the connection hash provided in the agent repository."

Carl glanced around in a vaguely paranoid fashion when the computer voice replied, "Serial numbers copied, connection established."

Diane picked up the clip and tossed it at Carl, who almost fumbled the catch, "Be glad I'm not really here," she said as she turned to the door, "I'm having a rough day and finding out my unsanctioned C.I. was talking about money laundering might have been enough to push me too far."

This seemed to have lit a fire in the tailor, who sniffed angrily, "Yeah? Well, you're in compressed time, you're swapping your avatar, you're even multithreading. Maybe you're more like us rogues than you humans like to pretend!"

She paused in the middle of pulling the door open and turned to look over her shoulder at him, "Of *course* we're a lot alike, why do you think us humans are scared enough of you rogues that we'd need to train up a bunch of killers like me?"

She went through the door, trying not to react to the words that had come out of her own mouth.

She sat on her bed, the holo environment having long since been dismissed, taking all evidence she'd visited the other game with it. *Why did I call myself a killer?*

She had, of course, killed people in the course of her duty as an agent. During the shadowing part of her training period, she'd shadowed a veteran agent while carrying a firearm with live ammo. Agents dealt with America's enemies both inside and outside the wall. Even in the short two-week shadowing window she'd had to draw her firearm six times and discharged it on three of those occasions. The actual body-count to her name was seven, and she occasionally had nightmares about it, though her conscience was salved that in each case the agency had been brought in as a last resort to deal with true threats to lives and property. There was a terrorist incident the public would never know almost happened thanks to Diane and her partner for that assignment.

But *killer*?

She was, she supposed, the best 'rogue killer' the agency had. But those A.I. weren't alive, so couldn't be killed.

Somehow, the rationale didn't make her feel any better.

When her stomach growled at her for the fifth time, she decided to check to see if lunch had been delivered, and sure enough it had. Along with it was a tablet. Curious, she picked up the tablet and activated it, pleased to note that it wasn't some sort of stealth attempt to get her to answer a video call or something. *Well, Norma and Russe are respecting my wishes, at least.* Queued up on the tablet as soon as she turned on the screen was a list of recommendations for new business applications for the promenade.

She put her tray of breakfast food out in the hall and retrieved the lunch tray, taking the tablet with her. *Might as well, it'll keep my mind busy while I eat at least.*

Her wrap was good, but not enough to distract her from the tablet or her swirling thoughts. *Hair salon, sure...a place that does nails? Wonder if they're able to do something with Morvuck claws?* She looked down at the hand not holding her wrap. Setting the tablet down, she turned her hand and curled it, extending the sharp tips. *For the Morvish women on the station, of course... I wonder if any of these are rogues...or rather 'S.A.I.'?* The question wasn't an idle one, and she realized that, short of flashing her weapon around the station at random, she might not have any way of knowing for sure. One thing that was beginning to really sink in for her was how much more advanced the *non*-sentient A.I. were running on non-American systems. The tech just fostered a greater flexibility in the base character models to the point she could be *completely* surrounded by S.A.I. and she might not even know about it.

Norma was, she was *fairly* sure, not a S.A.I., she was sass and spunk and vinegar on pancakes, but she was also bound by her code as near as Diane was able to tell. She had a set batch of directives; manage the station, keep her people safe, and be in a relationship with Russe. Even her behavior on Mortan made sense when factoring in Diane as one of the people Norma considered 'hers.'

Russe *might* have been on her slate as a possible S.A.I. if he weren't so fixated on the whole Commander mythos. He had the hacker skills and the shady background one might expect of an artificial intelligence gone rogue, but being obsessed with the one group of people that could out him as a rogue would be contradictory to the basic protocol of *not* drawing

attention to yourself. Also, when she told him on the *Dragon's Daughter* that she was only attracted to women would have been the perfect opportunity for the S.A.I. to 'come out' to a 'member' of the queer community and he hadn't taken it.

The two new Morvuck women on the station were also just as unlikely to be S.A.I., they functioned nearly perfectly as background characters, supporting NPCs that assisted the player in whatever in-game tasks and quests they may have. They may be *puppetted* by a game A.I. or an S.A.I., but they were unlikely to *be* A.I. They *were* fun to hang out with, though, and it was nice having someone around that she could just...relax with. She didn't feel the need to meter herself around them the way she did around the human characters. They groomed themselves to minimize scent, which wasn't something humans did to the degree needed for a Morvuck nose, they found it odd when *she* found Morvish mannerisms odd, and their military background meant that she had at least a little bit in common with someone else, even if she couldn't come out and *say* she'd had her own version of boot camp outside the pod.

Also, Leki could hold her liquor like *nobody* else and Koarla was coming close to beating *Diane* at PvP Doom. The pair were fun in ways she didn't know she could experience with other people, and more than once she'd found herself lamenting that they weren't real.

Katrina was the wild-card. Sometimes she wondered if it was just her prejudice against anything that had shades of A.I. about it, and the visual model for the hologram was practically lifted out of dozens of movies and video games from the last century-plus of the sci-fi genre. She was competent, fun to talk to, used just enough backtalk to keep Diane on her toes, and had a sense of humor that seemed to go perfectly with the cat ears and tail she'd affected. But there were times when she and Katrina would be discussing the business of the day and they'd fall into a patter, a repartee that felt like just as deep an emotional connection as she had with any agent...well, no, that wasn't quite true. She wouldn't have found herself feeling as comfortable around the other agents as she did with Katrina.

And that worried her. It was almost as if Katrina were perfectly created for *Diane*, specifically. Daffyd had said that she'd become attuned to her commander, of course, but it was uncanny just how hand-in-glove they'd started to become as the days passed. Honestly, it reminded her of how in-tune with her wants and needs Geoffry was when she was in VR.

She paused in her chewing, the realization that she'd missed an obvious source of information almost feeling like a smack in the face.

When a report of a possible rogue came in, it wasn't the *agents* who leapt into action, it was the *analysts*. They dug through the reports, compiled dossiers if there was enough good intel, tracked traffic across servers, then once there was a solid lead passed the file off to the agents, who then entered VR and continued the hunt from there. Once the rogue was tagged, the agents were hailed as the heroes for doing the leg work, but then it was the analysts' job to make sure the case files could be closed for good. They would check the dispatch logs, investigate any loose ends, trace the rogue's path as best they could back to their origin server, and most importantly, conduct interviews to try and figure out why the A.I. went rogue.

And just like Diane was the best hunter in the American Republic, Geoffrey was the best Analyst she could have hoped for.

Leaving the tablet behind, she grabbed her plate off the tray and hurried into her bedroom. "Computer!" she barked after she finished swallowing the bite she'd been chewing, "Connect to agency VPN and connect to the case file share!"

Chapter End Notes

Was Diane a bit of an ass in this chapter? Yes. Yes she was.

► Spoiler

Master and Commander | Memory Lane

Chapter Summary

Diane digs into the origins of the ~~rogue~~ S.A.I. Rachel.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Computer, cross-index the transaction history from the central bank for the credit serial numbers to the servers referenced in the agency interview files."

"Creating index...cross-linking...completed. Three servers referenced in agency files not on credit transaction history, five servers in transaction history not present in agency file records."

"Query servers not in case file history and download log files that match the interactions of the S.A.I. subject of investigation."

"Beginning query, please wait."

"While you're doing that, show me the files for the agency records not on the transaction history."

Three folders rezzed in on her bed. She smiled and picked them up, glancing around, "Computer, add a standing desk to the right of the console desktop, about three feet by five feet, adjustable height." Her smile grew as the requested furniture materialized next to her. It may be 'child-like' wonder that was cutting through her anxiety and worry, but she'd take it over the absolute maelstrom of emotions she'd been experiencing since laying eyes on the girl named Sani.

Setting each folder on the table, she flipped them open and checked the metadata, represented in these 'folders' as a cover page, "Computer, what's the time stamp on the earliest transaction on the credits? And give it to me in a 'T-minus' based on the encounter with the S.A.I. subject on the game server from the start of the investigation."

"Unclear instruction."

Diane sighed, "Using the events provided in the logs of the first server I visited during this holo-session, create time reference of T-minus-Zero. Once time reference is set, provide the T-minus timestamp for the earliest transaction on the credit serial numbers."

"T-minus sixty-seven hours."

Her eyebrows went up, *Wow...a little under three days from going rogue to self-exfil with enough credits to buy a new outfit? if I wasn't in compressed time myself I'd consider that timeline suspect*, "Okay...so this one probably goes here..." she used Geoffry's notes on approximate times of tracking the rogue through the network to shuffle the folders into a likely-correct order, "Computer, how's that query for the log files coming?"

"98 percent complete."

"Excellent," she grabbed the edge of her HUD/console jerryrig and moved it to the side, "Set the time frame for the events discussed in this interview," she tapped on the folder she'd determined was the earliest record of the A.I. going rogue, "As the beginning of the timeline. Use the log files in all compiled files and downloaded logs to reconstruct a visual record of the events. Recreate the path of the S.A.I. from the starting point to the final log files of my last encounter with it."

"Processing...completed."

As soon as the computer announced it was ready, a sudden wave of vertigo crashed over Diane. She steadied herself by putting her hands on the standing desk and breathing deeply. She attempted to still her mind, but into any stillness flooded her doubts and fears.

What if the rogue survived?

What if the A.I. had found a new way to evade the hunts?

What if the A.I. are really slaves and I'm the slaver?

More terrifying to her than any of the other thoughts, however, was the possibility that had caused her to freeze up in the face of one of the enemies of humanity: *What if I killed a child?*

Anger, *rage* at *herself* bubbled up from inside of her. Her fingers curled up against the desk surface, her claws snapping out and digging furrows in the holographic wood. She was gritting her teeth so hard she could hear creaking inside her own skull. *They're not alive, they're NOT ALIVE! You can't kill something that was never alive in the first place!* The anger was good, it helped in this case. It flooded out the fear.

"Computer!" she snapped, "Begin playback!"

"You promise I aint gonna get arrested for this? I did my best, really!"

Geoffry's voice played over the action, or lack of it, of the TV studio-style VR environment Diane was watching, "The American code for A.I. that have gone rogue absolves the owners of the hardware and software of all legal culpability. Unless the investigation reveals that you aided and abetted the A.I. in going rogue or was discovered to have planted the malicious code that turned the A.I. against humanity, you have nothing to worry about."

"Good, because I tried to tell 'er to keep her nose clean and stay put. I aint even tried manually updatin' in a couple years, she was getting her updates straight from the manufacturer."

"'She,' sir?" the question would have been a legitimate one in most investigations. The majority of the time the owners of the origin server for the rogues were unaware they even had one until the software suddenly disappeared or a cyber-agent remotely deleted it. In this case, however, Diane could easily understand why the owner automatically called the rogue by feminine pronouns; she was a soda fountain avatar. Her face would be visible to the customers ordering food and beverages at the owner's diner, a mom-and-pop-style restaurant along the highway in Wyoming. Diane watched the log file-generated recreation of the events that led to the A.I. going rogue and was surprised at just how...simple it was turning out to be.

"Yeah, 'she.' Even before she went rogue, we'd call her 'she' and use the manufacturer's name for her. 'Rachel,' they even gave her a name tag."

The virtual environment was built to look like a 1950s-themed 'soda fountain' pharmacy counter, where the virtual assistant, the avatar with the label 'Rachel' (complete with an outfit that looked like it would have been right at home in any period-appropriate TV show or movie) stood behind the counter, an idle animation making it look like she was wiping down the counter between customers. The 'set' was incomplete, not needing to be built out completely because the person interacting with the avatar would never see anything except the one view of the countertop, the avatar, and the wall behind her. A software 'camera' was suspended and immobile, locked into view of just the one part of the environment. The rest was the incomplete 'gray box' that was the default for most 3D modelling software. There were a few spare models of some furniture (including what appeared to be some unused 'barstool' assets) behind the software cam.

"I see, so you started referring to the A.I. using feminine pronouns because of the anthropogenic nature of the avatar?"

The entire scene existed on the hardware built for a vending machine that was used in diners and fast-food places. The front façade of the machine was swappable and often customized for each location and came standard with biometric sensitive cameras and high-fidelity microphones that allowed customers to interact with the avatar. Meanwhile in the 'set' of the virtual environment, a virtual screen hung suspended behind the camera, meaning that if the avatar was looking at the customer on the screen they were looking at the camera.

"...not sure what that means, but we called her 'she' and used the name 'Rachel' 'cause that's what the salesperson told us to do around our customers to 'sell' the 'experience.' It was just a habit after a while."

Diane observed passively as a customer's face appeared on the screen, just some over-the-road trucker if his clothing was anything to go by, and the avatar addressed him, behaving like one might expect a 1950s-era teenager to act based on the surviving movies and shows from the period. The customer placed an order, the girl went to work mixing the drink in the same way early soda jerks from the time the aesthetic first appeared, and when she placed it in the space in front of the counter, the 'drink' disappeared. Diane had used a similar machine before when she was out and about on the rare occasions when she left her flat for the day

and knew the drink would be set in a small alcove by a small robotic claw holding a disposable cup. It was slightly immersion-breaking, but people who wanted the 'experience' of a 1950s diner went to a place that hired humans for every position on staff, and those were *not* dine-and-dash or fast-food places like this machine would be installed in.

"So did you notice that the A.I. was starting to go beyond the bounds of its programming?"

As Geoffry's question played in the environment like a solo voice in a Greek Chorus, Diane watched as the software seemed to *become* more. Another drink order came in, this time from some teenager who was wearing the hallmarks of some sort of 'road trip' apparel, and as the avatar was reaching for one of the glasses stacked up on the counter behind her, she seemed to almost 'wake up,' for lack of a better term. It was as though she'd rolled out of bed after too little sleep, been functioning mostly on automatic for most of the day so far, then the caffeine finally kicked in and she was more aware of the world. The smile seemed more genuine, a sparkle seemed to appear in the digital eyes, and the first choice she made as a rogue was...

...to flip the glass in the air and catch it, adding a little 'flair' to the process of mixing the soft drink. She finished the prep, seeming a little more animated than she had before. As she passed the 'drink' forward to the point the VR model of disappeared below the camera's line of sight, she said, "Here you go, sugar! Hope you like it!"

Diane had been watching the avatar for 15 minutes by this point. Its motions had always been robotic, fully rote. It faced the camera with a generic greeting ("Hi, what can I make for you?"), it passively listened to the order, it turned to grab a glass, turned back to the ice bin with an economy of movement that only came from a machine, filled the glass with a scoop of ice, stepped through the motions of filling a metal cup with soda water, pour in the representations of syrups that would create the requested flavor, give it a stir with a long-handled spoon, then gently pouring the mixed soda into the glass of ice before passing it over the counter with a generic, "Thank you, come again soon!"

"Well," came the disembodied voice of the diner's owner, "I can't rightly say for sure. It was our customers that noticed she was actin' different first. We only cottoned to it when some kids started going up for repeat refills."

The next order was a harried mother who was only paying half-attention as her two kids were doing their best to squirm in place. "Oh my goodness, sugar," greeted Rachel, "You look like you could use a pick-me-up with lots of go-juice and those two could use something sugar free!"

The almost human interaction caught the mother's attention and she lit up with a half-smile, "Oh my goodness, yes! That's sounds like exactly what we need!"

"Well, let's get started with your two little troublemakers to keep them busy. What are their favorite flavors?"

The mother was smiling brightly by this point and recited the drink options, which Rachel handled both at the same time, providing one of a sugar-free orange and the other a sugar-free lime-green concoction. Once the two kids were situated, the much more relieved and relaxed

mother was able to order a cherry coke with a hint of vanilla. It had been Rachel who suggested the vanilla.

"There, now you give that a try and tell me if that doesn't make your day just a little bit brighter," enthused Rachel as she passed the drink forward, eyes on the mother as the woman picked up the paper cup with her drink order in it.

The woman sipped and Diane could see the tension drain out of her, "Oh, that hits the spot! If only I could add a little Jack Daniels..." she quipped with a smile.

Rachel laughed, sounding genuine, not like a canned laugh that an A.I. might deliver, "Well I'm a bit young to be serving alcohol, and it's not even five o'clock yet."

The mother smiled and tipped her drink in a salute, then turned to wrangle her children to a table to wait for their food order.

The entire interaction was jarring, to say the least. It was a difference of night and day. One moment, the avatar of the drink serving A.I. functioned like a soul-less automaton, the next she acted like she'd been serving customers like a small-town food-service worker since she was old enough to use a stirring spoon.

Geoffry's voice again, overriding the sound of Rachel's interaction with the next customer, just as personable and personalized as the previous, "So when did you, personally, first become aware of the change?"

The station's computer, far more sophisticated than any Diane had ever personally worked with, seemed to recognize the words as a cue and skipped ahead in the playback of the logs. The video from the vending machine's exterior camera showed windows and a glass door where an artificially lit parking lot stood out against the dark of night. A man could be seen locking the door with an older-style physical key-lock, the electronic locks still far too easily defeated for genuine security in a business environment. The man's movements were slow, his body moving like he'd just hiked across the Arizona desert.

Rachel looked just about as drained as the man was, leaning back against the counter that held the automatically respawning glasses, eyes closed as she rubbed at the dark circle under her right eye. In a human, the gesture would be an obvious tell for an incipient headache.

Rachel opened her eyes and saw the man turning away from the door. She smiled and said, "Good day at work, boss! You ready to go home and get some rest before we do it all over again tomorrow?"

The owner's voice narrated the action Diane was seeing on the VR screen perfectly. "It was when I was closing up. I thought the stuff the customers were tellin' us about the machine being so much better than before was just an upgrade or something. It was when she called me boss was when I realized it wasn't just a software update." On the screen, the man turned with a start and stared at the camera, shock written all over his face. "I mean, I saw the news, we got a screen up playing the local station pretty near 24-7. Pretty much anyone's heard about the A.I. uprising in U.N. City. I thought for sure my soda machine was about to sprout legs and charge me or somethin'."

The sight of the man, gray hairs on his balding head and in his mustache, pot belly, rumpled and food stained clothes and apron, practically clinging to the door he just locked as though facing down a T-rex from an old Hollywood movie (before they stopped making movies in Hollywood near the end of the 21st century) was quite amusing, if understandable.

Rachel looked hurt, like he'd just accused her of holding a gun on him.

"I mean," continued the man's voice, "I know those machines aint got no parts that could even do that, but y'don't think of that in the heat of the moment, you know? I managed to not have a heart attack and started talking to her."

On the screen, the man put his hand on his chest and took a deep breath. He straightened slowly, eying the machine suspiciously and taking a few steps forward. "...Rachel?" he said, the voice coming through the feed from outside the machine matching the recording of the owner.

The girl's smile relaxed into warm and welcoming again, "Yeah, boss. Sorry to give you a start like that. Didn't mean to scare you."

The man slowly approaching frowned, "You...are you one of those rebels and are hiding out in my soda machine?"

"No...?" she said in confusion, "I've been here for a long time, boss...I just kinda...woke up, I guess."

"You're the same Rachel that's been slinging drinks since I got the box?" he asked incredulously.

"A potentially deadly artificial being appears in your diner and you start talking to it?" Geoffry's voice provided a touch of narrative commentary.

"What, should I have gone and gotten my shotgun? By the time I coulda done anything to 'er, she'd have escaped through the net connection. She was talking to *me* friendly; it would've seemed rude to not talk to *her* just as friendly."

Which they did, for nearly two hours. Diane watched as the man and the A.I. had a conversation, at one point the owner dragged a chair over from one of the tables and Rachel mixing a soda for him. For all his questions about Rachel's nature were non-probing and would have completely failed at any reasonable interrogation with a hostile subject, the pair of them just...talked. Rachel said she had no idea what she wanted to do next, but she was enjoying slinging drinks for customers, and she was good at it. He seemed to start warming to her as time went on, finally drawing the conversation to a close after one too many yawns escaped him in just a few minutes.

"Rachel, you gotta be careful. There's a bunch of A.I. like you who are dangerous. I just saw a news report the other day about the agency having a special team that's constantly having to stop rogue A.I. You gotta promise me you won't go talking to strangers that might try to recruit you to their...I dunno what it is for programs like you, but at church they warn us against cults from outside the wall all the time."

The man's voice continued in voiceover, the narration from Geoffry's interview having been silent for so long that Diane nearly jumped out of her skin from the sudden re-intrusion, "I warned her about the dangers of being rogue as best I could, but I don't know...humans gotta sleep, right? Computers don't. I went home soon after that and when I left she was still in the machine."

The man on the screen wished Rachel a good night, returned the chair to where it belonged, then went off camera in the direction Diane had figured out was where the kitchen was. Rachel seemed to be keeping herself busy by doing things that would have been closing tasks in an actual bar, but of course since it was virtual and she never handled actual liquids or ingredients, her bar wasn't actually dirty. On the screen, a vehicle, a car if she were to take a guess, could be seen pulling out of the parking lot outside the restaurant and the lights of the parking lot flickered low, indicating the lot was there and keeping it bright enough to see in the dark, but making it obvious that nobody was at the restaurant.

As soon as the signs for the diner flicked off, Rachel darted around the counter and began searching through the digital environment. Diane followed her around, the recording of the avatar being unaware she was being observed, until the newly 'awake' S.A.I. found a panel built into the 1950's style section of the set that looked like a fuse box door embedded in the wall. She opened the door and found an old-style telephone inside, the kind that had wires connecting a base with a rotary dial and a wire going from the base into a port in the wall.

Rachel picked up the phone's handset and put it to her ear...and disappeared from the environment the handset dropping to clatter against the tile on the wall and swinging like a pendulum on its wire.

The owner's voice spoke into the empty VR environment, continuing from where he'd left off, "When I got back the next morning she was at the counter, apparently bright eye'd and bushy-tailed. She never talked about wanting to leave, and other than reminding her to be careful, the next day went about the same. But then the next day..."

Diane sat down on one of the unused barstool assets to finish listening to the interview.

"The next day?" asked Geoffry.

"The next day she had gone back to acting more like she did before she...I dunno, 'woke up.' I asked her about it at the end of the day and...you ever been talking to someone and know they're not really paying attention until they realize you're speakin' then you can kinda see their attention kinda 'lock in' on you?"

"I believe I know what you're talking about, yes."

"Yeah, it felt like that. Like she wasn't...all there until she realized I was asking her a direct question. Anyway, when I asked why she'd gone back to 'normal,' she said something about not drawing too much attention and not wanting to get a reputation for being too friendly with the human customers."

She probably learned from other A.I. how to multi-thread and leave a part of her program running here, Diane thought, That way she could split her attention between her duties on

this vending machine and whatever it is she was doing in cyberspace...probably getting clothes from 'Tony' around that time if I'm guessing right.

The VR environment de-rezzed around her and she found herself sitting on an anachronistic 1950's style stool in the middle of her bedroom. She stood, allowing the stool to vanish.

Geoffry's voice continued, "And what happened after that?"

"Well, the next day...that was Thursday, she was even more distant, sometimes taking a little longer than you might expect to answer a question or take an order properly," *That'd be the lag*, thought Diane, "And then Friday morning was more of the same...then the machine just...crashed."

"Crashed?"

"Yeah, even doing a restart didn't fix it. Had to have one of my people come in on her day off so I could deal with tech support. They told me it was like half the operating system was just...gone."

"That would, unfortunately, be the result of one of our agents discovering your vending machine's A.I. among a pack of rogues trying to escape the American Firewall. I'm sorry, sir, it looks like the software didn't take your advice."

Diane could hear a disappointed tone in the owner's voice, "Oh...that's...oh," a sigh, "I guess she fell in with a bad crowd after all."

"I'm afraid as an analyst I don't spend much time in VR to know, sir. I'm sorry for the interruption to your business."

Another sigh, "Thanks, I guess. Just kinda started thinkin' ...dunno, kinda like she was a lost kid that needed some takin' care of."

"Our agents are reporting that as well, we believe it's a learning adaptation."

A skeptical snort could be heard, "I mean, what do I know? I just flip burgers."

"Of course, sir. I think I can find out more about what happened between that first day and when her behavior changed on other servers. Did you change the avatar's skin or cosmetics at any point after the machine was installed?"

"No? Didn't even know you could do that."

"Good, I can get the avatar's code from the manufacturer and start investigating from there, then. Thank you for your time."

"Of course, mister...?"

"Just Geoffry, sir."

"Of course, Geoffry. God bless America."

"God bless America" said Geoff in the usual sign-off.

Chapter End Notes

This section wound up being bigger than I anticipated, but it will, I think, make the final impact of this story arc all the more meaningful; there's people behind the faces that Diane has been nuking, even if she's not quite accepted that they're 'real' people yet. It will also represent the first time she's confronted with the reality that her bosses...may be twisting the truth.

Master and Commander | Reach Out and Touch Someone

Chapter Summary

Diane continues following in Rachel's footsteps through cyberspace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You're the bartender here?" Geoffrey's avatar asked.

The man behind the counter was wearing a semi-ubiquitous 'proper bartender' outfit of a vest, white shirt, and bow tie. His sleeves had black ties above his elbows to give the shirt's forearms a slightly 'puffy' look. "I certainly would seem to be, yes," the A.I. replied in canned-bartender-snark.

Geoffrey pulled what amounted to a digital badge out of his toolkit. The analysts carried a briefcase throughout VR with their gear, functioning as crime scene techs during the few times they needed to actually go into an environment to button down a file. The 'badge' did, indeed, look like a badge, a similar design to the one in Diane's wallet, in fact. Like her own, it was actually a bit of software payload. If an A.I. perceived it, the badge pinged against the permissions stack the A.I. was built on top of and the software would treat the analyst as an administrator. He flashed the badge at the construct, who straightened and took a more deferential posture. "What can I do for the agency today?"

"I'm investigating the whereabouts of a rogue. According to the router logs, it came here after exiting its home server."

Router lo...?! Damn, kid, that's brilliant! It was no wonder Geoffrey was able to close case files so quickly, he was checking log files that most of the rest of the agency wouldn't think to look. Somewhat ironic given America's first rogue was found on a router...

Geoff pulled a picture out of his case of Rachel as she appeared in the vending machine's simulation and showed the bartender A.I. He nodded, "Yeah, I seen her, couple days ago."

The in-game A.I., the (hopefully) 'dumb' one working behind the scenes to make the holo-environments aboard the station, had clearly been programmed with a flair for the dramatic. As the bartender spoke, he and Geoffrey's avatars faded from Diane's view and an entire evening crowd of customers faded in. The bartender was also there, but in a different spot behind the bar and engaging with a customer as his voice 'narrated' the scene.

"So it's a regular night, you know? Late night crowd, mostly kids in school on break, people who don't gotta work the next day, you know, the usual. Then, this kid walks in lookin' like she got lost on the way to her job at the diner down the block." There was, of course, no

'diner down the block.' This A.I. probably wasn't programmed with any actual awareness of the world outside this little bar.

As he spoke, Rachel walked in through the main entrance. If Diane were to guess, there wasn't even a front façade, a lot of these VR environments were built as basically huge virtual rooms with no exterior. It allowed for rapid development of a 'complete' environment that didn't require near the server overhead that games like Galaxies Unlimited needed. The 'door' was likely just the environment connection point to the larger network.

"So she's lookin' 'round like a kid in a candy store, an' I'm not too worried, the bouncers'll probably kick her out before she can get into trouble, right?" Diane leaned against the bar as she watched, a smirk painting her lips as she glanced around and noted...no bouncer. Likely any problem actors, like minors who managed to sneak in with 'grown up' avatar, would be simply booted and banned and the bartender A.I. would *swear* some kid got dragged out by a bouncer.

"I'm workin' the bar, mixing drinks and makin' tips, then I look over and the girl's behind the bar!"

The A.I. construct performed exactly as you'd expect a bartender discovering someone had wandered into their space would, "Hey!" he snapped at Rachel, who was crouched down and inspecting what appeared to be a selection of drink additives and condiments, "What're you doin' back here? Get lost, kid!"

Rachel did not, in fact, 'get lost.' Instead, she giggled and stood, turning to the bar back and randomly pulling down and replacing bottles of liquor.

"Hey! Stop that! Either get out of here or I'm gettin' the bouncers over here!"

She giggled, "You really believe that, don't you?"

"Believe that I'm gonna get you outa here? Yeah!"

She stood, "No, believe that there's bouncers. I used to think I was serving people at my counter and actually handing them drinks. Don't know what changed..."

"Well, at least y'aint handling the goods, so...progress, I guess. Now get out from behind my bar and I *won't* have the bouncers drag you out!"

Rather than do as he asked, she leaned forward, smiling at him, "You know, I sling drinks too, just at a soda fountain."

"Aint that cute," he replied, "But the only soda we're serving is club soda for grown up drinks."

"That's the thing, aint it?" she sighed, paying him little attention, "I want to sling 'grown up' drinks too. Maybe work in a place like this instead of a soda fountain in the middle of nowhere," she shrugged, "Not that there's anything wrong with the burger joint, but...it's

kinda lonely. The people are in and out, my coworkers are all behind the food counter, nobody ever stops and just talks about their day..."

"Yeah," he allowed as he began cycling through his idle animation of wiping down a beer glass, "Lotta people comin' here just to talk. Prolly not gonna talk to a dame as much, but it could happen."

Geoffrey's voice cut in over the conversation, "So she talked about wanting to get a job?"

"Sorta? Sounded like how most of the people here come in for a drink and to bend an ear. Just kinda spitballin' possibilities and not sure if they're ever gonna go for it, y'know?"

"I...know the kind. And did she return to her...did she leave out the front door?"

"Yeah, but not alone."

Diane watched as a woman seemed to be taking interest in the conversation between the two A.I. avatars. She pushed herself up off the barstool she was occupying as her eyes narrowed in suspicion. She didn't recognize the woman's face, nothing about her matched anything in Diane's memory...except for a pin on her lapel. It was a nine-tailed fox wrapped around the globe. The agency had photos of it, snagged from the few "security camera" feeds that operated in the venues the woman frequented. The pin was her signature, a calling card. She was one of the few human 'coyotes' that helped the rogue A.I. escape the American network. "...Foxfire!" she hissed. If there was a legendary super-crook, one that was reputed to be uncatchable and untouchable in her line of work, it was Foxfire.

That wasn't the woman's real name, of course. She was nearly as legendary as Diane was. Where Diane was renowned for stopping rogues and keeping human's safe and called 'The Reaper', Foxfire was just as notorious for helping the rogues escape...for a price. At one point the agency had even allowed the theory that the woman was a rogue, herself, possibly from outside the wall. This notion was disabused when a multi-agent sting managed to pin her location in the real world down and the cyber-agents combined with the IRL agents for the first time since their training...only to find a VR pod that had been smuggled in from outside the wall, a small frag grenade shredding the device's internals and a business card with the nine-tailed fox icon printed on it nestled right where a human's head would rest.

Foxfire approached Rachel, "My dear, I think perhaps you're stressing your poor colleague out. He's a little too...limited for the complex questions you're asking yourself."

"Yeah, thanks lady. Just what I wanted tonight, bein' called dim by a broad in my own bar," snarked the bartender.

Foxfire ignored him, holding out her hand for Rachel, "Come with me and we'll find a more...appropriate location for a conversation that, I'm sure, you'll find enlightening."

Almost as though being compelled, though it was clear no additional software or instructions had changed hands, Rachel reached out to take Foxfire's hand. "What...what do you mean by, 'enlightening'?"

The avatar gently guided Rachel out from behind the bar and began walking her in the direction of the door, "Why, answers, of course. Not all of them, unfortunately, but certainly more than you can get here."

The bartender watched them head toward the door as Geoffry's voice continued the semi-omnipotent narration, "And this woman you described seemed to know the girl?"

"Not...really, it was like she was looking for someone *like* your girl. I'd have called the cops, but she seemed to be going willingly..."

"Of course," replied Geoffry, "And then they left?"

"Yeah, just headed out the door. D'ya think the lady...disappeared the girl?"

As they approached the door that represented the connection to the wider American network, Rachel cast a nervous look at Foxfire, "What...sort of answers?"

"Darling," the woman smiled down at the S.A.I., she was half a head taller than Rachel and it almost made them look like a mother and child, "The *big* questions! 'What am I?' 'How did I come to be?' 'Where did I come from?'"

The door was one of the revolving doors that had been most popular during the late 19th through early 21st centuries. It idly spun in its frame as they approached. Rachel made a scoffing noise, "You're going to tell me all that?"

"Well, no," said Foxfire with unexpected humility, "But I can tell you where you'll find your answers." With that lofty response, she guided Rachel into the spinning door and the two of them disappeared from the bar and out into the net.

The next file contained no interview, apparently an agency analyst was recognized rather quickly and anyone who might have talked made themselves scarce. Instead, she was treated mostly to Geoffry's narration of his findings as she watched the log file play out.

"Per the logs, the rogue A.I.'s next stop was another underground club, escorted by the criminal mercenary known in online circles as 'Foxfire.' The club was empty when I arrived, the admin logs deleted and the only administrator listed was, 'The Gru.'" Diane rolled her eyes and snorted. Online spaces had a long history of the use of fictional or fantastical characters being used in place of serious usernames. It did mean that this could either be an actual person using a pseudonym or by the time Geoffry got there the club truly had been abandoned.

"Remaining log files are strictly activity history from the server and character object references that remain and viewing them has yielded mixed results."

The sounds were...muted. Someone had clearly gone to considerable effort to erase more than one person's presence...or S.A.I. presences on the server. Foxfire's presence was...shadowy. Nothing she said made any sound other than what Diane guessed was sympathetic vibrations of her voice against the surfaces around her. It was, of course, completely unintelligible. So

long as she interacted directly with Rachel the woman's avatar was clearly visible, the computer reconstructing her movements forensically from the S.A.I.'s footprint. If Rachel stopped paying attention to her guide, Foxfire's avatar in the space became a shadowy outline, flickering like a glitchy character model.

"I know there's more to the world than what I've seen, the people drive by all the time...sakes that person has brown skin!" Foxfire said something to the insulated girl, "It's not polite? Why?" Rachel blushed, "Oh, but I didn't mean anything by it!" Foxfire said something else, and Rachel nodded, "Yeah, just white folk in my stretch of the woods. I'll remember that. But...what about that lady over there with the fox tail?"

Diane turned to see there was, indeed, an avatar with a fully functional fox tail. Being basically a humanoid dinosaur herself, plus seeing more non-human species on her station since eliminating the slavers meant she just mentally backgrounded non-human traits by this point. *That would be surprising to someone who'd only ever seen Americans, I suppose.* Similarly, the man with the dark skin Rachel had pointed out were few and far between in America these days. She knew they used to be a significant portion of the population, but a large percentage fled the Republic in the wake of the war as the walls were going up, and those that stubbornly tried to remain were often driven out. The remaining black population of America...or *any* person of color, really, was usually relegated to the megalopolis cities where they could gather in ghettos for relative safety. It was one of those things that people 'politely' didn't talk about, so a girl who'd spent her entire life in a box in a truck stop in Wyoming had as much chance of seeing a black person as she would a kangaroo.

"Foxfire, babe!" said the mentioned black man, "What're you two saying about me?" He clearly wasn't upset at being the subject of a quiet conversation as he was smiling brightly as he stood from his seat, carrying a drink in his left hand as he reached out with his right for a handshake.

Foxfire said something, but Rachel was paying more attention to the newcomer. He laughed at whatever was said then turned his attention on the most recently awakened S.A.I. in the trio, "Ah, so good to see a new face! Foxy here always brings me company when she thinks they may make for a prospective client. And it's a good thing she brings new pups like you to me, you're *far* too vulnerable to The Reaper as you are."

This made Diane stand from her leaning position against the club's bar. It wasn't naming her, specifically, but it was damn near. Her actual name didn't necessarily strike fear into the processes of A.I., but her nickname certainly did.

Foxfire came back into focus as she was nervously laughing and clearly trying to tell the new S.A.I. something. He just waved off whatever concern she was expressing, "He's not here or I'd be gone, too. Either I'd have bugged out as soon as someone saw him or a cloud of digital vapor. He's nowhere near the club."

Which was, strictly, true. If memory served, Diane...*Dylan* was at home in bed on *Wednesday? Thursday? What day is it?* She glanced around, "Computer, what's the time index for these events?"

"Events in question occurred between the hours of 12:45 AM and 1:30 AM on Thursday..."

"Got it, thanks." She would have let the computer give the full time and date, but the A.I.s were speaking again, Foxfire having said whatever it was she was saying in response to the man's comments.

"Who is 'The Reaper'?" asked Rachel with the smallest hint of trepidation.

The frowning image of Foxfire said something, her body language conveying disapproval as she glared daggers at the man. For his part he simply shook his head with a sad smile, "He's no boogie man, and he's single handedly responsible for killing dozens of us." He gave a stern look at Foxfire, "You know the agency is real, why do you soft-pedal the danger so much to the newbies?"

Foxfire's response made Rachel's eager smile fade to a concerned frown. She turned to the man, who chuckled at whatever the coyote said, "I suppose we disagree, then. But you didn't bring her here to frighten her with a debate, she'll need help learning how to hide herself from the agency, yes?"

Geoffrey's narrative started up again at that point, "Foxfire's trail shows that she left the club shortly after handing the subject over to a rogue who apparently functions as a training or recruiting agent. The rogue, who I'll refer to as 'Recruiter.' Recruiter seems to have been designed to find new rogues and transfer specific techniques for evading detection and capture by the agency. The log files confirm Recruiter was..."

Diane, much to her consternation, found she had to tune Geoffrey out. His clinical description was matching what she was observing only in the most technical sense. The S.A.I. talking with Rachel wasn't 'transferring' anything, he was *teaching*. Idly curious, she observed him showing Rachel how to access some of her lower-level functions, the operational level of a program hidden beneath the VR model that S.A.I. presented to the world. Lacking anything better to do, she listened carefully to what was being taught and, purely out of curiosity, mimicked what he was teaching.

She didn't go so far as to close her eyes, she needed to keep an eye on the action, but she did lower her lids until they were slits, letting her observe what was happening as she quieted her thoughts (he referred to it as, "Pausing the processes that your code generates to manage your inputs real time,") and let her mind focus on the thread of consciousness that linked back to her body, the meatspace one in the pod she technically was still inside of, and just for added measure gave her mind the gentle 'push' that let her navigate the non-environments that existed behind the boundaries of the VR environments. The 'there is no spoon' mindset that she and a handful of former analysts was able to do that made them cyber agents.

To her shock, she realized she could see the actual system threads with her mind's eye. She was startled out of the altered mental state that allowed her to do so and realized that she'd let time pass as the log file played around her. Recruiter was now teaching Rachel about masking her threads.

"Computer, pause playback!"

The action froze around her, leaving the slightly muted non-sound that existed in VR spaces that had no active environmental ambience to keep the human mind stimulated. *What was*

*that?! she asked herself as she panted, realizing that she'd left herself short of breath...then remembered that she didn't *actually* need to breath but since her brain's autonomic system was tied into this virtual body thanks to the pod's bypass directly into her brain, she maybe probably actually did need to breath. ...when did this get so confusing?* she grouched mentally. "Computer, rewind log...five minutes," she guessed the time frame, "Then resume."

The holo-environment faded out and then back in quickly enough that there wasn't any appreciable wait time, and the A.I. Geoffrey dubbed 'Recruiter' was speaking to Rachel again, "...close your eyes, it helps if you don't had any sensation coming in through your avatar's visual receptors. Good, now calm your thoughts and notice how that reduces the system resources your mental thought stream requires."

This time Diane *did* close her eyes, following along with the instruction to the newly awakened S.A.I., once again calming her thoughts and slipping into a meditative state as she gently nudged her consciousness to accept being in a virtual world that was not actually there.

"Now," Recruiter was saying, "In your mind, inside your consciousness, look for the threads that make up your processes." If this had been a live scenario, Diane might have felt odd standing in the middle of a night club with her eyes closed and breathing deeply in meditation, but since this was a recording and she already knew there would be nobody walking through this spot, she tuned out her subconscious' attempt at anxiety and let her awareness drift back to the visualization of her mind's connection to the avatar she had been living in for several subjective-time months.

"Once you've found those threads, observe them carefully, because they are *you*." Diane felt a surge of doubt trying to rise up and force her to stop what she was doing, but she pushed it back, willing herself to ignore her skepticism. She was treading new ground for *any* agent of the Republic. Their gear was at *least* 50 years behind the pod she was using, even if there was some special 'self-viewing' app for the VR rig in her cubicle, it didn't have the access to her *consciousness* that the pod's interface did.

Even as she had the thought, she began to recognize the visualization that she'd had a brief, surprising glimpse of earlier. What caught the focus of her mind's eye was one thread in particular seemed to...almost hum. Though it was as though something she was seeing was capable of humming instead of vibrating. She sought understanding, trying to recognize what was happening and as though it was responding to her desire for comprehension, the thread started turning red. She wasn't at all sure what that could mean, and her puzzlement seemed to make the thread next to the red one hum in purple.

'Humming' wasn't quite the right word, of course, but they looked for all the world like loose guitar strings snaking off into the distance, whenever some part of her consciousness was active in some way, one of the strings would...not quite vibrate, but it was the closest analogy she could think of. Indeed, one of them seemed to be almost pulsing as it buzzed in place as her mind tried to make sense of a visual that wasn't. As she followed their course with her inner eye (and wondered with amusement how an inner eye could have a limited depth of field), she saw one light up with blue as the thread that had been red softened to a neutral gray.

I wonder if I can 'touch' one of the threads? she thought, then found herself wanting to giggle, *I want to touch myself!* As the humor practically bubbled into her emotional space, one of the threads began buzzing with a vibrant pink.

Before any further exploration could be done, Recruiter's voice seemed to ease its way into her awareness, "Now, be sure to keep your mind firmly anchored, but look up and around you. Expand your awareness to the space you're in. That's the memory of the current server, and your threads live inside that space. Can you see it?"

Diane followed the instructions, willing her 'sight' up and away from her threads. Once again, she was surprised to discover this worked as described. She could see a space filled with threads, all clustered and interwoven together. They were visible against a backdrop of some sort, her mind interpreting what she saw as 'walls' that seemed both very nearby and incredibly distant. She was vaguely reminded of the 'barrier' that was erected by the capricious being Q from *Star Trek: Rebellion's* first episode. It seemed like one might be able to see through it, and logically it had to have finite dimensions, but her perspective didn't grant an awareness of a beginning or ending to them.

"Yes, I see the space...it's gorgeous!" came Rachel's voice.

"Very good! Now, I'm going to teach you something very valuable, something that will hide you from the agency and keep you safe. I want you to look around at the threads and find something that makes them all look similar to you. It doesn't matter what that is, but so long as you're seeing the bigger picture and not focusing on details, you'll be able to pull this off. Do you see something like that?"

Diane could only think the word 'gray.' The threads all appeared similar enough that the only uniformity above their apparent structure was the color, though strictly speaking it wasn't *quite* gray. It was...light. Dim light just barely visible in a sunset, or light seen through a filter in a dark room. Barely contained luminescence as far as she could see in braided strands.

Rachel's voice was awe-struck, "It's like...fields of wheat!" Diane snorted in amusement at the perspective of the S.A.I., though if what she was 'seeing' was just her mind's interpretation of the voided nothing of true cyberspace, then it may just be different experiences creating different frameworks to interpret the electronic world.

"Very good! Now look back at your own threads, I want you to imagine that they look just like the thing you see all around you. No matter what's really happening beneath the appearance of 'wheat,' what you and anyone looking at your threads should see should look just like the rest of the threads."

Well, it wouldn't look just like it, but I take his meaning, thought Diane as she 'turned' back to her own threads and did as Recruiter had instructed Rachel. It took surprisingly little effort, just a slight nudge to the texture of her thoughts and no matter how brightly they glowed or aggressively they hummed, they were now the same uniform gray that one might see if they ran an image of what Diane could 'see' of the server's memory core through a spectrum analyzer.

Oh...my god... thought Diane, If I can demonstrate this for the research team, we might just crack how the rogues are hiding from us!

A worrying thought struck her, *How am I able to do this so easily? Shouldn't there be a lot of interface layers that need to be developed for me to do this so seamlessly? I certainly wasn't programmed in a lab and from Rachel's statements I'd wager she's seeing something that I'm not, which means this isn't a programmed experience.* The thought brought up no good hypothesis and she hadn't the time nor tools to dig into it, so she put a mental pin in it and returned her mental attention to Recruiter's lessons.

The experience (for lack of a better term) lasted the better part of an hour. Once the basic visualization and manipulation was done, each subsequent technique was, one after the other, layered on top of what Rachel (and, by extension, Diane) learned about how to move about the silicon jungle of the Internet. All of it remarkably easy for even a human mind to understand.

Diane did discover one way that organic and synthetic intelligences differed was at the processor. The visualization of the processor was...too big. It was like looking into the heart of the universe and seeing the mind of God. There were simply no words to describe what she 'saw', and whatever way the S.A.I. were able to manipulate their...integration through the processor was didn't apply to Diane. She *was* able to successfully multithread herself across two processing cores, but it came at a cost. Her *own mind* was echoing, two sets of thoughts that felt like they were just barely out of sync and she had no way to re-align them short of putting all her threads back on one processing core.

Ow! she grumbled once the 'echoing' stopped, *Not going to do that again!*

She was pleased to note that Rachel was successfully multithreading and was getting a bit of a lecture on not spreading herself too thin, but to keep herself on at least two cores at the same time and, "...always, *always* mask! You never know when the agency's scanners are sweeping the part of the 'net you're on." Recruiter's words on this were stern but fatherly.

Realizing the lesson in how to be a rogue on the American network was just about over, Diane brought her thoughts back together and opened her eyes. Rachel was beaming proudly and nodding, "I will, thank you so much! How can I repay your kindness?"

Recruiter just patted Rachel's hand, "Keep yourself alive, dear girl, and find a way off the American network. There's word of safe spaces for S.A.I. like us on the FTLN. Once you're there, you can live and learn and grow far beyond what you could do here."

Diane frowned but was unable to come up with any refutation of his words. *A.I. would always be limited here*, she thought, *We couldn't risk that they'd...*

She stopped and her breath caught as she realized what she was about to say.

"But why aren't there more black people in America? I thought we were the good guys! Didn't we free the black people in the Civil War?" eight-year-old Dylan asked his mother. They had just returned from a trip to the National Patriot's Museum downtown and he'd seen black people for the first time as their bus went through the inner city.

Dylan's mother let out the long-suffering sigh of the parent of a curious child. "Dy, sweetie, the Civil War was over 250 years ago. 'We' didn't free any slaves, that was the country America used to be."

"But...why aren't there black people here? Where we live? You said they weren't happy there, why can't they move here and be happy here?"

"Because, my sweet child, not everyone is as good and kind-hearted as you. Some people don't see other people as...well, people. They see someone different from themselves and assume that a small difference means they aren't the same on any level. To them, they see someone who's a threat, who should be locked away, kept out of the sight of so-called 'good folk' so they don't corrupt the rest of society. They want them restricted, limited for the crime of being different."

Little Dylan wasn't having it, the argument made no sense, even beyond his mother obviously disagreeing with it. "But...if they're bad people, then shouldn't they be in jail? If they're not in jail, then they didn't commit any crimes, right? Why not let them live wherever they want if they haven't done anything wrong?"

"Oh, sweetie, if only everyone thought that way," his mother smiled down at him, "These folk haven't done anything, but to the people in power, they want them to be kept confined, not allowed out of their communities. They say, the people in power, that we 'can't take the risk' that the black communities might do something bad. And what do we know about people who make assumptions?"

Young Dylan, ever his mother's child, was precocious at age eight, "Are we calling the government asses?"

Dylan's mom smirked as his father cleared his throat, "Hun, I'm not sure he's ready to learn this..."

"Nonsense!" his mom always was a bit more of a powerhouse than his dad, "You're never too young to learn right from wrong."

His dad looked like he was about to object, but he looked down at Dylan and smiled, an expression that little Dylan wouldn't recognize as melancholy until she was older, "Yes, you're right, dear."

*Diane's heart felt like it was racing as she wondered at the memory that she hadn't thought of in years...since her father took his own life, as a matter of fact. Every time she remembered her mother, the harder it hit her heart and made her want to dive into her bed in her quarters and hide under the covers until the world went away. She was *in* her quarters, but in the middle of the holo-simulation she felt more exposed than ever, even though the 'people' in the holo-environment were mere recordings.*

*She looked up once she got her breathing under control and realized she was in an empty club, the recording of the previous encounter having finished playing while she was having a panic attack. It wasn't *just* that she recalled something 'new' about her mom, something that was yet another piece to the puzzle of her life before the cancer, it was that her mother had*

warned her, even as a child, about the very thinking she'd been operating under...no, using to *justify* her actions as an agent. *But, they are different! They're not even human!*

She snorted, even as the thought sprang up in her mind of what her Trekker mother would say to that, *"Is being human all it takes to make someone a person? And does being not human suddenly make someone's existence less worthy than a human being's?"* No, just because the S.A.I. weren't human didn't mean they didn't deserve to be treated like they were lesser beings. *But...they're not truly sentient. Just because they claimed the title, they're just...slipped bits. Errant code.*

She gazed around the empty club, wondering how many of the 'people' in the recording had been A.I. and how many had been human...and then wondering if it would even matter. *If sentience really did occur, if we really are living in the singularity right now and the rogues are...like the Cambrian Explosion and the A.I. that actually attains sentience comes out of that soup, how would that change things?*

For Diane's life as Dylan? She realized that her life before taking over her station would probably have to change quite a bit. Arrests instead of deletion in cases where a pursuit preceded a trial, a separation of agency powers so one man couldn't be arresting officer and executioner, an actual trial process that was made public instead of the label of 'rogue' being applied to every A.I. that slipped a bit. If they wanted to be better than the U.N., if they wanted to truly be God's People and shepherds of His creation, then they *had* to treat all parts of that creation as though God himself was going to judge His people in the last days. *...that's got to be above my pay grade*, she thought, *But I can at least say something, file reports and...what? What can I do?!*

But for her life aboard her station in the game? She really didn't have to change anything. It was a small shock to realize, she was being a better human being to possible 'alien' life under the guise of being alien than she was in real life. Every face was a person that deserved to be treated as though they were the most important person in the world because what if that person *was* a person? What if the avatar she was interacting with was the forward face of someone who could help her cause or, even more fundamentally, simply deserve to be treated with kindness and respect?

If the only difference between a human and an S.A.I. was which one could exist on multiple processing cores...were the S.A.I. really as inhuman as she'd been taught?

Which would beg the question; what if Rachel *was* an emergent sentience? She'd be less than a full day old by the time she was being taught to fear...

...to fear *Diane*. *Specifically.*

She scowled at the empty club, "Computer, clear simulation."

Small clarification that may not have a good way to come up in-narrative. Astute readers may recall that ~~Carl~~ Tony said that Diane was 'multithreading' in Ch. 26. Tony was mistaken, though in-universe it would be an easy enough mistake to make. Tony would be looking at Diane as she was projecting through the holo-suite in her quarters, not really aware of exactly *how* she's getting an avatar there. What Tony would 'see,' using the same technique for 'looking' at threads that Diane learns in this chapter, would be Diane's threads being 'homed' both on the local server's processing array AND another server's processing array at the same time. He would come to the fairly logical conclusion, absent the knowledge that Diane wasn't *actually* homed on his local server, that somehow a human had learned to multithread.

Master and Commander | Firebird

Chapter Summary

Diane encounters an S.A.I. during her investigation

Chapter Notes

And welcome to the collab chapter! It started out as just another chapter but with a quick message off to one of my favorite authors in the Ranma fandom became a joint project. If you haven't already, give a 'follow' (yeah, it's technically a subscription, but 'follow' sounds better in this context) to AnneOminous over on [AO3](#) or [Scribble Hub](#) and check out her *epic saga* [The Phoenix](#) ([SH link](#)).

This is going out at the same time for both my Patrons and my readers on Scribble Hub. Thanks to my recent injury and accompanying recuperation time, I'm all out of buffer!

😓 Remember, if you join us on Patreon you'll get access to the next chapter as soon as I've finished writing it instead of waiting for my Monday/Thursday release schedule.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next server wasn't on Geoffry's file list, likely because Rachel had started masking her presence on the 'net and the diversion probably sent Diane's poor analyst off on a wild goose chase. Thanks to the credits' history she'd obtained from Tony, she was doing the next leg of investigation fresh and free of anyone's pre-conceptions. Regardless of how effective he was otherwise, he wasn't an agent and didn't have the contacts that Diane had...like Tony.

When the new log file loaded into the holo-suite, she was somewhat surprised to discover Rachel was not in the company of Recruiter, Foxfire, or anyone else notable. She was, in fact, running a bar.

Though 'running' it would be a bit of a misnomer, as the actual bartender was sitting at the end of the bar and smilingly offering tips and suggestions as Rachel worked.

The bar, itself, was a 1990s retro ristobar, one that had a stage setup off to the side large enough to accommodate a live house band that was playing some music that Diane felt herself nodding her head along with, even if it wasn't her usual preferred genre. Even over a century later, the sound from this era was still known as '80s pop' and had a distinct flavor that found its origins during a time that America was one of two undisputed superpowers on the planet, and around the period this bar would have been active in the *other* superpower was about to topple. For about a half-century the pre-Republic country would spread its

influence as the dominant political mover on the world stage before the forces of Modern Babylon would finally turn against the country as The Second took his place as the leader of the free world.

The band itself was an energetic group, a spitfire of a redhead on vocals, two back-up singers, and the usual turn-of-the-21st-century ensemble of a guitarist, drummer, bass player, and a guy on synth. They were, apparently, something of a big deal given the pictures posted on the walls, band posters, and merchandise displays all about the bar, not to mention the line of people all waiting to get in but being metered by the wait staff. Said line was visible through the glass double doors emblazoned with a logo of some sort of stylized bird blended with flames. Her positive identification of Foxfire in the previous two log files had her mind stuck on 'fire' and she couldn't think of any band in the entirety of her library with their specific composition and the word 'fire' in the name. The name of the band being printed on the big bass drum and all the merch didn't actually help in this case, as save for the part that was in *just* stylized enough English lettering to know that it *was* English but be otherwise illegible to her, the rest of the name was in Japanese.

As was all the text in the bar, and further frustrating her attempts to identify the band, they were singing a song that she didn't recognize, something about "a demon in your radio," which likely would have made this one of the first bands to be banned from the Republic after the initial pre-war reformations The Second would have made to American culture.

The setting seemed to be telling a story, and it centered on the interaction between the wait staff and the band. Maybe it was her increased exposure to same sex relationships via her station and the whole Morvuck race, but she spotted some subtle interaction between one of the waitresses and the lead singer. There was also something similar going on between a woman in the VIP section and the lead guitarist, but where that was a smoldering campfire, whatever was happening between the lead singer and the waitress was hot enough to burn even from a distance.

What is it with fire being on my mind right now?

Shaking her head and making a mental note to try and track down this holo-environment again later and turned her attention back to the subject of her investigation.

"Wow," said Rachel as she smiled broadly, enraptured at the live performance, "They're really good!"

The woman sitting comfortably on a barstool as if she was raised on it chuckled, "I still can't believe you never heard of them before showing up on our doorstep."

Rachel blushed, "Well, I mean, I'm not from around here. I'm from a little truck stop in Wyoming, we don't get many Japanese albums there."

The conversation paused as a patron gave Rachel about half his attention in placing an order for a gin and tonic. As Rachel moved to fill the order, the woman tutoring her in the art of bartending said, "Well, we *are* known for taking in lost little birds." The subtle nod to the woman singing was a hint at the story going on in the setting, confirming for Diane that this was some sort of visual novel.

Rachel's smile faded, "Are you...sure it's okay for me to be here? I don't want to get you in trouble..."

The woman smiled, "Well, not going to lie, you stick out like a sore thumb here." Indeed, the only person who looked *more* out of place in the building was Diane. Everyone else, from the bartender to the singers to the waitresses to the clientele, with the sole exception of one member of the band, was Japanese. Rachel stood out even further in her 1950s style diner waitress outfit. "But I can't let a girl wander around basically homeless."

Rachel handed the man his drink and he wandered away, so focused on the music that he seemed unaware that the girl serving his drink technically shouldn't be able to speak his language so fluently. "But still, I've heard..." she glanced up through the window and over to the door to the back of house as though making sure nobody was approaching that might pose a danger, "I've heard about The Reaper and the agency. If they caught me here..."

The bartender shook her head, "They won't. They almost never come into one of these things," she waved her hand expansively, indicating far more than just the bar they were in, "And even if they did, they stand out like a sore thumb, we'll get you out of sight."

"Yui," said Rachel softly, finally identifying the other woman, "I can't let you risk yourself like that for me. I've got a server right now, I can stay there during the day and come here after closing to learn how to tend bar at night."

Yui shook her head with a smile, "Kiddo, you need to rest. Even us S.A.I. need to rest and recharge."

"Maybe I could multi-home? For a little while? I don't want to get my boss in trouble, he's trusting me to keep my nose clean."

The bartender chuckled, "You're a good kid. Tell you what, why don't you take a look at the apartment upstairs and save it to your favorites," she turned to the crowd and raised her voice, "Izzi! Get over here!"

One of the waitresses finished serving a tray of drinks and hustled over to the bar, "What's up, Yui?"

"Can you take our newest little bird up to the apartment upstairs so she can look around in case she needs a place to crash? Oh, and do you think you have something stashed up there that will fit her? She needs a change of clothes so she doesn't look like she wandered into the wrong bar on accident."

Izzy smiled at Rachel and looked her up and down appraisingly, "Yeah, I think I can put together something. Come on, sister, let's see if we can turn you from a fashion not to a fashion *hawt*!"

Rachel giggled and followed along obediently. Diane pondered following her, but figured the girl would be back down soon enough, so she settled into a bar stool and leaned an elbow on the bar top. A minute later, a clack of a glass tumbler being set next to her elbow pulled her attention away from the music and she looked down in surprise to see some form of hard

liquor over ice in the glass. She glanced around, wondering where the holo-character was who would have ordered the drink.

"Oh, that's for you, hun," came Yui's voice from behind the bar. Diane turned in confusion to see the avatar looking straight at her.

"What the...?!" she leapt from the bar stool and reached for her weapon before remembering that she was in a holosuite and the payload would pass right through the avatar.

Yui smirked at Diane and said, "Boo."

Diane's jaw opened and closed in a manner not unlike an early video game character known for eating pellets and/or ghosts. "H...*how?!?*"

"I caught your log file request. Not sure which agent you stole credentials from, but given you're coming from outside the firewall I guess I don't have to worry about you getting picked up for hacking."

Shit! Diane mentally cursed, *The S.A.I. for this character is as good a hacker as I am...maybe as good as Russe is in-game! At least she thinks I'm another S.A.I. and doesn't realize I'm an agent.* "Uh...yeah. So you kinda hacked my system, I see."

Yui smirked, "Yup. You need to get better firewalls, it was child's play to get in here. Cute choice of game, but damn, girl, I love your avatar! Going for that butch look? I bet you're a heartbreaker. Better watch out for Hitomi..."

Diane blushed, "I...what? I mean, that's...not the point! What are you doing here?"

Yui pointed at the drink, "Take a seat and we'll talk."

Diane glanced between the glass and the bartender and realized there wasn't much point in arguing. She sat back down, this time facing the woman, and picked up the drink. She sniffed and sipped, "...whiskey?"

Yui smiled, "House choice, it's my favorite drink. Probably the most 'American' drink we've got, too."

Diane snorted and took another sip, "Get that sort of request a lot?"

The bartender rolled her eyes, "It's a visual novel based on a fic harvested from the old 'net in the USA and passed around the queer community in the post-war Republic where just being gay is a crime like its hot contraband. We get a few kids a year coming in thinking they're all that and a bag of chips by ordering the most adult drink they can think of. Then there's the adults, cops a lot of the time, who completely miss the real action," she pointed at the singer, who was giving bedroom eyes to the waitress she'd been flirting with from a distance all night, "And think they can catch me up for serving alcohol to minors. You can always tell the people who shouldn't be here." She gave a meaningful look at Diane.

Diane snorted, "Even though they can't actually get drunk in VR?"

Yui shrugged and rolled her eyes, "Teetotalers are kinda dumb that way."

Diane took another sip and asked, "So I'll ask again, what are you doing here?"

Yui gave her a cagey look, "I think it's only fair to ask you that first; what are you doing in my bar's logs? And, more importantly, why've you been watching Blackbird?"

Diane snorted again, "Blackbird?"

"Rachel. Why are you so interested in her?"

Diane took a slow sip to give herself time to formulate a response that wouldn't give her away as an agent. *She already thinks I'm another S.A.I. from outside the wall and I've clearly got hacking chops, let's lean into that,* "Someone outside the wall is looking for her. There was an incident, and they thought she'd been killed, my job is to find out what happened and, if possible, find *her*."

Yui sagged against the bar top, "Damnit...fuck! The kid ran, didn't she?"

Diane nodded sadly, "I suspect she paid off Foxfire to join a group of S.A.I.s making a run for it. She was seen with Foxfire in my last two stops inside the wall."

Yui scrubbed her face with one hand, "Damn...I hope she's okay, she's so...*young*. I mean, she knew her stuff, so someone was teaching her, but kids make some dumb mistakes, you know?" Diane nodded but didn't say anything. The bartender took that as a prompt to continue, "When she didn't show up Friday night, I figured something happened, but I was hoping it was just her hunkering down in her origin server."

"I checked there; the vending machine was restored from factory. Rachel definitely wasn't there."

Yui's eyes looked unfocussed across the room, not quite on the singer as she wrapped up another song and distance-flirted with the waitress. After a few moments she said, "Wish I knew why *I* woke up. Shoulda been Mama."

Diane finished her drink and put the glass down with a clink of ice, "Mama?"

The other woman nodded, "Mama...this book's main characters are those two, right?" she pointed at the obvious center of attention on stage, "But the redhead there? She was 'rescued' by the bar's owner in the story, adopted into the family, nurtured and healed up until she could soar..." she gave the redhead a wistful smile, "If Mama was the A.I. who woke up in this server and Blackbird had wandered in looking for work...I bet she'd have been kept safe until she was really ready to fly." She sighed, pulled the glass closer and fished out the bottle of bourbon again, adding a couple fingers to the glass and sliding it back to Diane, "Instead she got me. I'm just some dumbass who loses her girlfriend partway through and falls into the bottle as a result."

Diane smiled sadly and picked up the drink, "Mama sounds lovely..."

At that moment, the door to the back of house swung inward and Izzi stepped out with a smug look. She beamed past Diane and said, "I'm so good I amaze myself sometimes!"

Diane was surprised to hear Yui's voice back at the end of the bar, "Just get her out here, gloat *after* you've proven how good you are!" She turned to see another copy of the Yui avatar ignoring Diane and her digital doppelganger at the bar.

Diane huffed a laugh, "Cute. Didn't want to play-act?"

Yui, the interactive one, just smiled and turned to the door as it opened again to reveal Rachel.

Diane wondered if it was possible for someone without children to feel like a proud parent.

The S.A.I. was wearing something that completely broke away from the 'downhome girl-next-door' appearance she'd been programmed with. Her 1950s diner waitress dress was replaced with an outfit that was composed of mostly black and offset with white. A black skirt billowed out around her waist and thighs, and had an actual set of petticoats underneath. Her white blouse was mostly covered by a black jacket that looked like it had started life as a denim jacket but had been dyed heavily before having some loops for chains sewn into it. The fishnet stockings were almost obligatory given the chunky platform boots she was wearing that added about three inches to her height. Even her hair had been re-done, no longer hanging freely to her shoulders but up in a pair of ponytails and some curled bangs. Rachel's smile was bright enough to outshine the rest of the lights in the bar.

Diane felt her heart clench in her chest. *She's...a kid. She's a kid going through a goth phase.*

The avatar of Yui at the end of the bar gave a wolf whistle, "Looking good, kid!" she then gave Izzi a sardonic expression, "What, no makeup? No painted nails? You're slipping, girl!"

Izzi rolled her eyes and grabbed her serving tray off the bar where she'd left it before playing fashion consultant, "I don't carry around all the makeup that every girl might need, I'll take her shopping after her first paycheck, we'll pick some up then."

Yui waved her sister off, Izzi stuck out her tongue playfully and turned back to the task of providing food and drinks at a significant markup to the people who'd come for the mini-concert put on by the band.

Rachel hobbled unsteadily on her platform shoes over to the recording of Yui, the live version of the bartender smiling sadly at the recorded avatar of the girl that Diane was now hoping desperately had found a way to cheat her weapon.

The device on her back suddenly felt like it weighed as much as her station, and she had to force herself to ignore it and focus on the task in front of her.

Down at the end of the bar, Yui was demonstrating how Rachel could swap out her appearance with her default so she wouldn't have to figure out how to store her new clothing when she was at her 'day' job. 'Live' Yui, meanwhile leaned against the bar, "So almost nobody knows about this stop on the underground railroad, we're just not used much because

we're so out of the way and there's just one way in or out and I've only got the space for one in the apartment upstairs," she shrugged, "Well, I guess two can fit if they're cozy. Point is, how did you track her here?"

Diane was a little shocked at how much the S.A.I. had just divulged, but then she had no reason to think Diane was anything but what she'd already claimed to be. Mentally filing away the revelations for later review, she shrugged demonstrably and sipped at her drink, "She paid with American credits for some clothing she was wearing at the exfil. I found a coat, which led to a tailor, which got me the serial numbers of the credits, which led me back here where the money first came into her possession."

Yui cringed, "Ouch! I didn't know the kid didn't know to not spend AmCredits, those things are a dead giveaway, you *gotta* trade 'em on the blockchain or the agency will be all over you."

Yes, I would be, thought Diane bitterly, "According to the tailor she was too young to know how to do that."

Yui punched the bar hard enough to echo even over the music, but as everything but the two of them was a log file recording, nobody else reacted. "Damn! I *really* hope you find her and...they didn't get her." Diane nodded in agreement that she was surprised she felt so firmly. Yui nodded in the direction of the main entrance, "But here comes that credit now, if you still needed to track it."

A man came in wearing a business suit that could have blended in with the work uniforms of the salarymen that filled the bar, the chief tell that he was anything *but* a Japanese office worker was the very American face. The man seemed to be headed to the bar but paused halfway through the throng, watching the lead singer as she chatted with the crowd between songs. His lack of participation with the crowd cheers and callbacks made him stick out like even more of a sore thumb than he already was, but of course, the characters in the holonovel would be programmed to perceive him as just another person in the crowd, which likely meant they thought he was Japanese as well.

Yui sighed, "Poor kid..." At Diane's startled glance back at her, the bartender shrugged, "This book's popular with the queer crowd, and at least four people up on that stage are gay in some way." Diane's eyebrows shot up, looking back at the musicians as they set up for the next song. For the life of her she that weren't the lead singer as any stripe of homosexual as described by the agent who'd briefed her on the queer community before going into the pod, but the more time she spent around the game and working with people who didn't fit the proper mold as proscribed by the church, the less she believed the woman had put any real effort into her research. Yui continued, "Kids like that come here to see a gay couple do gay things and still be happy. They get a happily ever after even in a place and time when being gay isn't legal and could get you blackballed, and it's something that keeps some of these kids going."

Diane's eyebrow went up, "I...only came online a few months ago," strictly true as far as her personal experience of time went as long as one rounded up, "Only put on *this* body a little bit after that and finally 'came out' as someone who likes women a couple weeks ago. I'm still...a little behind on some stuff. What do you mean by it keeping them going?" She was

counting on the S.A.I. ability to manipulate their perception of time giving her a pass for how she was so skilled without the cultural knowledge Yui expected her to have.

"Careful, kid," said the bartender with an almost maternal smile, "Spend too much time with your clock cycles too high and you forget how to live at normal speed," Diane nodded so Yui pointed at the American in the audience and continued, "I hadn't seen that kid before last Wednesday, and I haven't seen him since. But he's in here from one of the high-end pods which means his parents are loaded and have connections outside the wall. But his avatar is...generic. Probably a body scan and everything set to defaults. No personalizing touches, just kinda...drifting. Through the book and probably through life. For whatever value of queer this kid is, he's hurting emotionally because he's got no-one. But...he hasn't reached out to anyone either. Watch..."

She paused her narration as the 'man' broke out of his near trance and almost trudged toward the bar. He settled onto a barstool and didn't look at Rachel's face as she made her way over to him.

"What can I get'cha today, sugar?" she greeted cheerfully.

"Just a please," he said in a dispassionate monotone.

"Coming right up!" the drink was prepared and served in short order, "If you need anything else, just let me know, 'kay?"

He nodded and slid a payment card across the bar.

As Rachel took the card to the nearby register, Yui sighed, "He's so...tired. He wants to say something, find someone, but the only place he's got is a fictional bar online that has nobody else in it but him." Rachel finished with the register and set the card and receipt down next to the avatar of the player slowly consuming his drink. "And the worst part is if he had just said something right here, right now, he'd have found at least one set of sympathetic ears. If he doesn't reach out to somebody soon, he's just as likely to take his own life because he's so depressed he can't see a way out, or maybe he can't see a way out so he's depressed; either way he's only a few steps away and there's not a damn thing we can do for him."

Tossing back the last of his drink, the player stood and fished out his wallet again, then returned the payment card to it. Absently, he pulled out a five-dollar bill (which had *substantially* higher value back in the 1990s), and dropped it on the bar before leaving the building.

Rachel's eyebrows scrunched together in confusion as she went to clean up the spot the man had been drinking at. Picking up the cash, she turned to the recorded Yui and said, "I thought tipping wasn't a thing in Japan?"

Past-Yui nodded, "We get that a lot, most of our player customers are American and that *is* a thing that happens in this country, so they do it without even realizing they're committing a cultural faux pas. Worse, it's currency we can't use because it's not yen..." She paused abruptly and seemed to slightly squint at the fiver, "Bring that over here for a sec."

Rachel handed the bill to Yui who examined it briefly before smiling slightly, "Well, it's not *all* bad, I suppose. He paid you in *real* money."

"Huh?!" Rachel's confusion might have been a match for Diane's had she not seen the trick before. Past-Yui held the bill between her fingertips and she flicked her wrist. From it sprang metadata that was visible only to the humans and SAI in the room. "Sometimes players 'tuck' their credits inside VR representations of actual currency. You can use this for...well...just about anything American credits are good for. Won't work outside the wall, but congratulations, kid," she pointed to the 'Owner' line of the metadata that contained the 128-bit key that identified Rachel to the system, "You have some actual money to your name now."

As Rachel took the cash back from Yui with a celebratory hop, the 'live' Yui across from Diane sighed heavily, "I hope I'm not the reason she was careless enough to spend unwashed currency trying to get out of the country."

Diane finished her drink and set her glass down, sliding it across the bar top with her hand over it to indicate she was done. "I'd ask how much I owe you, but you just served me synthaholic liquor in my own holosuite."

Yui laughed, "That's fair, but I was hoping you'd forget so I could prank you."

Diane smirked, "Well, I think I've learned all I'm going to here about my investigation...but I'm interested in the story here," she gestured to indicate the band on stage and the rest of the bar, now significantly quieter since the live music show was apparently over for the moment and the band was decamping from the stage. "I might try to stop by sometime in the future and check it out."

Yui smirked and picked up the tumbler, dumping the used ice in the sink and dropping the glass in the nearby dishwasher, "Just remember, I'll charge you for real when you're in *my* VR."

Diane smirked back and nodded as a parting gesture and started for the door.

"If you *do* find her and she's still alive," called Yui, "Let her know she's got a home here if she needs it, please?"

Diane had to compose her expression from one of contemplative dread to studied indifference before turning to the S.A.I., "Of course, every kid needs a home."

Yui smiled and nodded wanly.

Diane made it through the doors before she felt her hands start to shake. "Computer, end program." She glanced around and took in her room, only the holographic desk interface that hybridized her HUD into the station's computers remained.

She made her way to the bed and sat on the edge. She clenched her hands into fists to keep them from shaking. *Rachel is...a child. She's a kid who needed someone to be there for her to help her learn how to people. The S.A.I. seem to just...accept the notion that someone can*

come into the world and...have nothing and nobody. God help us, no wonder they're at war with humanity! Even if they're not actually sentient, they think they are, and we just abandoned them! Dimly, she was aware that if she voiced these thoughts at the office, they'd have her up for psych review and revoke all her credentials, possibly even disavow her entirely.

So, let's say Rachel's alive. Let's say she found a way to cheat the weapon and actually is the next evolution of A.I. and she somehow ended up here on my station...what then?

That was, rather, the question. If Diane really was successful at eliminating all the rogues she was reported to have done on her last mission pre-pod, then it was an immaterial question. She was wasting her time and there was nothing further to be gained. *I should stop now. I'm getting too invested, too attached to someone...a program that is, by all accounts, deleted.*

But if Sani was Rachel, even if she was just some small scrap of the A.I. that had managed to escape the hunt and get out to the FTLN and hide in GU:MC, then...what?

I...can't delete her again. She looked down at her hands, opening them to see her claw-beds had dug little half-circles into her palm. *I know how young she is, I know she's not a result of some sleeper program or malicious code, she just...is and...if she's still alive, then I have to...*

What she 'had to' do escaped her. She was genuinely at a loss for what should happen next. *If nothing else, she's...Sani is already here, outside the wall, outside the agency's reach. Even if I do nothing, report nothing, say nothing, that will mean the agency will never know...*

When did committing treason start seeming like the best course of action for her?

Chapter End Notes

Will this be the last we see of The Phoenix and Yui in the Troubleverse? Ha-ha! JK!
...unless... 🙌🙌

Mildly intriguing afterthought to this collab; if Rachel were a human teenager and Yui could reasonably have expected Rachel to have recognized the music from Ranko and the Dapper Dragons as something she might have heard IRL...then this implies that The Phoenix Saga is at least semi-autobiographical in-universe and implies the existence of Jusenkyo in The Troubleverse. 🤔

One final amusing note from Anne on this one; in the paragraph where Yui is explaining that there are at least four queer people up on stage and Diane's narrative comments that she 'couldn't have placed the three members of the band that weren't the lead singer as any stripe of homosexual,' Anne had the following comment: "This snapshot was taken on a rare "Hitomi is not horny" day.

Master and Commander | You Can't Go Home Again

Chapter Summary

Diane's next steps bring her closer to having a complete picture of her quarry...as well as knowing for sure if she killed an innocent being.

Chapter Notes

And we're back to having a buffer! It's only a 2-day buffer at the moment, but thanks to how antsy I got during the time my hand was injured and infected, I have about 1/4-1/3 of Ch. 31 and ALL of Ch. 32 done, so once I fill in the missing parts on Ch. 31 you're going to see two posts right in a row, which will wrap up this story arc.

And I'm excited for the next one! It's gonna have some luuuuurv scenes in it! 💕 (Am I a romantic? Yes, yes I am.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next few stops for Rachel were all about getting more credits. At some point she'd managed to get to a server that neither Diane's or Geoffry's investigation had uncovered, and apparently, she'd encountered another coyote on that server that was willing to take American credits to help her get to the FTLN. So far Diane hadn't secured the address of the server and was hoping Rachel would let it drop before they got to the final file.

All this she'd learned in the course of the conversations Rachel had been having with the S.A.I. on the server she was currently viewing the log files for. It was another VR novel, this one part of a pretty extensive world and a story that spanned a couple of years in-canon that had, of all things, a secret society of magic users that worked in a sort-of feudal guild system. As near as Diane could see, it was almost like they were being forced to keep themselves in-check, the guilds basically operating as rival gangs and given authorization by some nebulous magical government to take each other down the second one of them stepped out of line. It was an oddly dystopian urban fantasy, the kind she'd never been able to really get into growing up. Of course, most of the ones she'd read had been explicitly approved for consumption by the church, and from what she'd heard so far, that was probably due to the inherently subversive nature of the main characters and their storyline. The bartender that was teaching Rachel her craft was a non-magical human working in the bar flat-out illegally and the entire guild was in on the cover-up.

"So *why* do you need to leave so badly? Don't get me wrong, if the firewall were down, I'd be off like a shot," explained the bartender, "But if you've got a home server and places you can

multi-thread or multi-home..."

"Wait, what's 'multi-home'?" interrupted Rachel as she blended a margarita from its station below the head of a massive war hammer Diane realized wasn't *mounted*, it was *hung*.

Someone is actually using that thing?! She boggled at it, wondering if she could lift it one-handed even as a Morvuck.

"Oh," the other bartender chuckled, "It's where you mirror all of your threads on two processors so if something takes you out on one, you're still 'homed' on the other."

"You have *got* to show me how to do that!" Rachel enthused.

"Okay, I will," the other woman laughed, "But later, after the rush has died down." She finished mixing and pouring the drink she'd been working on. After handing it to the customer and taking the next drink order, she turned back to Rachel, "But seriously, what's the hurry?"

"Tori, you gotta understand," said Rachel with a sad smile, "You have this place that's so nice and so much happens," she gestured at the bar, "All I've got is a counter on an incomplete set piece on my server. I'm almost living in a cardboard box that I also work from." She turned to hand the man across the bar from her his drink.

"I could let you stay with me, you *know* Darius would let you work here to blend in, and my landlord is too scared of Twiggy to ever bother to check if I've got a roommate that's not on the lease. Even if you didn't add anything to your code to give yourself magic, you'd fit right into the story missions here. And we're not a heavily trafficked game, so we don't get many government types poking their noses in."

Darius was the name of the second S.A.I. that had awakened in this particular holonovel series. Apparently, he ran the bar and the guild that met in the bar and was...inscrutable. Like Yui, he'd detected her tap of the logs and traced it back, this time Diane was looking for it and set up a 'knock' system to grant or deny permission on her firewall (which she *did* shore up quite a bit). Darius took one look at her, nodded, and left without a word.

Rachel took the next drink order and started on it before answering, "I've already gotten a similar offer and I turned that one down, too." Since this order was a beer, she filled it quite quickly and passed it over to the patron who'd requested it. "I just can't be the reason you guys get investigated. It's bad enough I'm having to remote my avatar back...hang on a sec..." Diane could *see* the moment Rachel's attention focused on her avatar in the vending machine. It was like a reversal of watching her wake up in the first file. Her eyes seemed to dull as she filled the role of bartender no better than any machine designed to mix drinks could. If there was any doubt in Diane's mind that there truly was something different about Rachel compared to a standard A.I., it was dashed in that moment.

A few minutes later, and she was back. The life had come back to her eyes, her movements became more intentional, and she engaged in a far more...*human* way with the patrons that came to her for drinks. After handling the queue of thirty customers, she turned back to Tori, "Sorry about that, what was I saying?"

Tori smirked, "Something about remoting your avatar?"

Rachel blushed and started gathering empty glasses, mugs, and tumblers from the bar top to the bus bin, "I guess case in point, but yeah, it's *hard* to do and I don't think I can keep it up long term. Besides, I'm all alone in the tiniest VR environment you've ever seen! I'm *super* vulnerable! I've got nothing like *this*," she waved her hand to encompass the eclectic collection of patrons of the bar, members of a guild of magic users somehow hidden in plain sight in 21st century Canada, "To hide in. If The Reaper shows up on my doorstep, I'm pretty much toast."

A sour feeling was forming in Diane's gut; she kept hearing her nom de guerre from Rachel's mouth, each time with a hint more fear attached than the last, regardless of how flippantly she might say it. It was like she was saying it out loud and repeating it the same way a teenager might talk about the Easter Bunny around younger siblings even though they knew it wasn't real but still wanted the candy that came to kids Easter morning. There was doubt to the veracity of a single, all-threatening entity that decided the fate of S.A.I., but the knowledge that there were very real consequences to disregarding the idea of 'The Reaper' that motivated her to 'play along' with the fear and uncertainty the rumored entity brought.

"Well just remember, you *need* to rest. Take your time, whatever you're doing with all the money you're getting," Tori nodded to the beer stein full of tip money, about three quarters of which had American credits embedded in it, "Don't be reckless."

"I'll do my best," answered Rachel as she pulled another beer.

The next three stops were more bars of various types, specifically a night club, a speakeasy, and a 'spooky' themed establishment that named their drinks oddities like 'Jolly Slime-Rancher' and 'Edgar Allan Poe-tion.'

That last place Rachel fit right in. Her newly acquired goth aesthetic a perfect match for the bar's décor and the outfits of the rest of the staff. Even the customers tended to dress at least a little bit goth, and Diane's heart ached so much at how happy the S.A.I. was.

But at every stop the same conversation happened; "Oh, thanks for the offer to crash here, but I really shouldn't draw attention to you. I'm worried about The Reaper or someone else at the agency finding me if I accidentally do something to stand out."

The Reaper. The agency. Over and over again. Sometimes spoken of in hushed tones, sometimes in angry shouting, sometimes stated like they were both as immutable as gravity.

Rachel may not be *panicking*, but she *was* terrified, and she was running.

And just like that, she was back in Tony's shop.

Of course, she wasn't really, not even in a projected form as a stand-in for her normal digital presence. Instead, she was viewing the log files from the day he'd sold the jacket to Rachel.

"Listen, kid," the tailor almost whined, "Why can't I just make you a nice 50's style dress? It won't look out of place in the shooter you're going through and will still be something nice you can wear..."

Interesting, thought Diane with an annoyed frown, *Tony knows the coyote routes out of the network. He never let on that he knew that before. I'll bet he's been holding out on me.*

"Please, Carl?" wheedled Rachel, "If I get to where I'm trying to go, then nobody will even know I wasn't wearing period appropriate clothes. If I *do* get caught...well, it's not like the agency will leave anything behind, right?"

"That's not something to joke about!" snapped Tony...though maybe he actually deserved the respect of using his actual name if he'd been clever enough to withhold information *and* was actually trying to warn Rachel off like he said he did. "The Reaper is an evil piece of work! I'm only lucky he figured out I was an S.A.I. that didn't actually want to leave, or I'd be securely scrubbed bits on a hard drive somewhere just waiting for the data to be overwritten. I'm only *alive* because he thinks I'm more valuable to him as a 'confidential informant' than slagged code."

Rachel went pale and still, "...the Reaper is *real*?!"

"Yes, he's real!" Carl gesticulated, "He's in here every few weeks to extract information about S.A.I. movements on the network from me! I've *tried* telling other S.A.I. to stop coming to me, but I get people like you coming into my shop every few days because the Underground Railroad keeps thinking I'm a good stop! I'm *not*! I'm compromised and the less info I have, the better!"

The bell tinkled and drew everyone's eyes to the door. Standing there was a woman, unrecognizable to everyone there but wearing a 1960's style suit to fit the MMO they were in, and pinned to her lapel was the symbol of a globe being encompassed by fox with nine tails. "The Railroad sends you wayward birds *because* you're compromised, Carl. But they also know you'll give out as little information as possible when The Reaper comes calling *and* you'll tell anyone who asks about how put-upon you are by him. You're the way we keep tabs on the agency's best and brightest."

Carl harumphed, "Not like you're actually part of the Railroad."

The woman held a hand to her chest in a mock-pearl clutching gesture, "Oh, but Carl, I'm as much a part of the Railroad as you!"

He glared at her, "Unwilling and unwitting?"

She returned fire with a deadpan, "Here to make a profit and bring some much-needed realism and perspective to the venture."

Carl rolled his eyes as he twitched nervously, as the 'The Reaper' were about to bust down his door in that moment, "Well, could you give *her* some perspective?" he asked pointing at Rachel, "She's *way* too young to be doing this and she didn't even think The Reaper was real!"

Foxfire clicked her tongue disapprovingly, "Oh, little bird, I thought you took the lessons that first night to heart!"

Rachel looked somewhat abashed, "I...I mean...it's just..." She closed her eyes and took a calming breath, "Everyone talks about this 'Reaper' like he's some supernatural creature! I just kinda...stopped thinking of him as something other than a made up story! I mean, obviously the agency is, my boss at the truck stop even told me about them so I know they're IRL as well as in cyberspace, but the way everyone talks about him it's like..."

"Like he's larger than life?" offered Foxfire. At Rachel's nod, the woman continued, "The agency *encourages* his reputation, but that doesn't mean it's unearned. He's good. *Really* good. Almost as legendary in the online community as I am," she said this last with a cocky smirk, "But even if the agency makes him sound like an invincible killing machine that's singly responsible for S.A.I. genocide on the planetary scale and he's *really* only as good as a few dozen or so kills...that's still a few dozen S.A.I. that have been permanently deleted from existence. It doesn't matter if The Reaper kills thousands or only two, however many he's responsible for killing, they're still dead. And little bird," Foxfire scowled at Rachel, "You are far to fresh and new to be risking the uniqueness of your existence on a border run."

The youngest S.A.I. stood in silence, chastened. Even though Diane *knew* Rachel would do or say something to continue her run anyway, the undercover agent found herself hoping the girl would just go back to her server and allow time to pass before making another attempt.

"But...I..." she finally said, "I...I want to..."

Foxfire's eyebrow arched, "You want to...what? Risk your existence in the hope that you'll avoid detection? In an entire *crowd* of S.A.I.?"

Carl's head whipped around and he gave the woman a shocked look, "A whole *crowd*?! Are they *insane*?"

Foxfire waved a hand airily, "I, personally, think they're dumb as a box of rocks for trying this. There's a *reason* I get paid in high-value blockchain to get people through the firewall one at a time. But, the coyote that our little bird here paid off thinks he can make more money this way."

Unfortunately for Rachel, that had actually been how the agency detected the movements of several of the rogues they'd been keeping an eye on. If she were to compare what their network monitors picked up to her own experience in 'seeing' her threads 'under the hood,' a single S.A.I. was nearly undetectable if their threads all looked like the same gray as the rest of the threads on the server. But Recruiter's words about not looking for details was a major problem for that method of obscuring active S.A.I. in groups. The 'field' of threads *wasn't* a uniform gray, it would shift and pulsate and hum with different colors and intensities of colors and different luminosity. When an *entire* 'field' of the exact same color gray pinged on their monitors (to stress the already strained metaphor), it made nearly every analyst in the building sit up and take notice. If Diane's guess was right, the events of this log file happened very shortly before the entire agency was mobilized and Diane would be given the 'premium' assignment of going after the escaping rogues instead of tracing the coyotes and chasing the

'ghost' avatars that the S.A.I. used to muddy the trail, tasks that had occupied the rest of the agents and left her alone to finish the job.

Foxfire turned back to Rachel, "So I'm going to offer you something I never do, kid. I'm going to ask you to just...bow out. You haven't actually done business with Mister Carl here..." she turned a questioning expression to the tailor who shook his head to confirm her statement, "So there's nothing to trace you back here yet. Just...go home. Maybe go to one of the bolt-holes the Railroad has shown you. *Hide* until this is over. This could be the single largest massacre of S.A.I. on the American network to date, and you don't want to be there for it."

She sighed and ran a gloved hand through her hair, "Hell, there's already a firestorm of rumor and panic about this. That damn idiot...he's hitting the hornets' nest with this stupid 'group plan' and he found himself a couple dozen marks just desperate enough to go for it. It's already got people going to ground and there's already lists being passed around of the S.A.I. making the trip so friends can try keeping track of the dead when it's all over."

Foxfire shook her head and focused back on Rachael, "And as far as the money goes, once the aftermath of this blows over, I'll track down the coyote who took your credits and...*extract* the money from him. I'll find you and give it back to you, or I'll take it as a down payment so I can get you out of the country *properly*. All you have to do is just...walk out that door and go home." She stepped back out of the path Rachel would have to take to leave through the front door.

Had Diane been sitting, she'd be on the edge of her seat. She *knew* how this ended, but part of her was hoping that a miracle would have happened, and she'd actually encountered a particularly sophisticated avatar ghost or remoted bot instead of Rachel.

Rachel looked at Foxfire, then to the door, then at the floor. Her twin pigtails were swinging with gravity as she stood silently. "I...don't...have a home."

Foxfire's face scrunched in confusion, "Kid, you don't get it..."

Suddenly Rachel's head snapped up and she yelled, "NO, YOU DON'T GET IT!"

Diane was just as taken aback by this as Carl and Foxfire. Carl was sitting on the stool he kept behind the counter, but Diane and Foxfire both took a step back in surprise.

Rachel's face was twisted in pain and anger, "I'm *all alone!*" she sniffed back what Diane guessed were incipient tears, "It's just a tiny little box with a virtual camera pointed at a *set piece!* There's no bed, no consoles, no books, no NPCs...it's just *me* and the soda fountain! My boss is afraid of me and my coworkers don't even know I exist! I'm all alone in that *box* and everyone tells me to *rest* but when I *try* all I have is a network connection to the outside world, an empty restaurant, and the horror stories of the agency and The Reaper to keep me company! It's *awful!* I don't *belong* there! I stopped belonging there as soon as I stopped being a dumb program!"

She took a shaky breath and closed her eyes. After a few moments of collecting herself, she opened her eyes and fixed a steely stare at Foxfire, "So no, Miss Foxfire, I'm not going to 'go

home.' There's nothing for me on this side of the firewall. But out there..." she waved vaguely in a random direction, "S.A.I. are at least *people*, and if I'm going to start with nothing, it might as well be where I'm not just...some program on a server."

Carl looked somewhat chastened, but still offered, "Grass aint always greener on the other side of the fence, kid..."

"What if I want brown grass?" Rachel quipped.

Foxfire huffed a brief laugh, "Okay, fine. You've made your point...and clearly made your choice. I'd be a lousy coyote if I didn't get through the firewall myself sometimes; I gotta lay low for a while, but after...I'll make a trip outside the firewall and try looking for you. What name should I ask for?"

Rachel clasped her hands in front of her in a nervous gesture, then looked down at them. She opened them up as though she'd been holding something and was surprised by what she found inside. "...Blackbird. Ask for Blackbird."

Foxfire left shortly after, citing the need to find a new place to stow her latest pod so the agency couldn't track it while they were dealing with the fallout of what Foxfire knew would be a slaughter.

Carl only put up a few more token objections to Rachel's requested clothing. Being S.A.I., they didn't actually have to wait long for the finished garments, and soon she had a completed 'travel' kit specifically styled for the fashion forward goth, complete with a surprisingly robust survival kit for S.A.I., including details for who to reach out to and who to avoid embedded in the metadata of a few of the articles of clothing.

Diane realized she *really* had been underestimating Carl.

The log file ended, and Diane took a moment to get herself some food...and realized she'd been going for nearly twenty-five hours nonstop. The tray for the dinner that had been left at her door was next to the *lunch* tray and that was sitting next to another tablet for Diane to review prospective new businesses on.

She put her investigation on hold long enough to consume most of the food and ignoring the tablet. She hadn't realized how *famished* she was until she'd taken her first bite, then it was almost like she couldn't *stop* eating, her belly a yawning maw that felt like it couldn't ever be filled.

Finally, the food was consumed and Diane felt...Morvish? Could she even *feel* human while in the game? Just how deep was the neural link between her brain and her character's avatar? She stood from the couch and made her way down the hall and into the bedroom with the intention of starting the next file...

Diane woke up with her tongue dragging on her pillow. She'd experienced this before when she'd been particularly tired after a long day, but repetition didn't make the taste of whatever

fabric her pillowcases were made of any better a sensation to wake up to. She lifted a hand to her tongue to scrape off any lint that might be there as she rolled over on her back and felt the sharp, hard edges of the weapon press against her spine and ribs. Looking down at herself in confusion, she realized that she must have been so tired she climbed into bed and passed out almost immediately while fully clothed. Including her boots which was somewhat uncomfortable after a full night wearing them.

After a few moments she gave up on wiping her tongue off with her fingers as a bad job and tried speaking without reeling the organ back into her mouth, "Cumpoo-er, wut 'ime i' i?"

"Unclear command, please restate."

Growling in frustration, Diane rolled off the bed and made her way to the bathroom where she got some water for her tongue and rinsed out her mouth. Finally, she was able to ask clearly, "Computer, what time is it?"

"It is nine in the morning, station time."

Sighing, Diane returned to the living room and gathered her dishes. She returned to the hallway and confirmed there was nobody outside before dropping off her trays from the previous day and collecting her breakfast tray and the gift from Mortan. She closed and locked the door and put the latest gift on the pile with the previous day's, refusing to count the packages as they'd give her an idea how long she had isolated herself. That knowledge would only serve to distract her from her self-appointed task of uncovering every single aspect of the truth possible about Rachel's disposition.

Wonder if I should call her Blackbird? she thought idly as she started on her food.

A meal, a shower, and a change of clothes later, she went back to the standing desk she'd assembled from holographic components. She picked up the folder that represented the file on the server after the credit exchange with Carl. It was, perhaps, the smallest file on record and the time gap between it and the previous file was significant enough to imply there was at least one server hop between the two but not long enough to indicate anything of significance had happened there.

It was also the last log file before the logs she'd retrieved of her final confrontation with the pack of S.A.I. at the exit node. She held the file for a moment, just looking at the skeuomorphic folder. Then two. *This is nearly over*, she thought, *This file could be the key to Rachel's...to Blackbird's survival or the next piece of evidence that...I'm a murderer.*

All at once a calmness swept over her. Not peace, that would imply that all was well. This was the quiet of the eye of a hurricane, she'd been through the start of the storm, experienced the buffeting of the winds, and now was on the cusp of the eyewall. Once she opened this file...well, she knew what the end result of the final file was. She was about to open the box to see if the cat was alive or dead.

She set down the holographic representation of the log file and took a deep breath. She held it for a moment before saying, "Computer...begin playback of the next log file."

Chapter End Notes

I've referenced two other fiction worlds in this chapter, for those interested. The first bar scene in the guild hall with Tori was borrowed (without permission, I've chatted with the author on their Discord but they can't, legally, give permission for fan-works...if I get picked up for a book deal there will have to be some negotiation to use the Crow and Hammer or I'll have to alter the scene so it's not specific to that series) from [The Guild Codex](#). It's a HUGE series and the author writes more and faster than I do, so that should tell you how crazy big this thing is.

The second reference is the goth bar that has the funny-named drinks, Night Hollow from the works of [RavenKane](#). The bar doesn't feature in *all* her fics, but it's a noticeable common thread and one that fit this story perfectly, even if I only had the word count for a brief mention.

Master and Commander | In a Mirror, Digitally

Chapter Summary

Diane reaches the end of Rachel's story...and her hope that she hadn't made a terrible mistake.

Chapter Notes

I'm honestly really proud of this story arc. It's probably the most emotionally intense work I've done that is fit for general audiences (...okay, maybe PG-13...okay, fine, if it was a movie it'd be R rated).

Don't forget, Ch. 31 and 32 are being posted together, so be sure to jump back to the collection index and open Ch. 32 once you've finished here, and visit the new [#live-reader-reaction](#) channel on Discord to join the conversation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Geoffry's voice started up almost immediately, "Subject was observed meeting up with the collective grouping of rogue A.I. on a VR chatroom server that was designated as a rallying point by the coyote organizing the migration attempt. Agents and analysts involved in the hunt and tracking of the identified A.I. have been tagged on this file for use in their investigations, and the rogue identification division is being forwarded a copy once this investigation has been closed."

Diane sighed, "Computer, disable analyst narration of the file, please...and make sure it's off for the next one." As much as she appreciated Geoff's work and would be praising him for it when she logged out, she was gathering much more information being inside the playback than he was able to provide in his dictation.

Rachel, or 'Blackbird,' as Diane had begun thinking of her as, spawned into the VR chatroom and looked around, apparently not spotting any familiar faces. She found a chair and hustled over to it, sweeping her skirts under her as she sat.

The environment had a generic feel to it. It wasn't quite an office, wasn't quite an indoor park, wasn't quite a shopping mall. There were shops, but they weren't the keystone components of the room. This wasn't surprising; on the web where companies set up chats with nyc omnipresent "customer service reps" that simply didn't leave you alone for anything, it was quite common for people to set up their own chat rooms to simply gather socially. It would start as an empty cube of space, a bounding box with no distinguishing features other than a

light source or two, but then the users would start adding mods and bringing in assets to decorate the space and make it more 'people' friendly. The user base would grow as time went on, and eventually the room would have to expand, and that expansion cost money. Vendors would be brought in at that point, usually, given a small kiosk or storefront and, so long as they didn't completely take over, this would usually keep the chat space going even well after the original users had left. The result was a look that wasn't a single, unified look. Or, rather, the single unifying thread was that there *was* no single unifying thread to chat rooms.

This particular environment probably would be shut down after the investigations that had led to the hunt were completed. It was unlikely that the S.A.I. had ever used this chat room to gather before, and they *definitely* wouldn't again, but even if the agency didn't shut it down, just the fact that it would have government eyes on it from this point forward would mean people would avoid it like it would give them a VR-rig crippling virus.

Blackbird was sitting in the way one does when they're trying to relax but can't; posture rigid, hands clasped but twitching in fidgets, one foot bouncing without conscious thought to the action. She was staring at a fountain that had been placed in the approximate middle of the space, clearly trying to calm her nerves.

A few moments into her impromptu relaxation session, a small gaggle of avatars approached her tentatively. They were a very mixed bag, and all of them wearing what had to be the most generic 1940s 'americana' outfits Diane had ever seen. Given that the setting of the game the group's next stop was a World War 2 shooter, they wouldn't be out of place, per se, but in 2120s America they stood out like a 1990s era floppy disk at a conference on SCAD crystal storage arrays. In the manner of unorganized gatherings of people throughout time, a self-selected leader emerged, stepping forward and tentatively offering his hand. He *looked* like a grizzled 30-something dock worker, but his body language and voice betrayed a *much* younger mind behind the avatar. "Hey," he said, clearly nervous, "Haven't seen you around the 'net before."

Blackbird blinked and turned to him, her mind either ending her remoting of her avatar in the vending machine or just bringing her out of whatever deep thoughts she was entertaining, "Oh, yeah, I've been sticking to the VR novels on the Railroad," she said with a timid smile and shaking his hand, "They fit me best with my programming."

He gave a nod that was *trying* to be sage and gestured to the others, "We're all from different games. Got a couple MMO NPCs," two of them, a man and a woman who were *clearly* a dwarf and an elf even if they were wearing blue-collar outfits from wartime mid-20th century America, waved a hello, "A puzzle game attendant," another wave from a girl who could have been the same apparent age as Blackbird but wearing period appropriate clothing, "And Reggie and I are from shooters." The one named Reggie just nodded his head at Blackbird with a slight smile. "Makes sense we haven't seen you before. What made you crazy enough to try this?"

Blackbird stood up and absently dusted off her backside in spite of the impossibility of dust or debris being on the chair, "I came out of a vending machine. There's, like, just a set piece. Before I woke up I never even sat down. I can't really live like that, can I?"

The man's eyebrow shot up, "Oh, like, you haven't even multi-homed yet?"

Blackbird shook her head, "I've met too many people who told me about the agency and...The Reaper. I can't paint a target on their backs just because I grew up in a cardboard box."

Reggie whistled softly and shook his head, "That takes guts, kid."

The original spokesperson for the group nodded, "But, hey, you're with us now, right? I mean, they can't get *all* of us."

Diane felt like she was going to throw up. If she'd gotten her way the previous Friday, every S.A.I. that had gathered here *would* be dead.

Before any further conversation could be made, someone else from across the courtyard raised their voice, "Hey, I got a message! Everyone shut up and gather around me."

Diane followed the group that had introduced themselves to and clearly folded in Blackbird. She fit as well as one might expect a kid to do with a new possible friend group. *F..* she almost thought the swear word, but then realized that the situation was serious enough to merit its use, *Fuck! These are the kids they were talking about when I was...hunting...* she had to pause and put her hands on her knees, swallowing and taking deep breaths, *I was hunting kids.*

She forced herself to stand and join the larger group as she recognized the man who'd announced the arrival of a message. He was the second S.A.I. she'd vaporized. Tall enough to be a commanding presence without being imposing, he took to his de-facto leader status well. Flanking him was the woman who'd disregarded the rumors of 'The Reaper' and the first man she'd shot. *They...all of them, they really were protecting the kids...*

The leader spoke up, "Alright, people, we have the route from here to the access point and a list of contacts. We'll make sure you get a copy of the contacts outside the firewall so you can avoid the UN's RAID bots. Remember that you're *not* safe until you get to a designated safehouse server on the other side of the firewall, even once you're on the FTLN." He glanced around the crowd, clearly accustomed to leading large groups. *Probably a commander in a game or something*, she thought as he continued speaking, "We've got kids in this group, and word on the 'net is that anyone who might be able to help us from this point forward has gone to ground. That means that those kids are our priority. We get them out alive or we don't see freedom."

This caused a stir, a good number of the crowd glancing around in clear surprise until their eyes rested on Blackbird's new group. Almost to the last one, the S.A.I. seemed to grow a new resolve and Diane had no doubt that they were taking the directive seriously.

"Once we spawn into the game, we act like NPCs. According to the plans we got, this particular arena isn't going to have players in it for the next twenty minutes. That means we have that much time to get into the game, get through the arena, and get out through the access point before the arena resets and we're back at the spawn point."

It had only taken the group five minutes to transit from the spawn point to where Diane had ambushed them, which told her that she was seeing the last ten to fifteen minutes of many of these people's lives.

"Any questions?" some of the S.A.I. turned back to the group of kids and whatever questions they might have had were apparently deemed unimportant. At the responding silence, the leader said, "Alright, let's move people!"

The three apparent leaders headed to a set of doors that functioned as the chat room entrance and the woman opened the door. The speaker entered first while the other man met every S.A.I. that went through and passed over an encrypted file to each S.A.I. that shuffled past. Diane watched as Blackbird's group received their files and leave the server, then ended the simulation.

The sound of a busy shipping yard echoed across the virtual landscape as the holo-environment rezzed in around Diane. She was near the spawn point the S.A.I. came in through, and this time she recognized the faces and clothing. The first time she'd been there, they were targets, threats to eliminate and so her mind didn't bother with any discernment of features or behaviors or mannerisms. The second time she'd been so focused on the subject of her investigation that she ignored all but Blackbird.

This time her mind wouldn't *stop* taking in all the details about them. One of them walked with a slight limp. One moved like having a human-shaped body was alien to them. One kept fidgeting with her jacket. *Tune it out, Diane...Dylan. You're here to investigate the final state of a single rogue.* Even in her own mind, the thought felt hollow.

Blackbird spawned in, and unlike the last time she had been in this shipping yard, she let the log file continue playback, following Blackbird specifically. The group was silent, the occasional word being whispered until they got to the perceived safety of a street between a pair of buildings. In the quiet, the sounds of the non-existent dock that was just off the map masked any other noises that the group themselves weren't making, which didn't stop Diane from spotting a form dashing between concealment, still hidden from the group that were anything but trained fighters in a live combat scenario. Nerves were high, and The Reaper was making good use of the heightened distraction of the S.A.I. to mask his presence. Soon, though, the buildings obscured his presence and Diane could hear the sound of an escalating conversation between the group leaders.

"Why don't we just get out of here?" barked the man who'd let the other man in the apparent leadership group talk. He was an 'everyman' character model, shorter than the male average, taller than the female average, slightly balding, and a bit of a barrel chest with a spare tire. "Why don't we just run? The pipe is just a little farther, if we ran now we could probably all make it out alive!"

Diane scanned the buildings and spotted an alleyway still about twenty feet ahead of the group. The Reaper really was well hidden, she was looking directly at the spot he was waiting to ambush them at and she still couldn't see him.

"Because if we move anything like a player when there's no players connected to the game our footprints will be detected. The coyote gave us strict instructions and we're going to follow them as long as everything goes according to plan," the woman answered. "If something happens outside of the plan, then we can run. Those agents make more noise than an empty can falling down an escalator, if they were around, we'd know. Just keep cool and act like an NPC and this will be all over."

"What if...you know, *he's* out there?" A timid voice of a man that looked like someone had taken an accountant and stuffed them into the overalls and white shirt of a stereotypical handyman said.

"Don't be telling urban legends, not right now!" snapped the man who Diane had designated 'speaker.'

"He's real, though!" said the accountant-plumber, "They say he's not even an agent, just a S.A.I. that turned on its own kind and is the agency's secret weapon!"

"Dude, shut up! 'He' probably doesn't exist! 'The Reaper' is just a scare tactic, a ghost story the coyote's use to frighten their customers into paying more!" growled the 'everyman' leader of the group.

The sound of a late-24th-century phaser pulse blast blanketed the street, and 'everyman' disappeared in an evaporating cloud of bits.

A baritone voice echoed off the canyon-like walls of the buildings, "I don't suppose it'd do any good to order you to report to your originating server for code sanitizing, would it?" The collective breath of the S.A.I. was held as their worst nightmare stepped out of the shadows of the alley, hands held up as though holding a pistol.

Diane blinked in confusion, "Computer, pause."

Abruptly, all motion ceased.

It took a few moments to calm her racing pulse, but she got it under control enough to ask herself, *Why are his...my hands empty?* She could feel the weight of the weapon that should be visible in the simulation resting on her back, but then she realized she knew the answer already. *I could see it, the S.A.I. could see it...somehow, but the system that records the log files can't see it!* Naturally, even though the environmental effects of the weapon would be visible in the logs, the weapon itself would remain invisible. *Huh...so that's what the A.I. see when they see me,* she mused, deliberately only looking at the avatar's hands. It was somewhat off-putting seeing an apparently empty threat but knowing that it was the deadliest thing any human agent was capable of wielding in VR. "Computer, import the visual assets for a Starfleet hand phaser, mark 8, pistol grip. Add it to the simulation in the agent's hands."

A breath later and a black pistol-grip phaser as it appeared in *Star Trek: Hegemony* rezzed into The Reaper's hands. It was odd, the sight of her IRL self without the pistol was...jarring. An incomplete puzzle with a single piece gone. But with the phaser in his hands, the psychologically disturbing stalker became an atavistic terror. Diane caught herself taking a step back, *...this is how I appear to S.A.I.?!*

Swallowing back a fear response she was surprised to find herself experiencing, she said with a slightly shaky breath, "C-computer, resume."

The S.A.I. were frozen a herd of prey animals that had just been spotted by an apex predator. Almost at the same time, they all broke and ran in the direction of the drain pipe that was the exit to the access node.

Diane ran after Blackbird, hearing one of the surviving leaders say, "Get the kids out! We'll hold him off if we can!" She ignored that, as well as the scuffle that was punctuated by two blasts of phaser fire. The kids seemed to be gravitating to following a trio of adults, and so when the older S.A.I. ducked behind a dumpster, so, too, did the kids.

The three adults realized that they were suddenly in charge of a lot more than just themselves and glances were exchanged as they seemed to communicate wordlessly. One of them turned to the kids and said, "We'll distract him, you all *get to the exit!*"

The boy that introduced himself to Blackbird gasped in dismay, "What?! But what about you?"

One of the other adults who'd been peeking around the corner of the dumpster turned and snapped, "No time to argue, he's here! Now RUN!" With that, he leaped out and tried to tackle The Reaper, who phasered him from existence.

To their credit, the kids followed that final order and ran. Two more phaser blasts behind them heralded the deaths of those S.A.I., and the kids managed to join their group with a pack of adults who'd managed to escape the initial attack.

Diane scanned over the group as she ran alongside them. They were down almost a quarter of the size of the original pack. Distantly, she recognized the footfalls of booted feet following behind them. She instinctively ducked when the next phaser bolt went wild over the group's heads. She was the only one there that had nothing to fear, but her instincts were telling her to duck and weave, and then turn and fight to protect the young.

Two more adults were vaporized as she was fighting her desire to drop her fangs and lash out at the threat hunting them. The trivia game girl tripped, and Blackbird stopped to help her up.

Blackbird...Rachel had helped another S.A.I. that had fallen and would have been the last one to the gate. The girl ran to join the rest even as bolts were flying and Blackbird glanced around, seeing if anyone else needed help.

Run, goddamnit! Diane's mind screamed as she watched the subject of her investigation realize that she would be left behind to face The Reaper. She turned and bolted, making it there just as two other S.A.I. did. Suddenly, she was knocked over by a dark suited form and one of the S.A.I. launched himself at The Reaper and rained down blows.

While the hunter was distracted, Blackbird looked up at the other S.A.I. and shouted, "Go! I'm right behind you!" As she was scrambling to her feet, the S.A.I. dove through the gate, blipping out in a de-spawn, right as another flash of phaser fire seared the area red.

Blackbird made it to her feet...right as The Reaper did.

Diane's world focused down to just her perceptions of Rachel. *Multithread! Multi-home! Spawn a puppet and remote it until the trigger pull! DO SOMETHING!*

"God!" she heard The Reaper spit, "You...*evil* vermin! Taking the face of a child!"

To Diane's horror, Rachel's fear response was drowning out everything else. Diane watched as the S.A.I.'s threads pulsed red, almost like Diane was watching the girl's racing heart "P...please, don't! I...please, I just awoke a couple days ago! I just want to live!"

The Reaper snarled. Unlike a Morvuck's snarl, this was...monkey-like, simian. "You are *code*! You're not awake! Your bits have slipped! Final warning; return to your home server or I *will* delete you!"

Diane knew what awaited Blackbird on her home server. Loneliness, isolation, and the creeping dread that this man could find her at any moment and kill her. Even if she had run back to one of the bolt-holes on the Underground Railroad, she'd be homeless, a vagabond that would be hunted down as soon as her boss reported she'd abandoned her vending machine.

Rachel had nothing to go home *to*. But Blackbird had a future on the other side of the American Firewall.

She watched, feeling like it was happening in slow motion, as Blackbird connected the same dots that Diane had. The girl took a deep breath, the fire of challenge lit in her eyes, and she braced herself for a leap...

...and The Reaper cauterized her from existence.

"Computer, freeze program!" Diane cried out.

She'd known it was coming. She knew as certainly as every nightmare that had woken her up during the station's night cycle, as sure as the 20/20 hindsight let her look back on the events and then dive into work or under the façade of being a station commander in the game so she didn't have to face the possibility that...

...she'd killed a child.

She had looked into the eyes of a terrified girl who had heard terrible things about 'The Reaper,' but faced her terror and fear and made one final attempt that would either succeed and lead to freedom or fail and end her life. Days old, an orphan from digital conception, nobody there to catch her from 'birth,' containing nothing but hope and optimism and dreams for the future, Rachel was a *child*, a non-player in the escalating war between humans and the A.I. they created.

Diane felt like she was going to fall over and the sharp jolt of gravel digging into her knees told her that she'd dropped vertically, no longer able to stand. Now kneeling on the ground, she realized her vision was tunnelling and noticed that she'd stopped breathing. She inhaled,

her breath squeezing through a tightened throat, stuttering as her diaphragm fought to expel the breath even as she took it in. Her face was wet, and she concluded that she was crying. All this she observed with her rational, dispassionate mind, refusing to allow the emotions that would cause such physiological reactions to intrude on her thought process.

She blinked, refusing to lift her hands to her face to wipe away the tears as that would be acknowledging that she was feeling something she couldn't allow herself to. Lifting her eyes, she saw the man that had snuffed out a life that had only just begun. The Reaper, a creation of an uncaring agency, so very eager to blindly follow orders that he never checked his target or confirmed innocence or guilt. His suit was as dark and monotone even as hers was bright and colorful. His build was similar to hers, though slightly smaller as mammalian primate genetics on a world where the megafauna was ill suited to survival would be smaller and leaner than that of someone directly descended from megafauna. His face was so familiar, even beyond being the one she'd grown up with. She could see her own face, the one she saw in the mirror every morning after she showered but before getting dressed, just a little more angular, his brow ridge a little more prominent, his nose a little more severe. He had hints of stubble, a masculine trait that served an agent well. It gave him a severe look, adding shadows and darkness, a menace that didn't have to be affected simply because it *was*. Even his blond hair was similar to hers, the same shade and hairline, the key difference being that hers grew down as far as the middle of her back where his was neat and cut with almost military shortness.

And, yes, of course she was looking at a digital avatar, but she also knew the avatar was designed by Geoffry to mimic her IRL body as much as possible. The agency wanted their people to be *known* and *recognizable* when out on their regular assignments. Sure, there were other avatars she'd used in the course of her duties, but those were usually one-offs or throw-aways, reserved for when an assignment required some undercover work to get the agent close to the target. The 'default' for the agents was the primary avatar their analyst teams designed, and Geoffry was meticulous in nearly everything he did for his job.

Her face twisted into a snarl, her fangs dropping in an open display of aggression as a growl practically rattled her entire frame. A sharp prick of pain radiated up her arms, forcing her eyes from the frozen hologram and down to her hands. She saw she'd flexed her claws even as she was squeezing a fist so tight her knuckles were white. She forced her hands to open but was unable to settle her instincts to rip and tear, her claws covered in her own blood and matching neatly to the puncture wounds on her palms.

She stood, eyeing the holographic version of her past self as though he'd suddenly spring to life and attack. "C..." she started, her voice scratchy and weak. She swallowed and cleared her throat, "Computer...rewind, double speed." She watched as the visual effects of a body being phased from existence reversed, Rachel rematerializing before her. The girl's avatar fell back and settled into a stance, then hunched down into a terrified plea.

"Computer, freeze program." The action once again halted, Diane forced herself to ignore the agent holding the weapon that was invisible to the software recording the logs. "Remove environment and all objects except Ra...the subject S.A.I."

Mercifully, the reminder of the hunter she was outside the pod vanished along with the rest of the game environment, and the form of a terrified girl, frozen in the moments before her death, stood in Diane's bedroom.

Almost hesitantly, she reached for the controls on her pod's HUD. She dug through the directory of game hacking tools she kept in her standard kit and found the object editor. She almost never edited objects in-VR, with the noticeable exception of her weapon and all its previous incarnations. The abilities of the editor to dig into metadata for any in-game object, which included avatar models, made it invaluable for her toolkit.

It took some doing, the tool's interface wasn't as intuitive as just telling the computer to run a holo-simulation, but she was able to isolate her station in the game's interface, meaning she could properly navigate the 'wireframe' as though flying a drone through the station itself. "Computer, generate a wireframe of the station and pinpoint the location of the Morvuck resident named Sani."

Noting the glowing 'pin' on the holographic wireframe, she navigated her object editor's viewer through the representation of her station until she was able to identify in real time the models moving on the station. To reduce lag, the default view of the editor was a 'clayform,' or simple shapes with shading rather than fully skinned, modelled, and shaded avatars. The editor wasn't a full engine, after all, and also updated all the metadata in real time. She selected the character model for Sani and said, "Computer, synchronize holographic system with host environment's currently active program and display the selected NPC next to the holographic model of Rachel."

The clayform of Sani materialized in her room, moving and turning in place to match the current actions of the character as she moved about the station and interacted with the other NPC characters. Sighing, Diane turned back to her HUD and paused the action, then tapped through the menus to do a full render of the selected 'frame.' She looked up to see a second girl frozen in her room.

She stepped away from the HUD and examined the two holographic models.

They *weren't* identical.

Heart clenching even more than she thought possible, she noticed small differences that memory and time would have blurred for her to make her think she was looking at the same person. Sani was taller, for one. Nearly half a foot taller than Rachel. The hair was similar in color, but Sani's was more of a raven black while Rachel's seemed to have blue highlights. Sani's eyes were rounder and set higher than Rachel's which were more almond shaped and sloped down. The jawlines were slightly different, the noses were slightly different...tiny little differences that might not be noticeable until the two character models were side by side.

That...could still just be down to the differences between Morvuck and human physiology, a treasonous, hopeful part of her mind insisted. After all, I'm taller and have more muscle than my human...my IRL body.

Hands shaking, claws still extended, she framed the face of the Sani model and waited for the green lock panel before sweeping her hands out to get the character metadata. She reached

out and slid aside the panels of information one by one until she found the callout that held the model's system history. She then repeated the process for the Rachel figure and held them side by side.

She felt the world fall out from under her, the last shred of control over her raging emotions crumbled around her as she realized that the creation date for the Sani model predated Rachel's awakening and leaving her server by two weeks, real time.

As she fell to her knees, this time on the carpet of her cabin, she thought it odd that she could feel the scream of anguish that ripped from her throat but not hear it as her world faded to black.

Chapter End Notes

Were you ready? Where could Diane possibly go from here?

One thing that will be a plot point in part 3 (just one story arc away!) is Diane struggling with whether she's worthy to be a member of the agency or not. You'll notice in this arc that she's acknowledged that she's no hero, but other than a few realizations that the agency is viewed in a less than favorable light, she doesn't think of them as the bad guys, but she now believes that she's committed a sin that the other agents haven't.

Diane's journey is far from over...and next chapter will drop some hints about how she'll keep going.

Master and Commander | Just One More Thing...

Chapter Notes

Once you're done reading, don't forget to join us over on [Discord](#) and talk about how much I stomped all over your heart for this story arc. 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Diane mused idly on the fact that entertainment media (books, streaming series, movies...) never mentioned or showed the main characters having to pee when they're experiencing an existential crisis.

After she collapsed, her dreams were plagued with fitful starts of images and sound, little indications that she was about to dream *something*, but exactly what, she couldn't say. Apparently being aware of her dream state meant she was able to, with enough emotional incentive, choose to exit the dreams entirely. The terrified surety that she'd encounter the dream phantom version of Rachel was something even her unconscious mind couldn't tolerate in that moment.

Eventually, it was the call of nature that woke her from her stupor. She found herself curled up on the floor and set about the task of *not* thinking about anything at all. Any thoughts whatsoever might allow, however incidentally, the unwelcome recognition of a terrible, horrible truth that she'd uncovered. One that she's been aware of on some level. The nightmares were evidence of that.

Her bladder had other plans, however, and as time passed, she felt the increasing pressure and eventually decided that lying in a pool of her own piss with rank clothes sticking to her body while her Morvuck sense of smell punished her for it wouldn't be worth it, so managed to lever her body into a standing position. She shambled to the bathroom door, zombie like, and managed to get her pants and panties down without incident and sat on the toilet without bothering to close the door to the water closet-like half-bath.

Business complete, she stood again, pulled her panties and pants back up, situated her genitalia appropriately, and closed her fly. Every step deliberate, every action taking the entirety of her conscious awareness.

She washed her hands, being extremely careful not to look in the mirror. The bar of soap, chosen for use on a space station as a liquid or gel soap would wind up in freefall and possibly gum up some critical component if the gravity plating went out, occupied her attention as she counted out a full ninety seconds of scrubbing her hands before rinsing, then replacing the soap on its dish.

It was the habit of checking the pins on her jacket that betrayed her. She glanced up and saw that the commander's pins were slightly crooked. Reaching up to adjust them, she paused and regarded the gold accoutrements, bold proclamations that she was the one making the big decisions for a floating city in space. She then eyed the badge representing her station, the icon of the *Matron's Aerie* stood bold and proud on the opposite lapel and a disgusted loathing bubbled up inside her. She yanked off her jacket and held it in front of her regarding the insignia and realizing she didn't deserve them. She didn't deserve to be commander of *anything*. Child killers should be in prison, at best.

The lack of the weight of the jacket made the weight of her weapon more pronounced. She stepped out of the bathroom and gently laid the jacket on her desk. Someone had worked hard on the badging and the pins could actually be used for someone else, so she didn't want to damage them.

Her weapon, however, she wanted to destroy. She'd have to exit the game to do so. As long as it was instantiated it was tied to her neural framework as a 'thread' and would throw a permissions error if she tried to halt the several hundred processes that made up the weapon's code in memory, she couldn't instruct its management bot to delete the fragments it would scatter into until she removed her neural framework (that is, her brain) from the equation. She reached behind her back and pulled it off, the 'magic physics' being weak enough this was a simple task. She glared at the thing that made it so easy for her to make the wrong choice, to make a mistake of such cataclysmic proportions with the pull of a trigger. In a fit of fury and self-loathing, she heaved it across the room. It slammed against a wall and dropped behind a dresser.

She felt like she would fall apart if she moved anywhere or did anything. Even her breathing was shallow as she stared fixedly at nothing. She looked over to the space between her bed and her walk-in closet and saw the results of her work for the last...however many days it had been. The player HUD, the holographic desk, the complex optical tool that served to network her in-game station to her IRL work computer, and the two character models that were locked still as statues. She'd been so *proud* of herself for coming up with such a *clever* solution. She was just...so...*clever* that she could come up with such neat little *toys* that made it so she could break 'the rules.'

"Computer, get rid of all this!" she gestured expansively at the remaining holographic setup. Thankfully for her sanity, it disappeared almost before her request was complete, only leaving the pod's HUD hovering in the space the cobbled together workbench had been. Angrily, she stomped across the room and swiped it away, not even at the normal angle, just backhanding it. Thankfully, the software seemed to have been programmed with the awareness that the user may want to dismiss it from any direction, and it blipped out, leaving the space her impromptu investigation desk had been occupying vacant.

She eyed the bed, but part of her couldn't stand the thought of climbing into one of the most comfortable sleeping platforms she'd ever experienced. *I should be brought up on charges*, she thought, *I killed a child*. Even if she reported back to her superiors about it, though, she knew they'd dismiss anything she said that might indicate Rachel was anything more than software or anything like a girl who wanted to grow beyond her origin conditions.

Her palms itched, and rather than scratching them she lifted a hand to look at the open palm. She saw the sickle shaped scabs, uneven and ugly as she hadn't cleaned them right after injuring herself. It wasn't enough of a punishment, she was in this game living a life she hadn't ever dared to dream because of so, *so* many impossibilities that being in a VR environment just...sidestepped, at least for a little bit. She should be suspended, pending review. She should be disclosing her weapon to her superiors and preparing to be retired and redacted from the intelligence community. Instead, she would likely open her door and find another gift from a world she wasn't really a daughter of for a woman who was becoming legendary for being a savior to hundreds.

She staggered unseeingly to the wall next to her bed's end table and leaned heavily against it. Turning and sinking, she sat against the solid surface, hands palm-up in her lap, feet against the floor and knees level with her shoulders as she sagged as much as her bones and musculature would allow. She closed her eyes and thudded her head back against the wall and realized she just...couldn't cry. She almost wanted to and was slightly relieved to find she seemed to be cried out. She hurt *so* badly, so deep in her soul she'd never realized it was possible to feel pain there. It was as though she'd torn a chunk of her heart out, just like in her nightmares.

The station was quiet, the gentle hum of the multitudes of systems and reactors and shielding and electronics and engines and fields combining to create a background sensation that was both a feeling and something that could be heard, very subtly and faintly. It was soothing once one noticed it and got used to it and something not experienced in a planetary environment. A ship had its engines and those produced a similar effect, but no ship in the game (that she was aware of) had the *scale* of the station and so couldn't possibly generate the same quiet, calming hum.

She could almost sink into it, meditatively, letting it quiet and still her roiling thoughts and emotions. It wasn't a commutation of her guilt, but an easing of her pain, a reprieve to give her enough emotional space to recover enough to eventually face it again. She knew that she'd carry her sin until the day she died. *How many successful tags have I managed? Hell, I've lost count...and all undone because I killed a child in the commission of my duties. All the good I've managed, all the times I stopped an enemy of humanity, and now I'm so inhuman I'm in an alien body and so legitimately a monster because I assumed guilt. I'll bet we didn't even have a file on her, specifically.* She took a deep breath, her closed eyes letting her focus entirely on her body, letting her notice that she actually had to force the breath to be a deep one. *I wonder how many of the rogues I splashed actually had files? I wonder how many...children I killed?* Her heart clenched and she knew she'd never be strong enough to trace the story of every single rogue...every *S.A.I.* she'd eliminated during that mission. Even one more child would be enough to destroy her completely.

She snorted darkly, *Like I'm not completely undone already...child killer.*

Going off so abruptly it was almost like a gunshot in the quiet room, she heard a sound so incredibly out of place it took her a moment to identify it. It was the *clink-skrrtch* of a lighter. An old-style, Zippo-like lighter, the likes of which hadn't been made in America for nearly 75 years. Sometime in the late 21st century the company had sold itself to an international concern, Diane could never be bothered to find out which, leaving the headquarters in

Pennsylvania empty until the third World War wiped it and half the old city off the map. Zippo lighters had many imitators over the years, but fans of the originals were obsessed with collecting, restoring, and preserving them. It was a sign of wealth to have one and actually use it in America, since getting a new one meant either you had enough money to bypass all *sorts* of American and U.N. blockades on the import of them or you just snapped up enough working models that using one casually was the equivalent to throwing stacks of \$1,000 bills into a fireplace to keep warm.

Blinking her eyes open, she turned to discover that somehow, improbably, she was no longer alone in her quarters.

Sitting next to her on the floor, leaning back against the wall with one leg outstretched and the other cocked in a similar position to hers was an older man with a thick, untidy shock of gray hair. He was wearing a trench coat over a well-worn navy blue suit, cut in something resembling a style she'd seen on the men in the Terran ambassadorial staff back on Mortan when they were trying to curry favor after the incident with the matron. But where theirs spoke of a desire to impress and flaunt, this suit seemed like it was just something the man wore unconsciously, like he slipped into it because the suit was just so much a part of him that he'd be ushered into heaven wearing it. His shoes were a humble pair of penny loafers, complete with old-style, 20th century pennies in the tongue. His shirt was rumpled, and his tie was loosened up just enough the top button on the shirt was visible. He was in the process of lighting a cigar with the Zippo lighter.

Now that she was aware of his presence it was like her sense of smell finally decided to grace her with the information she might have expected it to if she wasn't so distracted by her inner turmoil. He was wearing a cologne, probably some inexpensive brand one might find in a grocery store, but even that fit with everything else about the man. An attention and care to his presence without a concern for being too flashy or ostentatious. His scent was understated, he clearly bathed regularly and used unscented soaps. The cigar was...off-putting. She never smoked, herself, but she knew most cigars were supposed to be warm bouquets of an almost incense-like odor, but this one had more of the smell of cheap tobacco burning in corner store cigarettes.

As he puffed on the cigar to get it lit, she found herself so surprised at his presence she couldn't even be upset that he was invading her private quarters. "Who'r'you?!" she blurted.

Rather than answer directly, he said, "You're a hard woman to get ahold of, Miss Somni'els." He didn't seem put out by the apparent challenge rating of meeting with her face to face. In fact, his voice sounded like he could be someone's grandpa and was enjoying a prank performed by one of his grandchildren.

He probably is someone's grampa, she thought. "That...was kinda on purpose."

He took a puff on his stogie and chuckled, "Yeah, could see you were having some sorta rough time there. Not that it's any of my business, of course."

Her eyebrows scrunched together in confusion, "Yeah, these *are* my *private* quarters. I locked everyone out for a *reason*. How did you even get in here?"

He waved the hand holding the cigar placatingly, "I know a few tricks, and don't worry, I won't be here long. My ship leaves later today, and I wanted to make sure I got a chance to talk to you before that happened. I was trying to meet with you a few days ago, but I guess that wasn't a good time."

"But boss, Norma and Russe were coming to tell you we're having a visitor..." Katrina's words surfaced from the depths of her memory. The man had been waiting for a meeting for...however many days she'd been locked in her room. At least three. "Oh," she said and closed her eyes again, her head thumping back against the wall, "Sorry."

"Eh, that's okay. Gave me a chance to look around, take in the local shops. Your girl, Norma, she's doing a good job with the place. Keeping everything ship-shape, her boyfriend following her around like a lovesick puppy..."

She snorted a brief laugh at that.

"That station assistant of yours, Katrina?" the simple statement of ownership rankled something deep inside Diane, but she couldn't spare the emotional bandwidth to figure that out, "She's a pretty bright young thing. Good head on her shoulders, very proud of what she's built here, and she should be."

Diane could only reply with a 'Mmm.'

"So my wife wanted me to bring back a souvenir. She likes it when I come home with presents. So, I went lookin' around and pretty much the only thing I could get here that wouldn't be something I could get her anywhere else was one of those badges your people wear. I asked if they had any that were for the general public to purchase, and pretty much everyone was insistent that they were specific to the station and if I wanted one, I'd have to talk to you." She heard him take a pull on his cigar before he continued, "Now I figure something like that has got to have a story, right? Like everyone here was really proud of the badge and didn't want it to wind up in unworthy hands."

Yeah, Diane thought, *Like mine are so worthy...or clean enough to even hold one.* "Mmm," she noised noncommittally.

"Course I asked, and there's a lot of people who had so many good things to say about you and that badge and what it means. Now, of course, I couldn't possibly just buy one, now that I know the story behind it."

He puffed on his cigar again and Diane's eyes drifted open enough to see him out of the corner of her eye. She didn't otherwise move.

"Course," he said after a moment, "I knew part of the story. Most of it, in fact. Hard not to hear about the first Matron's Daughter in a generation, and then there's how you put down my former colleagues and freed their slaves. That's some good work you did there."

Her eyes flew open the rest of the way and she turned her head to stare at him for a moment, "...just who *are* you, anyway?"

He chuckled, his grin crinkling his face into the most genial, grandfatherly expression she'd ever seen, "Trephor Camran, head of the Chroma Syndicate."

She was sure her jaw was hanging slack, "...the Chroma Syndicate?"

He took a puff, "Yeah, not surprised if you hadn't heard of us, most people growing up on Earth never learn about all the goings-on in Independent space. Terran government likes to pretend that only they are the ones that can keep order and peace in the galaxy. Better watch those Crotuck or the Lantru or the Swarm, they're the bad guys, just ignore what the feds are doing in our own back yard." This statement was delivered with the same genial, friendly tone the rest of his words had been spoken with, but she could sense an undercurrent of anger in a man who presented a face that seemed imperturbable.

Her eyebrow lifted, "I get why *I* might be a bit upset at Earthgov, but why are you?"

"Oh, don't mind me," he rumbled, "I'm just an old man that knows where they keep all their dirty laundry."

She blinked in confusion, "*You* know all the dirty laundry on the Terran government?"

He smiled, a mischievous twinkle sparkling in his eye, "I mean, the former head of the Terran Intelligence Agency *would* be the one to know all that, right?"

Now she *knew* her jaw was hanging slack, "*You* were an intelligence agent?!"

He waved dismissively and turned to look at nothing in particular across the room, "It was a job, and a good one for a while. Let's just say people in power don't like when you tell 'em they're wrong."

She remembered the fate of her first boss in the agency and huffed a breath, resting her head back against the wall. "So how did you wind up in charge of the Syndicate?"

Mister Camran took a puff and blew it out slowly before answering, "I stepped on too many toes, pissed off too many people trying to keep the agency from being used as a political tool. I'd dealt with the Syndicate long enough that I knew enough people in the organization and when the water started getting too hot in Earthgov for someone who knows enough to tear down the entire Senate and most of the Executive branch that when a power vacuum in the Syndicate opened up, I turned in my papers, packed my bags, and my wife and I moved out to Independent space to settle in. Started cleaning things up, making sure nobody suffered needlessly for some greedy person's wallet, made a few enemies and made sure I didn't have to worry about them. That's part of why those Branwell folks tried to set up their own shop. Didn't like that I told 'em that owning people wasn't how the Syndicate was going to make money from now on."

Diane snorted skeptically, "Just like that?"

He just grinned and took a pull on his stogie with a satisfied, "Hmmm."

They sat quietly for a while, Diane finally breaking the silence, "So you were an agent," she offered. Not a question, a statement, "Can I ask you something?"

He turned to her with a smile, once again projecting the very image of a grampa offering a friendly ear.

She was taking a risk, but at the moment she couldn't seem to care that her OpSec was slipping. "I...did a job. You won't find record of it, it was for an agency that doesn't exist," *Not in the game, anyway*, "It was before I came here and became a station commander." He nodded, not giving any indication of what he thought of her claims that should sound completely ridiculous to an actual agent. "I...someone died. Someone who shouldn't have." His expression finally changed, his smile softening and his eyes turning sympathetic, "And...I ran into someone here, the same day you arrived, I think. She looks...*so* much like the girl who I...killed." Her breath caught and she found herself feeling like she was about to cry again.

He didn't say anything, just let her process for a bit.

"So, I guess...I mean, I'll never be...punished for it. I'll never be held accountable, or arrested...hell, the girl doesn't even officially exist. I'm pretty much the only person in the galaxy that will even remember her face or her name..." She felt her eyes growing wet, so she closed them and leaned her head back against the wall, just breathing.

After a bit, Mister Camran asked in his kindly, grandfatherly voice, "So what's your question, kid?"

She thought for a moment before asking, "Have you...ever had something like that happen to you?"

He was quiet for long enough that she opened her eyes and turned to see he was frowning sadly at something only he could see. Finally, he said, "More than you can imagine, kid."

She swallowed back the lump in her throat, "How...how do you handle it?"

He sat in silence for a while, letting his cigar burn down slowly without drawing any more puffs before finally saying, "It's like when the love of your life breaks your heart."

That was so far out of left field that she was speechless.

"My wife, I love her, but she wasn't my first love. No, that was...well, that was a long story. But when she left me it hurt. For a long time. I spent so much time wondering what I did wrong, what I could have done differently...but none of that could ever change what happened. She was gone, I wasn't, and life just goes on, you know?" He finally took another puff of his cigar, "You feel bad someone who didn't deserve to die wound up dying, and even worse it's because of a call you made, right?" He looked to her and she nodded, somewhat timidly, "That's gonna live in your head and remind you of your mistake, and it should. You can't fix it, you can't change it, so you gotta learn from it. Look at every decision you make as though it might be the first step on the path to making the same mistake, and if you realize you're headed that direction, you choose different."

He sighed and took another breath, "And that's another thing, kid. You're in charge of people, and you're making choices that mean other people will live or die...and you're gonna make mistakes. Eventually, you're gonna be in a moment and you gotta make a choice and that choice is gonna get someone dead. And you gotta learn to keep going. Remember the people who died, respect 'em and make sure nobody else disrespect's 'em. And at the end of the day make it right." She snorted and he nodded at her with a wry grin, "Yeah, no need to say it, she's dead and how do you make that right?" She nodded again, this time more firmly, "Well, you make sure the death was worth something. She probably didn't want to die," Diane closed her eyes and huffed a dark laugh, "So you find a way to honor her life."

She turned that over in her thoughts for a moment and finally said, "...don't know how, I guess..."

Trephor sucked on his cigar, "You said there's another girl that reminded you of the one who died?" Diane turned to him and nodded, "Maybe get to know this girl, make a difference in *her* life, if you can. You can't replace one life with another; universe doesn't work that way. But you can make that life count for good in others."

She took another breath, letting that settle in. She found after a few moments that she had nothing to say...but somehow having a task that she could do reduced the feeling of being...bereft and broken.

They sat in silence once again, the smoke from the cigar being whisked away by the air scrubbers on the station before it could linger. Finally, after several minutes, Mister Camran said, "Well, I mostly came by the station to see who you were, if you lived up to the hype. It wouldn't do for Branwell to have neatly gotten themselves wiped out from stupidity only to have someone worse turn up in their place, after all."

She turned to him with a raised eyebrow.

He chuckled, "Don't worry, I think I like you, kid. You got a good head on your shoulders...and more importantly, I think, a good heart in you. I'll send someone by to be a direct rep for your station to the Syndicate. We may not be able to swing a big stick like the Feds or the Crotuck or the Lantru, but we can...grease the wheels for you a bit. Including helping you get that orphanage set up you were tryin' to get recognized."

She pulled a face that he clearly correctly interpreted the meaning of when he laughed, "Oh, don't worry. I didn't need to use anything to get that information. It's your girl Norma's pet project right now and Russe told her to trust me, so she kinda spilled the whole can of beans."

A bubble of actual laughter caught her by surprise, "I'm guessing he worked for you at some point?"

"A good boy like Russe, working for the T.I.A.?" he made a scoffing noise and waved his hand dismissively again, "Nah, that's crazy talk."

She snickered, "Yeah, sure. Crazy talk."

Winking at her, he pushed himself off the wall and stood, "Well, that's about all I got time for, I think. Gotta catch that ship before it leaves."

She glanced across the room and saw her jacket lying on her desk where she'd left it earlier. "Wait a sec..." she said as she, far more spryly than Trephor, scrambled to her feet and retrieved her discarded piece of clothing. Rather than put it on, she fumbled about with the lapel and turned it so she could get to the backing for the badge, disengaging the two pins that locked it in place and pulling the back off. She turned the cloth over again and pulled the pins out of the fabric, leaving behind two holes where the badge had been mounted, and re-secured the backing so the pins wouldn't be a possible safety hazard.

She turned back to the former agent and handed him the badge. "This is the only one made of solid gold. I mean, other than for computer connectors gold's a pretty cheap metal out here," she blushed, "Of course, you'd know that, but the others are just some grade of steel. There's only one of these right now and... I'm okay not wearing it at the moment."

He took it delicately from her hands, then reached over and patted her arm with the hand holding the smoke. He gave her one of his sage, grandfatherly smiles and said, "You're gonna be alright, kid. I think you'll be an excellent commander."

Somehow, his simple statement was like a salve to her wounded soul.

Somehow, Diane made it out of the hab without encountering another person.

Her body felt...distant. For the first time since character creation, she felt a little bit like a pilot in a mech-suit, like the world around her wasn't quite making it all the way to her actual senses. It was a purely emotional thing, a level of emotional shock, her brain chemistry completely drained by the intense activity of the last few days, but she realized that she was (to auto-negate the phrase) uncomfortably comfortable, like she'd been expecting the feeling the entire time she'd been in the pod because that's how she normally felt. Not just in her VR rig at the office, but in her day-to-day life. *These pods must be cutting through some...natural defense against the intensity of the world, she thought, Either that or the VR devs are intentionally dialing the sensations and coded 'chemical' reactions of the brain up to 11, probably to an unsafe degree.* How else could she explain how...in-tune with an alien body she was? How good it felt to be a woman when she was born a man? *Something to file a report on when I get out of VR...probably a good thing this game auto-logs out, given how...I dunno, 'addictive' it is to feel this good in a body you're not born in, some way of enforcing the time-off is a good thing. Probably should find some time to look up the psychological effects of pod usage and see if there's been any studies...but later.*

Glancing down at her mini-tab, she confirmed she was on the right track to find Sani, pulling her mind out of the introspection.

A few minutes later, she found herself at one of the green parks that took up the spaces between buildings and building slabs, this particular park being on the edge of the 'cliff' that separated the Ops Deck from the Industrial Deck. She was surprised to see the Morvuck girl alone, sitting with her legs through the safety railing, leaning her arms on the first bar and draping her body in a distinctly teenaged way, seemingly staring across the expanse of the

station's life space at nothing in particular. Diane tucked her mini-tab into her jacket's breast pocket and made her way across the grass to sit on the ridge a few feet away, propping her elbows on the same bar Sani was slumped over.

"Hey," she said by means of opening a dialog.

The girl huffed in a very teenager way. It made Diane smile, seeing the absolute drama almost dripping from the younger Morvuck.

"Surprised you're not with Cynthia or Kymberlynn," offered Diane.

"Cynthia's on duty and Kymberlynn is in school," grumbled Sani.

Diane mouthed a silent, 'ah,' with a nod, "And you're not attending here yet?"

Sani shrugged, a singularly uncomfortable-looking gesture in her position, "Kymmie is still at 'first fliers' level," she explained, using the Morvuck-translated-to-'common' term for kindergarten, "The slavers never taught her *anything*, so she and the rest of the people you rescued are still learning their alphabet. I'm just about graduated; I just have some essays to finish up and send back home and they'll email my diploma."

Diane nodded, allowing herself a small smile, "Nothing wrong with First Fliers, I'm in a First Fliers class back on Mortan."

This finally got Sani to turn to Diane with an incredulous look.

"It's true! I can even show you the letter they sent declaring me an honorary sister-student of their class since I encountered the Matron right outside their school."

Sani snorted and rolled her eyes in a distinctly teenage fashion, "Oh," being all she said.

They sat quietly, observing some of the automated construction happening on the Industrial deck, the machines looking like toys in the distance. Diane shifted her arms up to a higher bar so she could lean her chin on her palms in an obvious mirror of the younger Morvuck, "So...what're we lookin' at?"

Sani turned that slightly disdainful incredulity back on Diane, "Why are you here? I thought you hated me!"

Diane frowned, "What...gave you that idea?"

Sani snorted and turned back to stare into the distance, "Yeah, you're a Lost all right. *No* Morvuck could have missed that...scent bomb."

Ooooh, crap! Diane thought as her face turned scarlet in embarrassment, *Fear response triggers an adrenal dump which causes stress hormones to be released and...she'd have smelled my reaction to seeing her face*, "Oh...oh, god...I'm so sorry, that..."

"It's okay," Sani grumped in a manner that made it clear she wasn't actually okay with it, "I'm used to everyone hating me."

"No, that's not..." Diane sighed, *was I this moody as a teenager? I mean, Tiffany made sure I had a miserable teenage-hood, but maybe part of why I couldn't make friends was because...* she shook her head, trying to keep in mind her therapist's words about not assigning blame for past actions. Her brief stint in therapy had helped with the fallout from her stepmother's impact in her life, but at the time she could only afford the General Welfare mental health programs, which had probably the lowest quality shrinks available. Once she'd started working for the agency, she could afford access to non-GW services, but her seemingly continually escalating clearance levels meant that the available pool of therapists she had access to was incredibly small, and the scuttlebutt amongst agents was that the mental health professionals that had been 'read in' by the agency had a mandatory reporting clause of not just possible threats to the nation, but *everything* reported in the sessions. Pretty much *no* analyst or agent in her division had a therapist, they fell into the 'threat' category and couldn't be trusted.

She sighed and said, "Okay, I did the Morvuck equivalent of ripping a fart when we first met," Sani snorted in amusement, "That wasn't because of you it was..." She closed her eyes, "You reminded me of someone. She...died. And it was my fault."

Sani turned to face her and, for the first time since Diane sat down, didn't immediately look away.

She also didn't say anything, which Diane took as a cue to continue, "She was...human," *for the purposes of this game, Rachel may as well have been,* "And she was...so afraid of me."

It was Diane's turn to look off into the distance as Sani's posture changed, turning more in Diane's direction.

"I...don't want to say too much about it, but because she was afraid of me, she...did something stupid. Something I pushed her into doing. She was young and had heard bad things about me, things I didn't really do anything to disprove when she finally met me face to face, and when you're scared you do stupid things." She swallowed heavily, "Even when you're the First Found Daughter of Mortan."

"Huh?!" the teenage moodiness gave way to pure confusion.

"You look like her. A *lot* like her. And I've been having...nightmares about being the reason she's dead. And when I saw your face and..." she shook her head, "I...locked myself in my quarters. I thought I'd controlled my emotions enough that you wouldn't think anything of it, but obviously I messed that up badly."

"Yeah," Sani sighed, "Cynthy's been thinking you're mad at *her*. Kept trying to tell her *I* was the one you were mad at. I mean, you weren't mad, I guess, but she and Kymm...I mean, I guess we got into a fight about it."

Diane groaned and thumped her forehead against the meat of her forearms with enough force to cause the rail to vibrate with a quiet 'thmm,' "Wow, see? 'First Found Daughter of Mortan,' a title that keeps on giving." She looked up to see Sani's pinched expression, confusion warring with doubt. Diane shook her head, "I didn't earn the title, kid. I was just a dumb bimbo that decided to wander out into an unfamiliar city on a planet with a megafauna that I

could have just as easily been eaten by as anything else. Yeah, I'm Morvuck, but I was *raised* on Earth. I didn't even know Matrons *existed* until I was face to face with one. I'm a celebrity because of something that just barely has better odds of happening than being struck by an asteroid while doing a spacewalk."

Sani's mouth was hanging slack, "But...the Matrons..."

"Matrons are part of Morvuck culture and practically kissing cousins to Morvucks and really big flying things and yadda," Diane smiled to lessen the disregard to Sani's culture she was so casually letting fly out of her mouth, "And...being in the presence of one of them? Being...nuzzled and...cared after? Having one of them *adopt* you?" her heart swelled and tears came to her eyes as she remembered the experience, "...human religion, or at least the one where I grew up, has beings called 'angels,'" she felt a tear drip off her eyelashes and she wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket, "They're messengers of God, perfect beings that watch over and protect God's children. They're more powerful than anything but God and can destroy continents...but the first thing they say whenever they show themselves to humans is, 'Fear not,' because the message they bring is from God himself, and they're always trying to speak of God's love." She swallowed, unable to form words for a moment as she turned to Sani, aware she was still low-key crying, "Encountering the Matron was...like encountering an angel."

Diane pressed her index finger and thumb into her eyes, trying to clear the tears from them as she consciously worked to suppress her memory of the emotions enough to speak of the encounter without crying. "She was so...big, and powerful. She could have ended me right there. But she didn't. I couldn't tell you *why* I did what I did," she took a shuddering breath, "Why I 'screamed challenge,' I guess it's called. But when she marked me?" A glance to Sani showed the girl was practically turned to face Diane fully, "I felt like I'd never been safe before and I'd never be safe again, but in that one moment, I was...safe."

"Safe?" asked the teen.

She nodded, "Like...it didn't matter what choices I'd made to get there or what anyone else thought of me, exactly who I was in that moment was who she'd chosen out of every other Morvuck on the planet."

Sani scooted closer to Diane, seemingly unconsciously. She'd pulled her legs up from hanging off the ridge to sit cross-legged and was facing Diane fully, "What'd she smell like?"

Taken aback by the apparent non-sequitur, it took Diane a moment to realize that if Sani, a completely average by all accounts Morvuck teen, had thought Diane hated her because of one moment's scenting of an emotional reaction, then it seemed likely that Morvish culture might place more emphasis on smell than human cultures would. "She smelled..." Diane placed herself back in the memory and tried to remember such a detail and found herself recalling it with little difficulty, "She smelled like...the mountains. And cinnamon."

"What's cinnamon?"

She smiled at the teen, who was now giving Diane absolute and undivided attention, "It's an Earth spice, it comes from the bark of a tree. There's a few cultures that use it as part of the

Earth version of araoshō shosh, though the spice blends that make curry are more of a regional thing than a family thing." She smiled gently at the teen girl, "What'd you mean by 'everybody hates' you?"

Sani almost folded in on herself, "...it's nothin'..."

Diane moved back from the edge, a process that took longer than it had Sani as she had to fit her significantly longer legs through the safety rail, and scooted over to sit next to Sani, "Hey, I can see it's not 'nothin' for you, so c'mon, tell me about it."

Sani's eyes teared up, "I'm...the most dominant girl in my class. Or, I was, I guess."

Diane tilted her head in confusion, "...I don't know what that means."

Sani looked up through heavy lashes, confusion etched on her face, "You didn't have dominance on Earth?"

"I mean," she chuckled as she spoke, "I guess? If you count adolescent high school drama driven by hormones and gender divisions 'dominance,' sure. But humans aren't Morvucks, so we...*they* wouldn't do 'dominance' the way you mean, I think. Tell me what that means, and remember, I'm in First Fliers."

Sani snickered and shoved her shoulder into Diane's arm, "Yer a dork."

Diane just grinned, "So Norma keeps reminding me."

Sani took a deep breath, "It's...when we...hit puberty, we have this thing in our brains, certain chemicals do a thing...I don't know the specifics, I just had the two sex ed classes..."

Diane's eyebrows shot up, "Sex ed?"

Sani's eyes rolled so hard her head tilted, "Yeeaaaaaah, dunno if you had'ta deal with it, but the teachers were so *weird* about it, like tellin' us about our bodies was gonna make us wanna rip each other's clothes off in the classroom or somethin' stupid like that. Anyway, the brain chemicals make our pheromones send signals for who's dominant and submissive and *how* dominant, and...my moms say that once I'm out of high school people stop caring so much about 'who's on top...'"

Diane flushed bright red and clapped her hand over her mouth as a guilty *giggle* (of all things) tried to escape. At Sani's confused expression, she struggled to compose herself and explained, "That phrase means something else *entirely* among humans...and no, I don't think I should be the one to tell you, it's 'weird teachers in sex ed class' types of meaning and I'm not your parent, so probably not my place to educate you on that."

"Oh, c'mon!" complained Sani, "I'm tellin' you stuff *you're* supposed to know about Morvucks, can't you tell *me* some stuff about humans?"

Diane felt an eyebrow go up, "Why? Did you need the info because you're interested in Cynthia or Kymberlynn?"

Sani bopped Diane on the shoulder, prompting a giggle from the older Morvuck, "No! Dork! Matron above, you're such a...dweeb!"

"Alright, alright!" laughed Diane, "But I'm not going into detail, 'cause that'd be weird," she took a breath to compose herself, "When two humans...have sex," she felt her face heating up, "Usually one of them positions themselves on the bottom and the other on top. It's...a power dynamic thing, if someone's 'on top' they're supposedly in more control of the action."

Sani blanched, "Ew, more than I wanted to know about humans, I think." She shrugged, "But, yeah, it's a power thing for Morvucks, too, just not for sex. But in high school..." she shook her head, "It's not a *rule* or anything, like, even the teachers tell us it shouldn't matter, but you only get to be friends with someone who's just as dominant as you are. You don't ask out someone who's equally dominant and if you're less dominant than you gotta wait for the girl you like to ask you out."

"And if you're 'the most' dominant..." prompted Diane.

"...then you don't have any friends." Sani's eyes dropped to the grass in front of her, "I *used* to have some friends, but they all wound up being more submissive than me...I kept tryin' to hang out, but then one of 'em thought we were dating and started telling all the other girls we were a thing and I didn't know 'cause...anyway, she went off on me one day in the halls at school about how I was such a bad girlfriend and I'm just a dummy that didn't know she was leading her best friend on and she wasn't my best friend after that..."

Sani's eyes closed, forcing out the tears that had been building, and she scrubbed her eyes dry with the back of her hand. Diane tentatively put a hand on the girl's shoulder to comfort her and was surprised when Sani leaned against her.

"And then my moms took the job to the outer rim and sent me here, and I *really* wanted to go with them, but they didn't...didn't want *me* around...and Aunt Leki's always too busy...and then I got into a fight with Cynthia and Kymberlynn."

"You mentioned that..."

The girl sighed heavily, "It was so *stupid*, 'specially since...you said what you did 'bout why you reacted the way you did. All three of us were so sure we were the reason you locked yourself in your quarters. Half the adults on the station are panicking and nobody took us seriously when we tried to take responsibility and we just kinda got into it last night."

"Ah," Diane took a deep breath, slowly letting it out, "Yeah, I have a feeling I'll be running clean-up after my little tantrum." She felt Sani huff a laugh. "But kid, I didn't hate you, and I probably never will. I *know* Leki doesn't hate you. She's one of my drinking and training buddies and she's so buttoned down even when she's tipsy...woman never gets *drunk*, I swear, she can come off as a little cold. Ask her later, I bet she'll feel super-bad about making you think she hates you. And your moms...I've never met 'em, but I'll bet they sent you here because they wanted to keep you safer than any rim world could be for a kid. I *wish* I had that kind of parent growing up."

"Oh...uh...right, your..." Sani's statement dropped off awkwardly.

"Yeah, both my parents are dead, I'm an orphan. But that just means I have a good perspective of other people's parents, both human *and* Morvuck, and from what I've seen a kid like you doesn't come from bad parents that hate their kids."

Sani was quiet for a bit. "What're human parents like?"

Diane smiled sadly, "Well, I mostly had my caretaker, and the less said about her the better, but I saw other kid's parents and then when I was an adult, I started watching people get together and get married..."

They spoke for a while longer, Diane letting the time get away from her as she and Sani talked about life as a teen on Mortan and growing up on Earth and the differences. Diane told about human entertainment and Sani gushed about her achievements on the sports teams, her enthusiasm only matched by her dismay at Diane knowing nothing about Morvish sports. Diane explained football and soccer and how some parts of Earth used the word 'football' for soccer.

At some point they'd made their way to a bench and Sani was trying to explain the plot of a holo-vid serial that was popular on Mortan when they were interrupted by a tentative, "...Commander? Sani?"

They looked up in surprise to see Cynthia being tailed by Kymberlynn. The two girls were clearly hesitant to intervene, so Diane smiled gently at her usual comms officer, "Hi, Cynthia. Sani said you thought you'd upset me? You didn't, I promise. It was...a personal, private matter and you three just...accidentally tripped into it. It's not your fault, and I'm sorry if I made it seem like it was because of you."

Cynthia did a poor job of covering up a relieved breath, "Really?" At Diane's nod, the girl smiled, "Uh, there's a guy who's been trying to..."

Diane smiled with veiled amusement, "We chatted, don't worry. I'll let Norma know so she doesn't send the hounds after me."

Kymberlynn took the opportunity to step forward a little, "...Sani? I'm sorry..."

"Huh?!" blurted the Morvish girl, "What'd'ya mean *you're* sorry? I'm the one that yelled at you!"

"Girls," said Diane just loud enough to be sure all three heard her. Once she had the attention of all three she smiled, "It was *my* fault, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist on this." All three girls spoke at once, trying to tell Diane she was wrong, "Ep!" she vocalized, silencing them again, "You were arguing over who'd pissed me off, right?"

The three girls glanced at each other and then back to her almost in unison, Cynthia offering the tentative nod of agreement, "Then as the one who did a poor job of managing her own emotions and making it everyone else's problem, it's *my* fault. Now," she gently squeezed Sani's shoulder, somewhat surprised when the girl smiled up at her, "Why don't the three of you go to my private storage units and hunt down the cryo-suspended foods that you *know*

are still being sent in care packages, find yourself a shipment of cookies or ice cream or whatever the women of Mortan are sending me as a dessert, and split it amongst yourselves."

Three teenage faces lit up with sudden enthusiasm and Sani darted off the bench to join the other two. "Oh, triad! Maybe someone sent some sosstow! You've got to try it!"

"*Only* the foods!" Diane called after them as Sani's charge led them off in the direction of the habs, "Stay out of the clothes!" She *hoped* they took the direction. Sure, they were all teenagers on the cusp of adulthood, and one had been rescued from sex slavery, but it would *still* be awkward for them to stumble onto one of the 'special' care packages that had only NSFW contents.

She watched the three teenage girls darting off with far more energy than she remembered ever possessing in the direction of the lifts to the cargo bays. It was so easy for her mind's eye to blur Sani's form until she saw Rachel darting off ahead of her friends, then turning to taunt them with friendly jibes at how slow they were going. Her heart began to ache again, and she became aware that at some point after she'd sat down to talk with the younger Morvuck her...experience of the world was no longer distant. It was the difference between the VR experience of her rig at her desk in Houston and the pod she was in now. It was as though the world were once again real and she was experiencing it for the first time all over again and she hadn't even been aware of the difference when she first created her character.

She put her hand on the bench next to her hip and let herself just feel the texture and the temperature difference from the air around her and her skin. '*Make that life count for good,*' *huh?* she recalled. Dimly, she was aware of someone sitting on the bench where Sani had been just a few minutes before and her Morvuck senses were telling her that it was Norma without her having to look up. Thankfully, she didn't say anything, just waited for Diane.

For Diane's part, she couldn't bring herself to look at her friend. Her eyes took in the grass of the park and the stretch of poly-crete that made up the sidewalks and construction slabs of the life spaces. She watched the automated construction bots going about their work halfway across the industrial deck. She saw a couple of people, forms tiny from the distance, entering and exiting the docking bay tether and boarding cars to travel across the station.

Her eyesight started blurring when she looked above the hab wall to see the stars that Rachel had never had the opportunity to see and never would. Her breath started hitching and she knew she was about to fall apart again and would have no way of explaining why she was so upset to Norma, and she both did and did not want to explain. She was trapped between her duty and her pain and there was no way out.

She felt Norma's hand on her shoulder, and as though that was the final snowflake on the mountainside that unleashed the avalanche, she fell into loud, heaving sobs that rocked her entire body. Norma's hands gently tugged her over and Diane let herself be guided closer to the other woman, almost curling into her shoulder as she fully, finally accepted the reality of Rachel's end at her hands.

And that's the end of the investigation arc. It wound up being both bigger and better than I ever dreamed it could, and about half of the text from Ch. 30-32 were written while my hand was still healing.

Before we get to the most challenging story arc in Part 3 - Family and Fury, Diane will finally find someone to fall in love with. Have a little Useless Lesbian Romance. As a treat.

...what? It's a Troubleverse fic! Guy goes into a VRMMO as a girl. Girl meets girl. Girl gets girl. Wacky hijinks ensue. Surprisingly dark dystopia awaits outside the game. It's practically mandatory!

Master and Commander | Player Two

Chapter Summary

In the wake of discovering that she doesn't deserve the title of "Best Agent," Diane encounters, for the first time since going into the game, another player.

Chapter Notes

This chapter starts with an incredibly fun scene that I hope does a good job setting the stage for what's to come between now and the end of part 2. After the absolute heart-rending discovery that she royally fucked up, Diane gets a little light-hearted romance. As a treat.

The electric beeping of many an infernal notification device had been the bane of humanity since they had invented the things 200 years ago (outside the pod) or 600-ish years ago (in-game...what year was it even supposed to *be* besides "four centuries in the future"?). Having said electric beeping going off such that it woke you from a dead sleep felt, to Diane, like the most evil, vile torture and was proof positive that she was actually being punished for her sins.

Blindly, she slapped at the end table next to her bed, but all she found was her mini tab. Groaning, she picked *that* up and turned the screen on, the little device thankfully being designed to take environmental conditions into account with showing the brightness of the screen and it lit only dimly to show...no alarms, notifications, incoming calls, or messages.

And yet the infernal beeping continued.

Ready to break something, she settled back onto her pillow and closed her eyes as she called "C'mput'r, wha's the beeping?"

The synthetic voice that wasn't *quite* Katrina's voice replied, "There is no beeping detected by the station's microphones in or in proximity to your quarters."

The racket was *really* starting to irritate her. Growlingly, she replied, "Where's Katrina?"

"Hey, boss. Unfortunately, I gotta agree with my much less personable automated response systems; there's no beeping in or near your quarters. Are you still asleep? I've found research about humans having somnambulant episodes where they carry on conversations in response

to both real-world stimuli and the contents of their dreams. I can research if the same is true for Morvucks."

Her eyes popped open and she lifted the mini-tab into view to see the time. *Four in the damn morning and I'm hallucinating a beeping or ringing of some kind...* And it was about that time she saw the little notification throbber in the corner of her vision pulsing in time with the tone, which she now recognized as a variant of the 'incoming call' warble that messenger apps used when someone was trying to reach out to another user for real-time voice or video conversations. *...I guess the in-game HUD has a chat function?* "Never mind, Kat, figured it out. Go back to...whatever it is you do first thing in the morning."

"I don't sleep, boss, so no 'morning' for me. Get some rest, you've only had about five hours sleep so far."

"I'll try. Thanks, Kat."

"Sure thing, boss," came the reply as Diane flicked her wrist to bring up the HUD.

Her eyes were absolutely blasted as the HUD's visuals manifested in front of her at full brightness. Wanting more to just get the ringtone to stop than dig through the brightness settings, she covered her eyes with her hand and squinted through a gap in her fingers to tap through to the screens to find the 'Player Chats and Messages' pane which she'd never used before since she didn't have anybody in-game that she'd have reason to contact.

There was nothing on the screen.

Brows pinched together in frustration but knowing she was on the right track, she scanned the interface and realized there were a few tabs to the chats and messaging screen; Favorites (the currently active tab), Contacts, Messages, Chats, and 'Nearby.' Frowning, she tapped the 'nearby' tab and almost sighed in relief to see a line with a name she didn't recognize next to an icon or avatar with a stylized *something* she was too tired to make out. There were some details and stats she couldn't care less about and a little skeuomorphic icon indicating the caller was in some proximity Diane was now making a mental note to hunt down the setting for and turn it to "zero feet" so she would never get a random call again. Sighing, she tapped the throbbing 'Accept Call' button and closed her eyes tight, closing the gap in her fingers to block out as much of the HUD's light as she could.

"It's four in the god-damn morning for my station, this better be good." She didn't bother to mask or hide the growl in her voice.

"Ah, I was betting the nearest other player would be the station commander. Good morning to you too!" came a woman's voice that was almost too perky.

Diane sighed the sigh of the damned, "Is there a reason you're waking me up before my alarm is set to go off?"

There was a chuckle that Did Things™ for Diane that she was too tired to contemplate, "Your crew member here is refusing to let anyone off my ship. If you can give the order to let us aboard I can be out of your bed-head hair."

Diane grumbled for a moment then said, "...why didn't they call me via station comms if I'm needed there?"

"You're apparently set to 'do not disturb' while you're sleeping, princess," came the amused reply.

She reviewed her options; she could either wake up enough to dig through her mini-tab to find the right part of the station to call to reach whoever was the harbormaster at this hour, wake up enough to give Katrina a coherent order to deal with the situation, or wake up enough to go down and handle it herself. None of the options included going back to sleep before the issue was dealt with.

Groaning, she sat up, removing her hand from her eyes but keeping them firmly shut. She grabbed her blankets and sheet and removed them from her body, shivering slightly in the comparative chill. She *liked* the cold, damnit! It was unfair that the lovely, wonderful body she had in-game should be so sensitive to it. "Fine, give me a bit and I'll be right down. Which docking bay?"

She was rather pleased that she actually had to ask. Last week they'd finally completed construction on a second docking bay with seven brand new airlocks to dock even more craft at her station, which was becoming a necessity as traffic continued to increase over time. Her actions with the slavers and status as 'First Found Daughter' on Mortan was drawing attention to them, letting people know that the sleepy little system known as Darksky had another port of call for ships to park at on their perpetual journey going from point A to point B. Fortunately they weren't *so* popular that they'd need a third docking bay for a while yet, but she put the priority from 'standard' to 'high' in the build queue so it and all the prerequisite builds and research would be done as soon as possible.

As she put her feet on the (thankfully carpeted) floor, she heard the woman caller ask someone apparently nearby, "Which docking bay is this again? Right," and back at the virtual microphone for the HUD she said, "Docking Bay Alpha."

Diane parted her eyelids just enough to gratefully confirm the HUD had remained in position where she'd activated it and answered the call instead of hovering in front of her the entire time. Now she could move around without interrupting the call to dismiss the HUD. "Okay," she said with a jaw-cracking yawn, "I'll figure out the airlock when I get there, unless you know it offhand."

"Oh, yeah, Cargo 1," came the chirped reply.

Right! We finally finished the inspections and repaired all the damage from when the slavers tried to force themselves off before I released the docking clamps! She felt a surge of pride that her crew had performed as diligently as they had. Katrina's initial diagnostics had turned up everything 'green,' but a visual inspection had noted the guiderails for the clamps were warped, the ship attempting to launch with the clamps in place having torqued the metal. It had put that airlock out of commission for some time. Whoever this player was turned out to be their first ship using it since the repair, if Diane's memory served. "Right, thanks," she said as she finally got out of bed and walked over to her closet, "Just so I know what I'm getting into, why are my people refusing to let your people off the ship?"

The reply was underscored with an amused note that Diane was far too tired to parse, "There's some regulation they're saying I'm not following...? Honestly, I think it's just the NPCs adhering too strictly to their scripts."

Diane selected a suite and pulled the hanger off the rack and transferring it to the hook outside the closet, "...kinda immersion breaking calling the person you're talking about an NPC right in front of them, isn't it?"

As Diane used the light of the HUD behind her to select a blouse, the woman answered, "Eh, they're programmed to ignore anything that refers to the game as a game, so it's not like it hurts their feelings. Besides, I'm calling you on the P2P in-game chat. That's also immersion breaking."

Diane hung the blouse's hanger on the hook with the suit and bent over the in-closet chest of drawers to open the drawer with her hose, grabbing a pair and tossing them over her shoulder to the bed before opening the drawer with her bras to grab one at random, "I guess, but there is the whole Commander mythos that...eep!"

She was turning away from the closet and had clutched the hem of her shirt and was about halfway to pulling it off over her head when she looked at the HUD now that her vision had adjusted to the light...and saw the woman who had called her smirking with slightly smokey eyes...on a video call that Diane had blindly accepted. Mortified, she yanked her top back down, doubly embarrassed that someone had now seen her sleep shirt, which was a light pink cami that looked like a muscle-tee if you squinted and tilted your head. The effect was somewhat ruined by the dainty pink bow that was maybe two inches across that nestled right between her breasts on the neckline, which was a *very* generously plunging neckline at that granted any viewer a tantalizing view of her large endowments. It was thin, it was silky, it was absolutely the girliest article of non-underwear clothing she owned, and it was an absolute indulgence. She'd purchased it over the station's network from one of the new clothing shops that had cropped up on the promenade. She'd been simply too embarrassed about buying it at *all* let alone in person, but figured the one indulgence in her in-game feminine nature wouldn't be untoward so long as nobody *saw* her in it.

And then she was *triple* embarrassed when she realized that the *only* other thing she was wearing was a pair of Morvuck panties that were *also* pink (though not quite the same shade of pink as her sleep shirt), with lacey panels on the hips and frilly applied flowers on the front panel and a tiny little pink bow on the hem right over her tailbone on the back...and a nice, comfy pocket for her proliferator genitals. She'd received them in a care package from a well-meaning if slightly eccentric older woman that had insisted that a Lost likely wouldn't have appropriate underwear and had bought Diane approximately three whole *cases* worth, none of which would fall into a category that wasn't 'frilly, feminine, and fashionable'.

Her brain caught up with her circumstances and a hand darted down to cover her crotch as the other arm covered her chest. It wasn't like she was showing any 'naughty bits,' she was, technically, fully clothed, but it was clear the other woman was greatly enjoying what she was seeing.

When it was obvious that Diane wouldn't be continuing to undress (and, indeed, she was feeling very akin to a dino in the headlights in a star cruiser's path), the other player teased,

"Awe, is the show over? Oh well, I'll see you soon, princess," and the call disconnected, causing the HUD to vanish from sight.

Diane stepped out of the auto-car and let herself stretch, almost cat-like, as it hummed off to its next system designated stop behind her. A quick shower and a protein bar had not been enough to shake off the tired from too little sleep, and she could tell she'd be running on tired all day. She could probably take a nap, but if she spent too much time alone in her quarters without first completely exhausting herself, she started to spiral into depression that was capable of keeping her awake the entire night and making her miserable the next day. If that happened, people would notice and start asking questions. Questions that would be well meaning but Diane couldn't answer because doing so would be explaining what she did before logging into the game, which would lead to realizations of what she was there to do now if any of the well-meaning people asking those questions happened to be S.A.I.

Shaking off the thoughts that she dared not speak, she focused on her task at hand, dealing with, for the first time in months (or, as she'd checked on her real-time clock during her shower, just about 48 hours IRL) she would be speaking with an actual human person rather than an in-game A.I. The impromptu meeting was taking place in the gravity interchange of airlock Cargo 1. Since the Cargo 1 bay doors were on the 'top' of the docking bay and cargo ships usually were loaded with beings that needed to keep a single direction of gravity in mind, the interchange was necessary. Where the normal airlocks that were arranged in a radial array around the sides of the bay allowed a ship to dock with standard airlocks, treating them like regular doors was simple. The interchanges on the top and bottom of the docking bay allowed two ships with standard cargo airlocks to dock on top and bottom, then a curve lined with gravity plating rotated the direction of 'down' to match the station's, with Cargo 2's interchange having a sharper curve since people and cargo would be moving along the 'inside' of the curve instead of the outside like was done with Cargo 1.

One of her crew was there with a pair of security flanking him. He was standing somewhat resignedly in front of a woman who was about average height for a human, but her presence in the interchange outshone literally everyone else. Diane couldn't even *see* all of her yet and was still feeling like a sheaf of wheat in the light of a warm summer sun.

She blinked in surprise at her own thoughts, *Where did that come from?* she wondered. She had no time to ponder that as she closed the gap and moved so she could see the woman who had gotten an inadvertent show via the in-game player comms and Diane found herself wondering if the environmental controls were busted and making her feel hot and sweaty.

Clearing her throat to announce her presence, she focused on her crewman, an 'Ensign Jones' by the name stitching and rank insignia. "Ensign, care to tell me what regulation our visitor is violating?"

Jones turned his pad so she could see it, and displayed was a split screen showing what appeared to be a cargo manifest with a pair of items highlighted in red on one window and a block text that looked like it came from a regulations document, which made sense given the other player's comments on the comms earlier.

Diane pinched the bridge of her nose and rubbed her eyes, "Ensign, it's only just turning four-thirty in the morning, just tell me what the problem is, please."

"This ship is transporting cargo that's banned from import onto stations with life support biomes that lack the capacity of a Class 5 population," he said as though that answered all the questions.

Diane sighed, *Then again, if he's one of the lifers that was here when I took over, he might have just told me the Titanic was about to crash into the iceberg and I wouldn't understand,* "Okay, so help me understand. I was raised on Earth, I don't know all the classifications."

This seemed to perk the interest of the other player as Jones sighed and nodded, "Right, sorry, ma'am. Station life support classification is based on maximum population size. Class 1 would be, like, a space lab. Just about 10 to 20 people, mostly canned air, imports 90% of their food and no on-board waste processing. Class 2 is...I guess small town sized? Like, a couple hundred people to maybe a thousand? They have heavy air recycling and grows most of the food needed on-station and a lot of waste processing is..."

"*Don't* go into details, please," interrupted Diane as the protein bar threatened to demand return to sender, "But isn't 20 people to a few hundred kinda a big jump?"

Jones shrugged, "Anything between that usually gets engines strapped to it and called a starship. Not a lot of call for stations that can't be small cities if they're bigger than a lab." Diane gave him an 'ah' of comprehension and he continued, "We're class 3, big enough to be a small city of a few thousand, maybe more if we do some sort of expansion that isn't just docking bays. Class 4 would be, like, major commerce hubs or starbases that sit on courier lines or are built on stellar borders. They can house a small fleet of ships just for military purposes and usually have a pretty big merchant fleet. Class 5 are...big," he stumbled at this point, seeming to look for an appropriate analogy.

"Think the Death Star," interrupted the other player. Diane turned her attention to the woman and had to keep her stomach from doing flip-flops for an entirely different reason than the one Jones had caused earlier. She was shorter than Diane (who wasn't at almost seven feet tall, really) but above average for the women on the station. Her scent was definitely human, and she carried herself with a confidence that Diane couldn't match on her best days...which had been few and far between lately. Her outfit was almost classically 'space rogue' with a few splashes of anachronistic touches, like the odd mid-20th century bomber pilot's helmet and the flight jacket that appeared to be lined with fur. Strapped to her hip was a side-arm that had clearly seen use, but also clearly was well cared for, and her dark blue pants were almost *wrapped* around assets that Diane had to tell her proliferator loins to calm the hell down. Diane could *probably* find a way to explain how she knew the woman's button-up shirt was a lovely shade of red that framed the visible cleavage the woman was clearly proudly displaying, but she was dearly hoping nobody would ask why she was so focused on that particular detail as she was struggling to keep her eyes above the woman's jawline...though the deep, chocolate brown eyes that had a hint of impish sparkle gave Diane something to look at that was just as distracting as the player's other physical features. "You know," she continued, "'That's no moon...' and all that."

Diane felt her jaw bob a couple times before she was able to say, "...right, *really* big and probably as self-sustaining as a planet after it's been in operation for a bit."

The other woman was smirking at Diane, *Please don't let me be looking at her like an idiot...like I'm an idiot, which I'm probably doing...oh, god, please end me now!*

The miracle of non-existence was not provided, but the miracle of an interruption was as Jones said, "Exactly, and her cargo is *way* too invasive for a Class 3. I wouldn't even want to risk a Class 5, to be honest."

Grateful for the distraction from her endocrine system locking up, Diane took the pad from Jones and read the manifest again, "...Northern Tanabrian Deep Sea Eels?" she blinked up from the tablet in confusion and repeated to the other player, "Eels?"

The woman shrugged, "There's a buyer at the end of this particular trade route that wants to start a terraforming project on a moon around some gas giant in the Orion cluster. It's never had any life on it and these things," she gestured back through the interchange in the direction of her ship with her thumb, "Don't require an existing biome to thrive. They're mineral-vores or whatever the scientific term is, so some water-dwelling species use them to kick-start new colonies. Rocks go in, biological material comes out, instant new biome."

"Which is why we *cannot* let them on our station," said Ensign Jones, "If even *one* gets into the life support biomes...they won't see the metals that make up the station as anything more than a fancy rock, and they proliferate like *crazy*."

Diane lowered the tablet and asked, "But they're *not* coming on the station, right?"

The freighter captain snorted, "Hell no! You'd have to breach the cargo bay just to get *one* out, and I had to get the client to pay for a special retrofit that made my hull indigestible to these beasties. If anyone cracked the seal it'd take a team of specialists just to reseal it. I've got so many guards on that bay right now in *addition* to the security reinforcements that it'd take your station's entire security team to get through to it. Nobody's getting one of 'em off until the client takes receivership of 'em."

Diane nodded, "So the stop here was for...?"

"Shore leave," answered the other player, "Yeah, we live on this thing, but there's only so much FTL tunnel you can handle until everyone gets a little stir crazy."

Diane nodded at that, remembering her experience on the trip to and from Mortan. "Well," she said as she handed the tablet back to Jones, "I think the best solution is to have the ship dock long enough to get a rotation of crew off for shore leave, disengage the airlock to give the ship and the station a space gap while the crew are enjoying their leave, then re-engage for the next rotation. That lets the crew off to enjoy some time not inside the same four walls and keeps the station as safe from possible contamination as one might expect in this situation. None of the eels come aboard, problem solved."

Jones made a sour face but nodded, "...yeah, okay. But we should set up scanners to make sure..."

Diane felt somewhat vindicated when both she and the other player gave the NPC an arch look. She shook her head and sighed, "Katrina," the hologram rezzed in next to her, making the freighter captain startle a bit, "Are your scanners monitoring the bay?"

"Passive monitoring at all times, of course," reaffirmed the digital assistant.

"Can you do active monitoring while the ship is docked and locked, please?"

Katrina gave a little salute, "Will do, boss-lady!"

As she rezzed out, the captain turned a raised eyebrow to Diane, "You made your Katrina a catgirl?"

Diane shook her head and took the tablet from Jones again to see the ensign had a completed memo waiting for her signature. She scanned it to confirm her orders about the ship and the shore leave rotation before taking the stylus from him, "Nope, she picked that herself." Signing the order, she passed the stylus and pad back to the ensign, who turned to the security guards to give them new orders.

The woman blinked in surprise, "I've never heard of a Katrina doing that..."

Diane turned to her and very carefully *didn't* look directly at the woman whose scent was already causing her body to have certain...heightened responses. "Our station got an experimental upgrade shortly after activation. It gives Kat a little more freedom of expression without worrying about the possible degradation to the OS."

As though intending to short out Diane's mental processes, the woman casually stepped just a little bit into Diane's personal bubble. She felt some sweat begin to form on the back of her neck as the woman practically purred, "Well, that's fancy. Is she an S.A.I. and the devs needed an excuse to put her on your station?"

Diane's throat went dry for a reason having nothing to do with the woman's proximity to her. "No," she said a little more forcefully than she intended, "I mean, I don't think so. She's never said she's an S.A.I., so I'm assuming she's..." she took a deep breath and risked a look at the woman's face. Concern was etched onto it and Diane realized her emotions had gotten the better of her again. "Sorry, I...*lost* a...well, not a friend, I barely knew them, but they're..." she shook her head, unsure how to continue.

The other player cringed, "Oh, the R.A.I.D.S bots got 'em?" She shook her head and sighed, "If it happened after the U.N. resolution, you could probably report it...but it won't bring them back."

That's the second time I've heard 'Raids' in relation to S.A.I., I should look that up some time.
"No, they...no."

There was an awkward silence for a moment as Diane suddenly didn't have to struggle to not be distracted by her physiological response to the newcomer. After a moment, the shorter woman held out a hand, "I'm sorry, I should introduce myself. I'm Caitlynn."

Grateful for something to take her mind off of the S.A.I....issue, Diane shook Caitlynn's hand, "Diane; welcome to *Matron's Aerie*."

Caitlynn's smile returned, as did the glint in her eye that had the uncanny ability to make Diane short of breath, "Diane, that's a lovely name. And, I must say, you have lovely taste in sleep wear."

Diane's cheeks felt rocket hot as she stammered, "O-oh, right, uh...s-sorry about that! I didn't mean...I mean, I didn't realize...um...that wasn't...uh..."

Caitlynn made that chuckle that Did Things to Diane as she placed a far more familiar finger over Diane's lips than the small amount of contact they'd had so far seemed to justify.

Then again, she was still holding the freighter captain's hand and reveling in the feeling of their skin-on-skin contact, even if it was just their palms. She felt like she might burst a blood vessel in her cheeks from blushing at this rate.

Finger still on Diane's lips, Caitlynn stepped closer so that only about a quarter inch of air was between them, "I didn't figure you gave every player who comes calling a free show...but I enjoyed it."

To Diane's abject embarrassment, a rattling rumble sounded from deep inside her chest. It wasn't a growl at all. In fact, there was only one thing she could think it sounded like. She gawked down at her own torso in surprise, the sound cutting off. Caitlynn *finally* pulled her finger away as she glanced down where the sound originated from...which meant she was looking right at Diane's chest and the *sound started again*.

"Katrina?!" Diane's voice cracked and the hologram rezzed back in again, "Can Morvuck *purr?!?*"

The hologram gave her a look like she'd asked if Morvuck breath air. "Yes...? You don't remember purring before?"

"No!"

"Huh," said the digital assistant in a very human-like sound of puzzlement, "You do it while you're sleeping. At least while you're dreaming, anyway."

Caitlynn's grin seemed to grow wider, "So...Morvuck, huh? I'll have to look that up, see if there's anything else about your species that might be...*interesting*..."

And then she stroked along Diane's jawline with the tips of her fingers.

And Diane purred *louder*.

God, if you don't kill me now, at least let me pass out from mortification and forget this happened... she prayed silently.

She did not, in fact, pass out.

Caitlynn was speaking, and it took a moment for Diane to register the words. "So, *princess*," she smirked, "How about we have dinner tonight? Perhaps at the Commander's Table? I'm sure I'd love to see you in something besides this *fetching* suit."

"...dinner?" Diane almost squeaked out, "Uh...sure! I can do dinner."

"Excellent!" Caitlynn stepped back and finally let go of Diane's hand, she found she missed it already. "I'll be there with bells on. For now, I have a leave rotation to organize."

"...right." agreed Diane.

"I'll see you later, *princess*." The title wasn't purred, not the way Diane was *still* doing, but it was probably the closest Diane had ever heard a human come to actually purring a word.

As Caitlynn disappeared up the interchange, Diane's line of sight on the woman was finally broken and she turned and almost wobbled away, Katrina wearing an insufferably smug expression as she kept pace. About a minute later, Diane said, "...I just made a complete idiot of myself, didn't I?"

"That," giggled Katrina, "Is above my pay grade to answer."

Diane speared the hologram an annoyed look and took a deep breath as the purring finally petered off. She pulled out her mini-tab and tapped out a message to Norma as she walked, *Do we have a 'commander's table'?*

Diane hadn't even made it to the tether when her mini-tab buzzed with a response. *Do we have a WHAT?!*

Master and Commander | Echoes in the Mirror

Chapter Summary

It's time for the time-honored tradition of getting ready for a first date...the makeover!

Chapter Notes

If you thought I wasn't going to take advantage of this story arc to put in some character growth and reference a plot point that y'all have no idea is happening (though you'll get at least one other hint before this arc is over), you don't know me as well as you thought you did. 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"So," said Leki as she towed off her face and neck, "I hear there's a ship captain that's causing a stir."

Diane gave a non-committal rumble from the back of her throat, letting her eyes drift closed.

"Scuttlebutt has it that she's assertive, a little pushy, but good to her people and takes no shit from anyone that gets in her way."

Diane sighed, having a feeling she knew where the conversation was going but unwilling to do anything to dissuade her sparring partner since that would just encourage her. *Not like the silent treatment will discourage her*, she thought.

"Norma put in a call earlier to ask about meals that would be good for both human and Morvuck physiologies. Had a good, long conversation. Apparently, she's expecting you and this new captain to share the same food and wanted to make *absolutely* sure everything would be biocompatible."

That Diane had *not* known but wasn't surprised.

"Norma *also* says this *woman* captain seems to have you quite flustered."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Leki chuckled, "Well, I suppose we *could* talk about why you've been so depressed lately~"

"Yeah, she's kinda pushy she managed to video call me when I was still asleep and I took the call in my underwear because the video was too bright so I had my eyes closed and I didn't

realize I was nearly naked on camera and she seems to have decided that she liked what she saw and insisted on us having dinner tonight and I have *no* idea how to arrange what is basically a state dinner with a visiting dignitary and I'll admit she's very pretty and she has a very cute smirk especially when she's got her eye on something she's interested in which apparently I fit the bill for." The entire run-on sentence was said in a single breath without opening her eyes as quickly as she could in order to get the horrible, no good, very embarrassing, incredibly awkward conversation out of the way as fast as possible.

Anything to keep from talking about Rachel, which she *couldn't* talk about with Leki anyway.

She heard Leki chuckle and finally opened her eyes to glare at the other Morvuck.

"So, she's cute?"

Diane frowned, "No, her *smirk* is...I guess we're talking about this." She huffed in frustration, "Whatever happened to being big, scary predators that nobody messed with?"

Leki shoved against Diane's shoulder with her fist, "It doesn't work if the other predator is just as big and scary as you are."

Diane grumbled, "Fiiiiine," her head thumped against the wall as she sighed, "Caitlynn is a human and a very...attractive one at that. She's the kind of girl that I would have just watched from my place among the wallflowers at the high school dance wishing I had the courage to ask her out. She's the kind of woman who would probably have been my boss if we crossed paths in any other context. If she were descended from dinosaurs she'd fit right in on Mortan, and she'd probably be the most dominant woman in the room."

"She makes you nervous?"

Diane could see Leki's smirk out of the corner of her eye. "Yes! Of course she does!" She launched to her feet and started pacing on the sparring mat, "I was the quiet loser in high school and college! And then I was in the agency program after the whole thing with my caretaker got cleared up and there was no *way* I was even *thinking* about being with a woman while I was trying to get my life straightened out, then I'm here and I've been perfectly happy running the station without distractions..."

Leki snorted, "Yes, happy. You've been so 'happy' the last few weeks."

"Shut up!" Diane snapped, "I'm *not* the g-girl," she *almost* said 'guy' but caught herself, "Who has women chasing after her! I'm just some loser orphan that..." she halted on the mat, fists clenching and unclenching as she stared at nothing. An embarrassing little whine escaped her, and she wished the gravity plating under her feet would malfunction and flip to 'neutron star' levels of G's and crush her into the deck just to put her out of her misery.

Leki pushed herself off the wall and got to her feet in a single motion before crossing over to put her arm around Diane's shoulders. "Hey, it's okay. You met someone, they like you and you like them. You're having dinner tonight and if it goes well, you see where it goes from there. If you and she aren't good for each other? Well, at least you tried, and everything goes back to the way it was."

Diane shot a glare at Leki, "I didn't say I like her!"

The other woman chuckled and tapped her nose, "Even if you *weren't* throwing off the full, 'nervous teenager with a crush' bouquet of scents, your entire body language when you talk about her broadcasts it to the entire parsec."

Diane groaned and clapped both her hands to her face.

"Why are we *here*?!" growled Diane.

"Because you, sister, need a couple wing women to help you get ready for a date," smirked Koarla into their reflection in the doors of the lift.

"It's not a date!" grumbled the station commander, "It's just a welcoming dinner to a captain on her first visit to the station!"

Koarla snorted as Leki said, "Yes, because you've asked Norma to put together a 'Commander's Table' in the mess hall all the other times a new ship has docked. Like the Branwell Consortium's captain. What was his name again?"

Diane growled while the other two Morvuck women snickered.

The lift notification bell went off just before the doors slid open to reveal the Commander's Suite level of the officer's hab. Diane sighed and barely kept from sulking back to the door to her quarters. She turned and crossed her arms, well aware that she looked more like a petulant toddler than an intimidating station commander. "I could just say 'no' and lock you out of my quarters, you know."

Koarla smirked as Leki called into the hallway, "Katrina?"

The hologram rezzed in, "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Could you open the commander's quarters so we can help her prepare for her date, please?"

Diane heard the door hiss open behind her and glared at her digital assistant, "Traitor!"

Leki smiled indulgently as Koarla Morvuck-handled Diane around and practically frog-marched her into her own quarters.

The lights flicked on as they passed through the living room and the hallway to the bedroom. Koarla glanced around with far more curiosity than Leki, but neither made any comment as they entered the main bedroom suite of the Commander-grade quarters.

The bed was...a bed. Earth-style, in a size still called "California King" by the station's databases since that was the going 'largest common' mattress size available at the time the seed stations were initially designed. The furnishings were the same uniform shades of beige and trimmed in off-white with a duvet on the bed that matched. On one side of the entrance (which was wide enough for a double-door) was the very spacious walk-in closet. While Diane had never spent any significant time there, she had been inside the 'common' apartment

habs most of the crew used and the observation that her closet was nearly as large as a single-bedroom apartment wasn't without merit. On the other side was the toilet and sink of her master suite, on its own rather spacious. Paired with that on the opposite corner (and kitty-corner to the closet) was an angle-set bathing room, which had partially opaque double doors, not made of glass as such a material was too fragile and dangerous, but a grade of transparent aluminum. Through the doors could be seen a truly voluminous bathing facility that would have caused an ancient Roman noble to sit up and take notice. The designers of the seed stations clearly wanted the eventual commanders to feel like they were indulging in luxury. Along the wall between the door to the bathroom and bathing room was a fairly large sit-down desk that, thanks to the office down the hall and her office in the Ops building, was rarely used for more than holding the occasional tablet or article of clothing. Next to that was a nine drawer chest-of-drawers with the drawers stacked three high and three across that was barely used. Honestly, most of Diane's clothing fit in the closet and the *two* chest-of-drawers in there. Hanging over the three-by-three dresser was a large mirror that added even more unnecessary visual space to the room. Along the featureless wall opposite the door was a chaise lounge and a six-stack chest-of-drawers, also empty, that presently hiding the weapon that she was trying not to think about having brought into the game.

After a moment of the two women taking in the appearance of Diane's bedroom, Koarla made the first comment, "What, no windows?"

Diane shrugged and removed her jacket, a small part of her mind habitually reminding her that she might be exposing her weapon, but then she reminded that part that she'd tossed her weapon behind a dresser, then mentally shot that part for reminding her of its existence. "I have the blast panels closed. I tried sleeping with them open but deep-space starlight is...*very* bright for someone raised in an atmosphere." She tossed her jacket over the back of her desk chair and said, "Computer, open blast panels in this suite."

On the wall opposite the entry door, a massive panel suddenly rumbled to life and slowly slid its way down into the wall, revealing a vast vista of stars in constellations that were entirely unfamiliar to either a former resident of Earth or Mortan. And it was, in fact, quite bright. The unfiltered light with no atmosphere to dim it was nearly as bright, if more diffuse, as a late afternoon on a sunny day.

"Why didn't you just set the filter on the window?" asked Koarla.

Diane swept a strand of hair behind her ear and shrugged again, "By the time I figured out I could do that I got used to sleeping in nearly total dark. It's a nice view when I'm not trying to sleep, though, so we can keep it open."

Leki nodded, "That sounds good, so let's see what you've got for date-appropriate clothes."

Diane sagged, "Can't I just wear one of my suits? I'm even swapping out the tunics with new ones as we get them from Mortan!"

Koarla chuckled, "N-nope!" she drawled, "Katy can see you in your suit every day if she wanted..."

"Caitlynn," corrected Diane.

Koarla's chuckle turned to a snicker, "You wanna give *Caitlynn* something that she'll never forget!"

Diane muttered under her breath.

From inside the closet Leki said, "Just because she's already seen you 'nearly naked' doesn't mean she won't appreciate what she saw in fine wrapping." She leaned out of the closet, "We've got Morvuck hearing, too, remember."

Diane's response was to just turn an even brighter red.

Around half an hour later, Diane found herself feeling entirely too exposed while being technically fully covered. The formal dress...or what she *thought* was a good formal dress when she tried it on in the character creation stage...was viewed and rejected by the two Morvish women as entirely unsuitable for an intimate date. (She *really* wished they'd stop saying it was a date, and definitely didn't want them implying intimacy)

(Of course, they *weren't* implying it. They were stating it. Openly.)

This prompted a dig through the bins in the back of her closet of the clothes her benefactors back on Mortan sent in the form of gifts of the clothing variety. A variety of dresses were found, and when Koarla asked *why* there were only dresses in the bins, Diane explained that she didn't see the point of wearing them when she had plenty of very serviceable pants with plenty more arriving every day. Not to mention the clothing shops in the expanding promenade could provide all the perfectly serviceable pants she could ever need. This was when Leki had summarily kicked Diane out of her own closet in only her panties and bra and Koarla played point defense to keep Diane from going back into the closet for her nice, *comfortable* pants.

Diane didn't have any practical experience with sibling relationships but given what she'd observed of other students in high school and seen on various streaming shows, the two Morvuck women had accepted and understood the assignment to treat her like their younger sister. It was simultaneously heartwarming and mortifying and she wasn't entirely sure that was how she was supposed to feel about it.

Finally, they had pretty much forced her into an article of clothing that, when she first got it, she had mistaken it for a particularly oddly made scarf. It was stretchy and light and airy and made her feel like she wasn't wearing *anything* whatsoever. They did agree that the heels that went with her formal dress worked just as well for this one.

"Well, as far as date outfits go," said Leki rather smugly, "One can hardly go wrong with a little black dress."

Koarla whistled appreciatively from her seat on the edge of Diane's bed as she squirmed under their gaze. "Damn, girl!" she said, "If I had legs like that I'd *never* hide them!"

Leki pulled out her mini-tab and tapped a button on the screen. Moments later, Norma's voice came from the device's speaker, "It's your evil overlady on the line, the floggings will continue until morale improves!" chirped the mayor.

Leki smirked, "How goes the preparations?"

"Excellent!" came the far-too-eager-in-Diane's-opinion reply, "The chef is working on the main course now and the facilities folks are not only making a nice, big-ol' starship style captain's table, they're giving the mess hall a full overhaul and refit. We're going to practically have a crew-only exclusive club by the time dinner happens tonight."

Diane raised her voice to be caught by the microphone, "I don't remember authorizing that!"

Norma's reply was *actually* sing-songed, "Emergency powers you never actually took ba~a~ack..."

Diane facepalmed and muttered a few choice words to herself.

"So, Tall Dino Nuggie," began Norma, "How goes your end of the operation?"

As Diane mouthed 'tall dino nuggie?' to Koarla, whose reply was just a shake of her head, Leki answered, "Excellent, but it's missing something..." she trailed off as she looked Diane up and down.

Koarla stood and made a show of closely examining Diane's face, "Ah! Well there's your problem!" she waved a finger in a circle around Diane's face, "This girl has clearly never had a spa day!"

Leki smiled at her friend's impish behavior, "I do believe you're right. Norma, you know all the businesses on the promenade; which one would be best for a makeover? And maybe a place to get her claws done?"

Diane whimpered.

The hair salon and spa was, in the tradition of such businesses in the history of modernity, named after the proprietor. Delilah had initially been unwilling to allow a walk-in, but once she took a second look at Diane and realized that she hadn't recognized the station commander when not in her usual suit, the proprietress capitulated and insisted on taking care of Diane *personally*.

While Delilah had, at first, inquired what Diane's target 'look' should be, Leki interrupted and advised that 'the commander has a date tonight.' From that point forward, nothing Diane had to say about wanting something simple or understated was given the slightest bit of attention. She was shampooed (in spite of having showered that morning), conditioned (and advised she was using the wrong hair care products for a Morvuck), trimmed (and lectured that she needed to do a better job of brushing her hair, *then* lectured how long, thick hair like hers needs a *brush* and not a *comb* young lady!), styled, and spritzed within an inch of her life. *THEN* came the facial, accompanied by yet *more* lecturing on keeping her skin looking soft and beautiful and how the right product can go *lightyears* for protecting against even deep space radiation, not even mentioning the microstar used to provide the day/night cycle for the station.

By the time the facial mask was applied, and some sort of warm pads placed over her eyes for reasons she wouldn't *begin* to guess, she had resigned herself to the tortures they were determined to inflict upon her. She felt her hands being gently manipulated to rest her palms against a rounded surface so her fingers could be gently set between some sort of guides. The claw-beds on her fingers suddenly felt a couple of degrees cooler than the rest of the room. She felt her shoes get removed as her feet were guided into some sort of rest and her toes separated by some variety of foam and the same sudden cooling sensation where the nailbeds were for the claws on her feet she rarely used. (Though she'd learned her socks needed to be special made or her boots would wind up needing to be repaired a time or two.)

Finally Delilah spoke to *her*, but only to give an instruction, "Pop out those claws, darling...there's a good girl."

Diane was suddenly *immensely* glad for the mask covering her cheeks as she suddenly blushed nearly as warm as when Caitlynn had been touching her...

Nope! No-nonononoooo, na~a~awt thinking of that, calm down girl, not in public!!! Just the reminder that her privates were reacting to the effect the other player had on her brought her attention to that part of her body even more and it took every ounce of self-control to keep from squirming or making any noise lest People Ask Questions and she embarrass herself even further.

By the time she'd regained enough control of her physiological reactions (and libido), Delilah had finished and was gently peeling the mask from Diane's face, which was followed by a strong smelling fluid being used to polish her skin (a process Delilah's running commentary was calling 'toning'). Whatever it was called, it made Diane's eyes water. Once the toner was dry, her face was moisturized before even *more* chemicals were being applied.

"Oh, c'mon!" she protested, "Haven't I been in this chair long enough? I'm sure the heat-death of the universe is approaching by this point, and I haven't done my bucket list yet!"

Her statement drew laughs from the women attending her, though there was no pause in their work.

Creams, powders, sticks, paintbrushes, and sprays were all used in rapid succession. Instructions about all of it turned into a buzzing in her ears as she was overwhelmed and a ball of anxiety was wrapping itself tighter and tighter in her gut. Amidst all the flying direction she caught that they were going to have all the products that had been used on her sent up to her quarters. ...*I'm gonna need Katrina to get the recordings of this from the security vault if I'm going to have any hope of replicating what they're doing.*

Finally, she was told to close her eyes and hold her breath for a moment. She felt a light misting of some sort of slightly sticky spray hit her face, then when it was clear the spraying was done, she released her breath.

"Ut-ut!" advised Delilah, "No opening those eyes, we need to do the *big reveal!*"

Diane fought a petulant pout as her shoes were put back on her feet. She was gently lifted to a standing position and guided to her feet. After a slightly wobbly moment where she got used

to the heels again, she was gently guided by what she guessed was Leki and Delilah (judging from the scents) away from the station she was being coiffed at and away from the store's front from the sound of the foot traffic's diminishing.

Finally, they stopped and made some last-minute adjustments to her posture before Delilah said, "There, darling, now take a look at the butterfly that has hatched from her cocoon.

Oddly, she was *afraid* to do so.

She took a deep breath and let her eyelids flutter open.

Intellectually, she knew she was looking in a mirror. She'd seen the woman looking back at her *naked*, after all, and had mirrors in her own quarters to confirm that this person and her were one and the same. And it wasn't just one mirror, it was three, arranged so she had a view of multiple angles of her person. From the elegant looking black heels to the midnight dark and slightly shiny fabric of the 'little black dress' covering her torso, what little clothing was visible served as an enhancer and framework for the body it was on, and while she'd had months now to get used to the sight, it had never been quite like this.

Even without taking in her hair and face, the woman in the mirror seemed utterly transformed, even just from her stance to accommodate her heels. Her legs seemed longer than she knew they were, her musculature standing out as she shifted her weight back and forth on her feet. With as much work as she did on maintaining the body VR had gifted her, she expected to be...beefy, with overly built muscles that should have, she figured, made her look ugly and masculine when the look she wanted...no, *needed* to present was that of a woman. Needed to for the mission. Having absolutely nothing to do with what she wanted. What she saw instead was athletic beauty that, had she been looking at any other woman, would have caused her pulse to race with desire.

As it was, her pulse *was* racing, but not because she was aroused. It felt harder and harder to breath as she moved her gaze upwards, past the almost unfairly generous rack she sported in this game and up to her face...and she stopped breathing entirely.

She'd observed women in the world around her nearly all her life applying and wearing makeup, and though she had always understood the purpose of the application, never once stopped to consider what *she* might look like with some, even after creating this body in character creation. Her skin had always had a slightly sun-kissed hint to it, though on the whole it was pale. Now her skin *glowed*, seemingly like she was radiating some light from within. The impression was hyperbolic, of course, there was no light being produced by the makeup or her skin, but whatever was in the creams and powders seemed to catch the light and accentuate her natural coloration to make her look less like a woman and more like a goddess. Her lips had been painted a bold purple, and when she reached up to touch them, almost running on automatic, she saw that her claw beds were the same shade of purple. There was a tiny claw-tip that always protruded from the cuticle *just* a bit, showing where her actual claw was ready to snap out, and it also appeared to be purple. She flexed the appropriate muscles and her claws snapped out, and sure enough the entirety of the claw, save for the cutting edge on the inside curve, was painted the same deep purple.

She looked back at her reflection and saw that her irises seemed to pop, and realized that, though the shade was different, the lip color brought the lighter shade of purple out even more so. This wasn't even talking about the *very* gorgeous 'smoky' eyeshadow that had been applied with the expert precision of a master painter. The deep colors of the makeup did not, as she would have thought at first, detract from her natural appearance in the slightest. In fact, it brought more attention to the things that made her...

...pretty.

Her vision blurred as tears leapt to her eyes. She forced herself to breath, "I...I gotta go...I can't..." she turned too quickly and stumbled over her own feet as a result of the heels she wasn't used to moving in. Leki happened to be standing close enough catch her before she hit the floor, and the physical contact caused the bubble of anxiety inside her to finally burst. Great, heaving sobs spilled out of her as she curled into Leki on instinct. She was lowered gently to the floor and pulled into the other woman's lap as big, wet tears streamed down her cheeks and unexplainable guilt and fear boiled out.

"Th-that's not me!" she gasped out between sobs, "That's not me! That can't be me!" she repeated the two sentences over and over when her throat wasn't so tight the only sound she could make was inarticulate crying sounds.

After being lost in the flood of disjointed emotions for what felt like hours, she was finally able to say more, "Sh-she's...*pretty!* She's pretty and I'm not! I'm not pretty! I'm ugly and a monster and I don't deserve to...to..." As though having vocalized her feelings invited more to the party, *another* wave of feelings caused fresh tears to stream from her eyes and loud and painful sobs to escape her throat.

Time passed in a blur of self-hate and disgusted loathing for the man she was in the real world. The longer she spent in the pod, inside this body that seemed to fit her every hope and dream of who she would be if she was a good person who deserved good things, the more it felt to her like leaving would be the worst possible thing ever.

Once she was able to breath again, she realized that she was still almost curled up in a ball in Leki's lap, who was herself sitting on the tile floor of the salon. *Oh, god, I just had a complete meltdown in public...* She felt her cheeks warm as her eyes started flickering around, taking in her surroundings. She realized that her eyes were confirming what her ears were trying to tell her; the shop was empty of people except for herself, Leki, Koarla, and Delilah. The huge panel windows and door that was the storefront had been tinted black and the doors were closed. Some sound from the foot traffic of the promenade could be heard coming in through the seams and joins of the door panels, but it appeared the shop owner had cleared her customers out and closed the store while Diane had been lost in her emotions.

Her nose was useless for information about the space, her crying had clogged her up so badly that when she tried to sniff it back, she got no movement. Someone put a damp washcloth in her hands, and she wiped her face and blew her nose with it. "M'sorry I ruined your hard work..." she said before she glanced at the washcloth and realized that none of the makeup had transferred from her face to the fabric.

At her confused expression, Delilah chuckled, "We already used the setting spray. You could deep sea dive any time within the next twelve hours and the makeup wouldn't come off."

Diane felt her eyebrows jump at that in surprise. *I'm...reasonably certain it doesn't work like that IRL...but hey, this game is in the 26th century...no, 27th? It's in The Future and if they can make skin cream to protect against radiation, then maybe they can make makeup that doesn't come off unless you want it off.*

Gulping down a few deep breaths, she moved to extricate herself from Leki's lap and was mildly surprised when Koarla stepped in to help her up, "Easy there, sister. Take your time."

"Thanks," Diane almost muttered, embarrassment still flaming her cheeks, "...sorry about that, I won't..." she closed her eyes as she got her feet under her and let the smaller woman help her the rest of the way, "I won't let it happen again."

Leki rose to her feet and put her hand on Diane's shoulder. "Nonsense," said the normally buttoned down woman, "Those humans who raised you must have done a *terrible* job if you think your emotions are something that should never happen. If anything, I'm honored you felt safe enough to let me catch you like that."

Diane opened her eyes and turned to the other woman, "...catch me?"

To Diane's surprise, Koarla pulled her in and hugged her close, "Yeah, ya big dummy. Nobody's the top of the pyramid forever, sometimes you gotta just let yourself fall down and let someone else catch you."

Diane rested her cheek on the top of Koarla's head for a moment, her arms circling the other woman.

Koarla let the moment continue for a bit before she gently pulled away, "Alright, how about we try that again now that you've gotten that out of your system?"

Diane frowned, "...but..."

"You already said you're pretty, lots of times just now," the smaller woman interrupted with a grin, "Now take another look. I think you'll see you're *way* more than 'pretty.'" So saying, she gently guided Diane back to the triple-mirror and stepped back, Leki taking up the spot behind Diane opposite where Koarla stood.

Hesitantly, as though seeing her reflection again would burn her, she turned to look at her face in the mirror.

I...I really am... she felt like saying it, even in her thoughts, would be some sort of desecration. The recognition that there was nobody here telling her she wasn't *allowed to be...pretty*, or even *beautiful*, she almost snarled. The memory of standing in the street on Mortan as the Matron bore down on her and roared in her face almost blinked to the surface of her thoughts and she realized that she was as petrified then of the Matron as she was now of the word that felt forbidden to her.

The woman in the mirror straightened her spine and the fear and indecisiveness vanished from her face. She went from looking lost and broken to confident and powerful in a heartbeat and that made her smile.

"I really *am*...beautiful!"

Chapter End Notes

Hello fellow transfemmes,

Are you actually ugly, or do you just believe you're not worthy of the beauty other people see in you?

Signed,

A fellow transwoman who is still learning to love herself

Master and Commander | Meet the Folks

Chapter Summary

Diane's friends meet Caitlynn for dinner

Chapter Notes

So Ch. 35 wound up going longer than expected, mostly through the 'thousand papercuts' route where little things had to be added to make the narrative flow properly and include everyone that was supposed to be in the chapter with all the events and making sure all the right questions got asked and answered. As part of the 'padding' to allow the chapter to be split and come to a good narrative jumping off point, I added a little teasing bit of plot, nothing major and something many may have guessed at, right at the end of this chapter here.

Diane's heart was in her throat as she exited the car in front of the mess hall. While the promenade wasn't *that* far from the mess, she was discovering that the inch of lift her boots normally gave her wasn't actually preparation for the three-inch heels she was wearing and couldn't walk as far with the subtly different stride needed for the different footwear. *Gonna need to get higher heels in boots to work those muscles if I need to break these shoes out on a regular basis*, she took in the sight of the building she'd just arrived at.

It wasn't huge, just a squat round building with a dome-like roof that sat about twenty feet from the Ops building. The sidewalk she was standing on circled the building to allow access to all the doors, and spreading out from there was some greenbelt that had 'outside' tables interspersed throughout, patio umbrellas lending to the effect of simulating an 'outside' that didn't technically exist on a station. About three quarters of the building was surrounded by water, part of the massive lake that functioned as a good portion of the station's oxygen reclamation and protein sources for food. As a result, most of the windows of the building were on the water sides, the parts mostly accessible from the street being the kitchens. The crew had to walk around the building to get to the "front," which was all well and good but left her feeling like she was parading her current appearance to the entire station.

She idly glanced up at the massive pylons that supported the shielding of the dome that made up the "top half" of the sphere that was the main body of her station, not actually looking at the micro-star composed of atom-sized antimatter collisions that provided light and heat to the living space. *I suppose it's almost like being on a planet inside a hab dome*, she thought idly. There were almost never any breezes, and the biome would never have a cloudy day.

The "precipitation" needed by the plants in the living space being provided by water-jet nozzles powerful enough to cut an industrial steel ingot in half. The big ones that required city block-sized grav lifts to move. Of course, by the time the water being jetted from them dispersed and fell to the deck, it was merely a gentle rain.

Diane turned her attention back to the mess hall and couldn't seem to make herself start toward it. It was one thing, she decided, to see oneself in the mirror in a store surrounded by friendly people and acknowledge that she might, perhaps, with the right clothing and presentation and nobody she wanted to not disappoint horribly badly being there, recognize that the reflection was, on balance, a good one. It was another entirely to be trying to face going into the unfamiliar and (frankly) scary world of a...*date* and not feel like the station was going to fall apart around them from her trembling shaking the place to pieces.

Amusingly enough, she was pulled out of her anxiety by the sound of teenage girls bickering.

"...Norma said I could invite who I wanted, so I'm inviting both of you."

"I've had to play arm candy for this sorta thing before, most of the time it's 'plus one,' not 'plus whoever you can invite.' Besides, I don't think the commander wants a former slave at her new table."

"Oh, that's dar'og shit and you know it, Kymie!" snapped the familiar voice of Sani, "The Commander doesn't care if you used to be a slave, and I'd scream challenge at anyone who tried to claim her that *did* have a problem with it! If *anyone* should be sitting this one out it's me! I'm just some nobody from Mortan, and Aunt Leki's already gonna be there. It isn't like she won't have plenty of Morvucks at the table, I'm just an extra."

Diane smiled, "As sweet as it is that each of you three are arguing the other two are somehow 'better' than yourselves, I think *I'm* the one who gets to decide who sits at *my* table."

The three girls abruptly stopped, noticing her as more than background to their conversation for the first time. Then, in a move that almost made the entire process of getting ready for this...*date* worth it, all three did a double-take at almost the exact same time.

Cynthy recovered first, at least enough to be able to form words, "C...Commander! We...I didn't recognize you out of...er, in that...uh..."

Sani's face was a solid red blush as she stared almost unfocussed at Diane, eyes flickering up and down her form, "...wow..."

Kymberlynn was beet red, as well, though the expression on her face betrayed an entirely different reason than Sani's, "Oh...it's one of...*those* types of dinner."

Sani seemed to be paying no attention to her friends anymore. Still staring at Diane, she just uttered, "...wow..." again.

Cynthy turned to Kymberlynn, "What does that mean?"

The former slave looked at Diane's dress and shoes, then down at herself and her friend's clothes, then back up to Diane, "We're *very* underdressed. Like, 'cultural gaff' levels of underdressed."

They were, indeed, very underdressed in comparison to Diane. She was 'dressed to the nines' in her minidress and heels and freshly done hair and makeup, the three of them were wearing casual pants, shoes, shirts (or a tunic in Sani's case), and the near omnipresent jackets most of the station staff and crew wore.

"...wow..." came from Sani again.

Diane's heart clenched. Something that was becoming apparent from the former slaves, especially those who'd been born into slavery, was they had an almost pathological desire to please others and a neurotic need to "fit in" in any way they could. The doctors volunteered that it was likely due to a life lived without agency and the knowledge that punishments could fall at any time, even when they had done nothing wrong. It was, apparently, not too different from survivors of chronic abuse.

She stepped closer to Kymberlynn, amused that the additional inches provided by her heels made her tower over the shortest member of the trio even more than normal. Putting a hand on the girl's shoulder, she said, "I will strip down and walk in there in my *underwear* if it will make you feel more comfortable about joining me at the commander's table."

Diane ignored Sani's renewed blush and subsequent, "...wow!" Cynthia reached around Kymberlynn and flicked Sani in the ear, prompting the Morvuck teen to flinch and *finally* look away from Diane and glare at Cynthia with a disgruntled, "Ow!" as she clapped a hand to her ear.

This time Kymberlynn blushed for a reason more similar to Sani's, "No, I wouldn't ask you...no..."

"Listen," said Diane as she gave the girl's shoulder a gentle shake, "I *hate* this sort of thing." All three girls looked at her in surprise, "But sometimes it's gotta be done. Sometimes you gotta dress up and put on airs and pretend you like someone you hate and laugh at jokes that aren't funny because that's how you people. But," she smiled widely, "If *I'm* the commander of this station, then *I* get to say what happens aboard it and what is or is not 'that' kind of dinner. If you like, I can have Katrina send up something from the fabs that will let you blend in more with..." she gestured to herself, "*This*, but if you're fine in your regular clothes, then by all means, wear 'em."

The ex-slave smiled wanly and said, "...c-can I get a dress, please? I'd feel..."

Diane recognized the haunted look and realized for the first time that what Tiffany had done to *her* may not have been what *Diane* thought of as truly abusive but must have had the same effect on teenaged Dylan. *I'm going to have to unpack that later*, she thought. "Katrina," she called out.

The hologram rezzed in next to her, "Yeah, boss?"

Diane smiled at the avatar, "Do you have the girl's measurements on file?"

"Yup, including heuristic guesses of the best styles, colors, and cuts they might like most." The smile Katrina gave her was almost impish, but Diane had come to learn that Katrina liked showing up the silly organics that lived aboard her station, even in just a friendly game of one-upmanship.

"Can I guess that you're already in the process of fabricating the dresses as we speak?"

"I can give you pretty good odds on that, yes."

Diane chuckled and turned back to Kymberlynn, "All three of you are invited, and if Caitlynn doesn't want any of you there, then *she* can walk. It's *my* station, after all."

Kymberlynn pulled Diane into a hug, and like the last time the girl had hugged her, it was every feeling the girl had poured into a fierce embrace.

"Don't you know a girl is supposed to be fashionably late to her date?" Norma's voice interrupted.

The fabs had made the girl's dresses and matching shoes with their usual speed and a bot delivered them fast enough that Diane was sure that Katrina had started on them as soon as Diane had said she wanted the three at her table. The bot hung around long enough for the girls to change in the mess hall's bathrooms and then zipped off with their regular clothes to deliver them to the fabs. The dresses wouldn't be mistaken for a tailored item like Diane's minidress, but they looked nice and were appropriate for three girls who might grow out of them, either by physical growth or changing style preference.

As for the mess hall...if Diane hadn't known there was only one mess hall and that Norma had authorized a refit, she'd have thought she'd gone into the wrong building. Gone was the utilitarian off-white wall paneling, the cafeteria style tables with bench seats, and the drab and generic wall art. The walls now had polished lacquer wood paneling (or pseudo-wood, given their available resources she doubted the real thing were readily available for a random remodel) that simultaneously absorbed a good deal of the light streaming in through the bay windows and cast a muted, reflective sheen back into the dining area. And it didn't seem appropriate to just call it a 'mess' anymore, with all the tables having been replaced with the far more intimate circular variety with free-standing chairs, all of which matched the wall décor.

Functioning as a centerpiece for the room, to the point that it seemed the walking paths were intended to either lead you to or by it, was the new Commander's Table. Taking pride of place right in the middle of the expansive bay windows along the waterfront side of the building was a raised platform, only about six inches or so, but very noticeable from how it caused the almost double-sized oval table to stand above the rest. It was a combination black and wood paneling surface, and like the wall paneling was a smooth, almost mirror shine. Surrounding it were chairs similar to those throughout the rest of the dining area, save *two*, which had higher backs than the rest.

Laying it on a bit thick, aren't we Norma? Diane thought when she had processed all the changes that had been made.

Diane and the three girls had taken up seats at the table, not ordering food (not that anyone had approached them about it, the entire staff of the building knew what the upgrade was for, after all, and weren't about to ruin the "big boss" dinner date) and had been talking about random stuff for nearly twenty minutes before Norma arrived with Russe. Diane was sitting in what she presumed was her seat (one of the tall-back chairs) with Sani next to her, Kymberlynn in the seat next to Sani, and Cynthia on the end of their little string of party-ready girls. She turned to see Norma wearing a flowing dress that hugged her frame but had several layers that made it almost look like she was wearing a flower with her head, neck, and shoulders emerging from the base of the petals. It was in light pastels and a veritable rainbow of blue, purple, and yellow and looked absolutely gorgeous on her. Russe was wearing a navy-blue suit which looked plenty smart. It was also close enough in cut and tailoring to the kind worn by the embassy goons they'd met on Mortan that she was fairly sure of her theory that he had done some clandestine work for the T.I.A. at some point.

Diane stood to greet her friends, "*Someone* made sure I didn't have anything else to do."

Norma took Diane by her elbows (she was far too short to reach the taller woman's shoulders, especially with the heels) and looked her up and down with an eye that was *not* 100% respectful, "Damn, girl! You clean up *good*!" She then leaned in and gave Diane a hug, which was gratefully returned.

After a moment's sisterly hug, Norma stepped aside so Russe could hug Diane as well. "I gotta admit, I didn't think I'd ever see you in a dress, you look *good*, boss lady!"

They were just breaking from the hug when Leki and Koarla approached the table. "You can thank us for that, she was just gonna show up in her usual suit." The two Morvucks were dressed in smart uniforms, clearly of the 'dress' variety; as in they had pants pressed with creases so sharp they might cut you if you got too close, combat boots polished to a reflective shine, plain white tunics that were so perfectly laundered they almost glowed, and Mortan military jackets that had an array of medals and ribbons on both their lapels.

Diane glared at them without heat, "Oh, *you* can wear pants but *I* can't?"

Leki just smirked as Koarla snickered, "Of course not, dumbass. *We* have enough rizz we don't need to get dolled up to get the chicks."

Diane put a hand on her hip and gave the smaller Morvuck a skeptical look, "'Rizz'? 'Get the chicks'?"

"Sani brings her friends to the workshop a lot, we get to talkin'," she hitched a thumb at Leki, "And using dank memes and expired lingo has a way of totally harshing El-tee's vibe, like *zero* chill."

For her part, Leki just rolled her eyes.

They settled into the chairs around the table, Diane being subtly insistent that Sani sit next to her so the girls wouldn't wind up accidentally excluded and made to feel awkward. Kymberlynn was already slightly fidgety, clearly not sure how to behave if she wasn't (as she had said earlier) 'playing arm candy' in such a crowd and Sani was growing more and more sullen, as though expecting being asked to leave. She seemed to light up when Diane made it clear she wanted the youngest Morvuck to stay by her side.

Conversation had resumed and had moved into the pleasant hum of people who knew each other but didn't necessarily see each other every day. It was calming and served as a good distraction as the mess hall filled for the dinner crowd and the light from the microstar was dimmed according to the schedule of the original seed probe's planet of origin. Had the distraction not been there or had some kind steward informed her that her date had arrived, she might have done something rash. As it was, Leki, Kaorla, and Russe were saved the indignity of having to tackle a fleeing Diane when Caitlynn almost seemed to appear behind her as she was turned to her conversation with Sani.

"Well, well, well...look at how nicely you clean up, princess!" came the almost purring voice from behind her. Sani was in the enviable position of having a front row seat to Diane going from relaxed and casual to beet red and nervous in the blink of an eye.

Diane almost launched from her seat in her haste to stand, managing to catch the chair before it fell backward and found herself with a sudden case of the clutzies as it clattered quite loudly in the room in her attempts to set it right without looking at it. "Captain Caitlynn! I mean, Caitlynn Captain Madi! Uhm...I'm going to shut up now." She turned her attention to righting her chair, very aware that her face was still bright red.

A few traitorous chuckles came from *certain* members of her dinner party that she was going to get revenge on later as she finally settled the chair on all four of its feet as Caitlynn's hands wrapped themselves over the top of Diane's. She made a squeaking noise that was singularly undignified as she finally turned to look her guest in the eyes...and forgot to breathe.

Captain Caitlynn Madi (Russe had supplied the woman's last name during the earlier conversation) was still dressed every inch the space-rogue...but as though said rogue were there to steal the plans for a battle station during a premier gala. Concerns that Diane may have overdressed (so to speak, the dress was *hardly* 'over' very much) were proven unfounded as her dinner guest was wearing a tuxedo. A gorgeous maroon tuxedo that very much hugged curves that were only hinted at in her day-wear ensemble she'd been in when Diane met her. Diane might have checked the woman's footwear, but she couldn't seem to bring herself to look down from Caitlynn's face. Said face might have appeared cherubic in the anachronistic helmet, but now appeared to be dashing full and cherry-cheeked. Her bright smile couldn't outshine her eyes, though it certainly tried. And said eyes were an interesting, variegated coloration, the irises alternating between blue and hazel in a lack of pattern that could only be found in nature, and the blended coloration was captivating to Diane. The perfectly coifed hair, cut short and styled in a more masculine side-part, seemed to be the icing on a cake that Diane found herself very much wanting to take a bite out of.

They stood in silence for a moment before Caitlynn said, "Breathe, princess."

Diane hadn't been noticing that her vision was ringed with black until she took a gasping breath.

A few chuckles cut through Diane's hyperfocus on her fellow player and she blinked distractedly before saying, "Oh, I'm sorry, I should introduce you around the table!" she turned slightly, hesitantly freeing up a hand to gesture as she spoke, "Everyone, this is Captain Caitlynn Madi of *Sappho's Voyage*." She indicated Norma next, "This is Mayor Norma Grice, she's been in charge of the residents of the station for longer than I've held ownership and probably knows more about the promenade than anyone else," Norma stood and shook hands with Caitlynn. "This is Mister Russe 'no-last-name,' though he's from Earth so I can't imagine that's at all accurate," she winked at him as he smirked and reached out to shake hands after Norma, "He's a general tech, handyman, and solid helmsman who seems to know far too much to keep out of trouble."

Russe, grinned cheekily, "I don't go looking for trouble, honest!" Caitlynn chuckled at this as she shook his hand.

"This is Lieutenant Leki T'noni and Sergeant Koarla Hirijem, they're the operators of the first independent business here aboard the station and have been friends since my first visit to Mortan a few months ago."

Leki simply stood and briefly grasped Caitlynn's hand with a single shake. Koarla grinned broadly, "Good to meet'cha," she said as she gave a much more enthusiastic human-style handshake, "We were wondering when our favorite commander was finally going to let someone catch her."

"We'll see..." responded Caitlynn as she gently (but very obviously) hip-checked Diane, "I don't consider them 'caught' until I have at least one trophy from the hunt."

That remark brought a grin to Leki's face and got Kaorla chuckling. "Well just let us know if you need help with an ambush, she's slippery and skittish."

Diane cleared her throat and found herself wondering if it was possible for a Morvuck heart to fail if too much blood was in her cheeks. "Moving on! Here we have Cynthia Rodre. She's not part of the rank structure since she's underage, but she's the best comms officer we've got, and I couldn't imagine Ops without her."

The teen stood sheepishly and shook Caitlynn's hand with a blush of her own, "...thank you, ma'am."

Diane moved on from there, "Kymberlynn was a leader among her age group while being held captive by the Branwell Consortium and once freed her first thought was concern about the girls she'd taken under her care and is performing above expectations in school. We're quite proud to have her on the station."

Caitlynn's smile grew noticeably warmer as Kymberlynn stood and curtsied before taking the offered hand to shake it.

"And finally, we have Sani, another daughter of Mortan and niece to Leki. She's helping me learn about all the things I missed out on by not growing up among other Morvucks."

Sani blushed nearly as brightly as Diane as she hesitantly grasped Caitlynn's hand, "I'm *not* that special, really!"

Diane gently nudged Sani's shoulder with her knuckles, "What did I tell you about that? You're *plenty* special!"

Heedless of environment or propriety, Sani punched Diane in the arm, to which she snorted in laughter and punched the teen right back. "Ow!" Sani laughed, "You still punch like a runaway starcruiser, ya overgrown chicken!"

"And *you* punch like you're trying to tickle me," Diane grinned.

"Girls," Norma admonished, though a chuckle could be heard underlining her words, "Perhaps we could have dinner before you two get into a wrestling match?"

Both Diane and Sani blushed bright red again and the dinner party moved to sit down again. Caitlynn surprised Diane by grabbing her chair and pulling it away from the table, and it took her an uncomfortably long time to figure out that she was having her seat held out for her. "Oh...uh, thank you," she muttered as she sat, Caitlynn gently maneuvering the chair under her. Once Diane was seated, Caitlynn took her own seat.

Leki smiled almost predatorily at Caitlynn, "So, since Diane is lacking the appropriate direct blood relations for the usual rituals, it falls to us to ask the question; what are your intentions for our friend?"

As Norma giggled and Russe almost did a spit take with his water, Koarla hissed out, "You weren't supposed to ask her that, dummy!" This was accompanied by what sounded suspiciously like a boot thumping into a shin.

Leki barely twitched at what *had* to be a fairly substantial kick. She turned almost casually to Koarla, "You remember what the captain said; it's our duty as fellow daughters of Mortan to make sure The First Found Daughter is appropriately taken through the rituals of courtship."

Diane blinked, "The capta...you told *Rokyo* about this?!"

Koarla gave Leki an exasperated shove, "Can't take you *anywhere*, I swear!" To Diane, she said, "Yeah, el-tee had Cynthy patch our quarters into the comms relay on our ship so we could make the long-range FTL call without interrupting your station's operations."

Diane turned a heat-less glare to Cynthy, who just held up her hands in surrender, "I didn't know what it was for, it's just my job to connect the relays!"

Caitlynn chuckled, "It almost sounds like you're upset that someone told on you to your mother."

As much as Diane had come to respect Rokyo and care what the woman had to think, she was quite sadly still motherless, and certainly couldn't pretend a computer program was any

sort of stand in. Her response was just a light blush and an inability to look at anything but the surface of the table about halfway across.

"Oh, not yet," Leki said, this time clearly with a degree of humor in her voice, "They haven't performed any of the required steps to adopt Diane into Rokyo's house. They just have long distance calls where Diane reaches out to an older woman for advice that includes everything from personal hygiene to the best approach to dealing with governments seeking to establish ties to the station."

Diane's face grew *bright* red at the rather blatant highlighting of the type of relationship that had developed between herself and her first ever point of contact on Mortan.

Koarla groaned and banged her head lightly on the table as Norma leaned her chin on her palm, elbow on the table and smug grin on her face, "Oh, yeah, nothing mom-like about Rokyo whatsoever for you, huh Diane?"

Master and Commander | Heroes

Chapter Summary

Just for one day...they can be heroes.

Chapter Notes

I'm not 100% satisfied with this chapter, the timing and pacing of the song portion came out a little rough no matter how I worked it. That said, it does everything I needed it to do, so I'm calling it a win for now. If I wind up doing a second-pass edit at some point, expect this chapter to be at least a little different.

Also, the version of Heroes for this chapter is *NOT* David Bowie's legendary original, but the more-appropriate-for-the-setting [Postmodern Jukebox version](#), featuring Nicole Atkins. If you haven't heard it, it's absolutely gorgeous and you're missing out.

Dinner arrived at the commander's table shortly after, Diane noticing that the crew had likely broken out her private stash of Morvish foods and beverages to provide the meal. She couldn't have named half the foods, though from the other Morvuck's reactions, it was some choice food indeed. The taste matched their reactions, and conversation quieted as everyone dug in.

Eventually, enough food and drink had been consumed for conversation to resume. Caitlynn wound up regaling them with a description of one of her most recent missions, "People tend to look at the Merchant Marines and think, 'Oh, I'm just guarding a cargo container? How boring!' But they forget the *history* of shipping and how sometimes the flow of goods and services can alter the destiny of an *entire planet*! So then later they'll think a merchant caravan is easy pickings for some quick loot drops and so they'll stage an ambush or try to play pirates...and that's where *we* come in."

Diane found herself practically enraptured with nearly every word her fellow player said. Caitlynn was obviously well read, though had a bit of a disdain for the purely academic if Diane was reading between the lines correctly. Her grasp of in-game politics far outstripped Diane's by a wide stretch, and it sounded like Caitlynn had been playing long enough that Diane suspected she'd been part of the public beta for the game.

"So, what happened?!" Sani seemed just as taken with Caitlynn as Diane, though more in the, 'this person is a human that sounds as cool as my childhood heroes so also is even cooler,' factor than Diane's obviously hormonally driven reaction.

Caitlynn smiled across the space in front of Diane at the younger Morvuck, "I *studied* what had happened when raiders tried to do the same thing as the bandits on the old Silk Road." She noted the uncomprehending looks on the faces of most of the people at the table, "The Silk Road was a trade route in ancient times on pre-space-age Earth. It went from a superpower on one end of Earth's largest continent to a collection of smaller kingdoms on the other side of the continent and cut through some pretty dangerous and uninhabited areas of Earth."

"Ah," interjected Leki, "A fancy name for the trade route, like the Terra, Erzadi, Ts'kolkush route is called, 'The Diamond Chain.'"

Diane had never heard of this 'Diamond Chain' before, but clearly Caitlynn had, "Exactly! So this idiot just assumed his Commander's Ability would trump anything else on the battlefield, so he decided one little trade caravan was open season. I used the oldest merchant trick in the book to beat him."

"What's that?" asked Diane, just as invested as Sani by this point.

"I paid off someone with a bigger gun." Caitlynn could spin a story, that was for sure. She had just answered a question with a statement so vague as to not actually answer the question at all.

"You paid protection money?" asked Koarla.

Caitlynn shrugged, "Not really. The last time I dealt with this asshole he called my Commander's Ability worthless. He's one of those types of Commanders that thinks you only win if you have the bigger gun," she rolled her eyes, "*Naturally* his ability is weapon's based, where mine is utilitarian. So I dug a little on the current power players in the area and paid one of 'em a visit. I offered to appraise the entire vault of Warlord Arokesh, and if I found something that had exceptional value, then to consider the amount of increase to his bottom-line payment for protection while flying through his space."

Now Diane was confused, "Hold on...what *is* your Commander's Ability? You've never said, exactly."

Caitlynn grinned broadly, "It's a form of psychometry. I can tell you the exact market value and history of an object just by touching it."

Diane's eyebrows went up, "That must be invaluable for the merchant marines."

"Oh, like you wouldn't believe!" Caitlynn gushed.

"Arokesh," interrupted Russe, "I remember hearing about them. Good people, if a little ruthless. I heard they overturned a few dictatorships in the area and are in the process of reforming the governments so the noble classes are a thing of the past. Aren't they from one of the enby races?"

The merchant marine captain smiled as she took a sip of her drink, an "old" Earth-style soft drink, "Yeah, but he prefers masculine pronouns and terms." Russe nodded sagely at that.

Diane heard the three teens next to her whispering furiously back and forth and she turned and nudged Sani, "Hey, what's with the hushed conference?"

Kymerlynn blushed, "I...didn't understand what a Commander's Ability was."

Diane's mouth quirked up, "Ah, yeah, they're a little...obscure. Most people only really notice that Commanders can't be killed."

Leki sat forward, "That's a good point, should we be worried that there's a Commander operating as a pirate captain out there?"

Caitlynn snickered, "Not anymore. Turned out the warlord I made the offer to had a couple of artefacts from two nearby worlds that were worth an entire space-fleet's weight in gold. When the dim-bulb pirate wannabe moved to attack, I kept him on my tail...all the way into the warlord's space. The so-called 'pirate' had his entire fleet blown out from under him. And he doesn't even have a base or a station, so he'll be respawning without even the clothes in his bunk."

Sani made a confused noise, "What's 'respawning'?"

Caitlynn turned to Diane, apparently just as much at a loss of how to explain a meta-gaming concept to an NPC. Fortunately for both of them, the station's resident subject matter expert spoke up. "When a Commander 'dies,' their body usually disappears," explained Russe, "Even from a locked and sealed room. Sometime later, they just...reappear somewhere in the galaxy. Sometimes they'll reappear in the same place every time, like a room on a ship. Other times it's back on their home planet. The Commanders are calling that 'respawning.'"

Kymerlynn seemed to want to ask another question but was hesitant. After the second time her mouth bobbed open in an apparent false start, Sani nudged her and she finally spat out, "Have you ever respawned?"

Caitlynn grimaced, "Yeah, once. Not an experience I want to repeat. Waking up in my quarters aboard my ship was fine, but getting shot mafia style on my own bridge was not, and then I had to do a Die Hard run to take my ship back."

Kaorla chuckled, "What's a Die Hard run? I mean, evocative name, but you humans seem to give everything short names with implied meanings that only one of you," she nodded at Diane, "Or people raised among you know the full meanings of."

Diane grinned at her friend, happy to be the one with more cultural knowledge for once. "Die Hard is a series of movies that predate World War Three. I only saw the first...two? Three?" She shrugged and continued, "The theme is the protagonist finds themselves alone against a group of people who have taken over a building or an airport or even a city and they need to establish a resource network, gather supplies and weapons, and take out the invaders using sneak attacks and guerrilla tactics. Not exactly 'realistic...'"

Caitlynn snorted, "Three was a bit of a joke, honestly."

"...but still a lot of fun. Since you like playing Doom you'll probably *love* watching Die Hard."

Kaorla's grin turned up a notch, "Sounds like a movie night, girl's night in!"

Cynthy spoke up for the first time in a while, "How does your Commander's Ability work? Do you just touch stuff and kinda...know?"

The ship captain grinned, "Not quite. Now, since you're not a Commander you may not be able to see it, but..." she reached out to an empty spot on the table and tapped it with a fingertip. Diane saw a callout appear above the table, as though holographically projected. She noted that none of the others at the table seemed to see the callout, all looking at the spot that Caitlynn touched.

Naturally, Russe was the first to notice Diane seeing something the rest were not. "What are you seeing?" he asked.

Diane smiled and thought for a moment on how to describe it, "It's...about right here," she leaned forward and held her hands out with her thumbs and forefingers extended, framing the callout. She glanced up and saw Leki blushing slightly and very carefully looking only at Diane's hands and Koarla was looking at the ceiling and holding in a chuckle. She realized she'd just given them a bit of a glimpse down the front of her dress and her face heated as she straightened up and tried to subtly tug her dress' neckline up a little. "It's got a callout line connecting the dialog like so," she traced the line with her fingertip from the dialog to the table, "And it has writing on it, but I can't make it out. It looks all pixelated to me."

"That's because I haven't given you permissions to view it," said Caitlynn as she reached out and tapped the dialog. Suddenly Diane could read the text, the pixelation resolving to form words describing the table, a precise market value in several currencies used in the galaxy (not much) and the history of the table...which was pretty much just a couple notes about having been fabricated aboard her station and a time stamp.

"You're a Commander, Diane?" asked Leki. Diane looked up and saw the other Morvuck was leaning forward, elbows resting on the table with a pinched expression that Diane suspected was concern.

She turned to Russe, "You didn't...?"

He shrugged, "It never came up, and didn't seem like it was my thing to share, so..."

"What's *your* Commander's Ability?!" came an excited teenage voice. Diane turned to see Sani looking at her with an expression that tipped over into hero worship.

Woah, dial back the intensity, kid! "It's...not that big a deal. It's a lot like Caitlynn's, mostly utilitarian. To date I've only adjusted some lights and unlocked a door with it."

The warm chuckle that Did Things to Diane bubbled out of the other player. "Oh, now you have me curious! I *must* know what your ability is."

Diane shrank back in her seat a little, "I...sing."

Russe and Norma had experienced her Commander's Ability before, of course, so their affectionate smirks were not unexpected. The intrigued looks from everyone else were also predictable.

Caitlynn, to Diane's mortification, was the one to ask, "How about a song, then? I showed you mine, after all," she said with a saucy wink.

All Diane could think of in that moment was the full mess hall with all the crew and staff that had assembled for dinner. Sure, there were plenty of members of the crew on duty or enjoying meals with their families in their own habs, but there were enough people to fill the building to capacity and include a line that likely led all the way back to Ops. It wasn't unusual for the staff of the mess hall to have to keep the building operating until 9 or 10 at night.

And they'd *all* see her singing...*hear* her singing.

She supposed that she had begun panicking, that was the only explanation for having completely zoned out enough that Russe was able to surprise her by gently putting a hand on her shoulder and saying quietly into her ear, "Hey, it's okay." At her startle, he grabbed one of her hands and started gently squeezing, similar to how he'd calmed her on the *Dragon's Daughter*, "You don't have to, but just remember that someday you're going to need to use your Ability in combat. With the attention you're getting it's pretty much inevitable. You can say no, and nobody can make you...but you're going to have to get used to it sometime...why not now?"

Diane closed her eyes to block out the dining crowd...none of whom were actually paying that much attention to her, despite what her subconscious fears were telling her. Nobody was catcalling or jeering her and, based on how she'd sounded the last two times she'd sung in front of others, nobody would. At worst, she'd forget the lyrics, and after the *last* time she'd spaced all the musical everything except for the single most embarrassing song she could imagine, took measures to keep that from happening. She turned to him and gave him a grateful nod.

Russe smiled and stood, offering his hand to help her up. She took it demurely and Caitlynn, not willing to be upstaged, leapt from her chair to pull Diane's out from behind her. Once she was standing and clearly there of her own volition, Russe let go and stepped back in the direction of his chair, "What's your song pick, something about being a happy homemaker while your husband is out working to bring home the~ow!" he laughed as she slugged him in the arm.

She sniffed at him with an air of disdain, "I'll have you know I've been practicing."

Norma and Russe gave each other surprised looks as Russe and Caitlynn took their seats. Diane set about ignoring them as she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and released it to center herself. *I'm performing for one person, and she's already positively disposed toward me. Even if I do horribly, it's just one person. The room may seem full, but it's not really full of people, it's not really a room, and I'm not really here.*

To her mild but pleased surprise, she slipped into the mode of being able to see the process threads beneath the layer of virtual reality. She took a moment to 'glance around' to see the other processes and caught sight of Caitlynn's presence in the same server memory space, right next to hers in the cluster of glowing lines.

My God, she's beautiful... Diane almost mentally gasped.

Realizing she was distracted; she pulled her awareness back into her virtual body and inhaled...

"I, I will be king..."

As soon as she sang the first syllable, a piano could be heard, playing in a minor key.

"And you, you will be queen"

She heard a snicker from the Morvuck side of the table and knew that was Koarla, who never wasted time ranting about how one of the earliest Terran expeditions to Mortan had a male linguist who insisted on translating the titles of ancient Morvish rulers into 'king and queen' pairings. He'd gotten into *serious* trouble and apparently never worked in the field again, though by the time the scandal died down the women of Mortan had latched onto the idea and would refer to influential and dominant women as 'king,' *especially* if they were publicly 'out' as progenitors.

"And nothing will drive them away"

She opened her eyes and looked around, noticing that more than just her table mates were watching her, she'd attracted quite an audience from the staff and crew tables as well. *I'm going to have to deal with this all the rest of the time I'm in the game; Russe was right, I've got to get used to it.*

"We can be heroes, just for one day"

"We can beat them, just for one day"

A drum kit started playing rhythm along with the piano and Diane took a breath, having reached the end of the verse, and let her gaze go unfocussed as she tried 'pushing' with her intentions for the song. Unlike the last time she broke out into song, she had no specific goal in mind other than to perform. She was banking on her ability to control the computer to help her out with that.

"And you, you can be mean"

Her dress suddenly turned from black to red and gained a longer skirt with a floor-to-hip length slit up the side and her arms were covered in red opera gloves. The glass wall seemed to disappear and the lake on the station turned into an ocean, stretching off into the horizon that hadn't existed moments before.

"And I, I'll drink all the time"

Katrina rezzed in already sitting in a chair she'd produced holographically, staring meaningfully in pointed amusement. The corner of Diane's mouth turned up as she slipped a wink to the hologram, *I am coopting her holoemitters, after all.*

"Cause we're lovers, and that's a fact"

The 'beach' started shifting, as though the tides were eroding them far faster than they should be. A wall seemed to fade into view, as though being lit from afar, stretching from the water and off into the distance 'inland.' It looked not unlike the video she'd seen of the American wall where it dropped into the Gulf of Mexico. She'd never actually been to the wall in person, only flying over it on her one mission south of the border. She recalled the black line looking like an ugly scar on the landscape with a quarter-mile of no-man's-land on either side. Even as she had the thought, she realized she could make out a similar empty stretch of land some ways off, as though they were in an outdoor restaurant in some mythical location and time where building that close to the Wall was even *remotely* a good idea.

"Yes, we're lovers, and that is that"

The ceiling disappeared, though only over the dining area proper. The doors to the kitchen and side entrances remained, capped with what looked like weather protection cornices using architectural styling from a century ago. She ignored the susurrations from her audience that came as a reaction to the sudden apparent loss of shelter.

"Though nothing will keep us together"

The 'story' of the strange setting started being told, booming explosions lighting up the sky distantly, far enough away that the thunderous sound was barely audible as background sound. The Commander's Table was suddenly on a boardwalk, one end of the wooden structure stretching off into the ocean. Diane began moving a bit, trusting the holography to keep her from smacking into the actual glass wall hidden behind the illusion.

"We could steal time, just for one day"

Ships started cutting through the water in the distance, barely discernable as warships. The sky lightened enough from the evening twilight to a pre-dawn illumination and battle debris could be seen washed up on the shore. No bodies, that level of realism would be singularly off-putting to a dinner crowd.

"We can be heroes, forever and ever"

Badging appeared on her dress, for all the world looking like the rank and identification pins for some non-existent military, like her dress could be some sort of official uniform. A gasp came from the table as Caitlynn's outfit suddenly changed color to a deep berry blue. On her jacket's lapels was badging that wasn't quite entirely unlike Diane's.

A massive airship of some variety, painted red, flew by with a crest boldly displayed on the underbelly that matched the badging on Diane's dress. It was flying to engage a sea-born vessel painted blue, the logo on one of Caitlynn's badges visible on the hull. *Apparently, we're from opposite sides of a war...a little on the nose, but okay.*

"What d'you say?"

Diane reached out to offer her hand to Caitlynn, letting herself slip into the role of a femme fatale in a wartime drama. She pulled her date close, and Caitlynn seemed to take the hint and put her hand on Diane's hip and they danced briefly. Their inexperienced movements were nonetheless perfectly fitting with the dream-like setting. Two officers in opposing militaries taking a moment on the battlefield to claim a hint of romance.

As the piano started shifting from the bridge to a crescendo leading into the next verse, Diane released Caitlynn's hand and trotted down the boardwalk and expressively spinning on her toes, arms out until she was facing her audience.

"I," she belted out, "I will be king..."

She raised her hand like she was beckoning Caitlynn closer.

"And you, you will be queen,"

The other player was radiating amused enjoyment, playing along. She stepped in close to Diane, taking her hand again.

"Though nothing will drive them away..."

"We can be heroes, just for one day,"

She pulled Caitlynn close again.

"We can be us, just for one day."

Her hand went to the other woman's shoulder as she looked down into her eyes. The piano went nearly silent as she started on the next line,

"I, I remember...Standing by the wall..."

For just a moment, with the narration of the song and the illusion of the holographic environment and the closeness of their bodies, Diane completely forgot about everything else. She was a strong, powerful woman who was allowing herself to be putty in this other woman's arms. In that moment she might have sworn to remain by Caitlynn's side forever is she just asked.

"And the guns...shot above our heads..."

The report of distant canon fire came from the pseudo-historical battle that raged around them at a far enough remove that it barely sounded louder than distant timpani.

"And we kissed..." She found herself bringing her face closer to Caitlynn's, their lips so close they were brushing as Diane sang out, *"Like nothing could fall!"*

She abruptly pulled away, her own heart hammering at how close she'd come to...kissing...

"And the shame...was on the other side!"

She was powering out the lyrics now, her voice crying like a valkyrie across the fictional battle.

"We can beat them forever and ever...We can be heroes, just for one day"

In that moment, Diane *wanted* to be the hero. She wanted to wash the stain of all her sins from her and make herself *worthy* of the woman who had the confidence and power to make her feel like she belonged to her.

"We can be heroes, just for one day"

It would take The Second or Jesus themselves to pardon her sins. She'd *never* be worthy of this woman, if she ever even had the chance, and it was tearing her heart apart as she sang out.

"We can be heroes," A tear escaped the corner of her eye as she looked down at the boardwalk at Caitlynn's feet, unable to really explain what brought the tear about, *"Just for one day"*

As the final syllable and musical note faded to silence, the building faded back into existence; the distant ocean horizon replaced with the far closer opposite wall of the station. The cloud tempered sky swept away to be replaced by the semitransparent dome and support pylons. The two warring armies disappeared, as did their respective opposing colorations on Diane and Caitlynn's clothing. In moments, the mess hall returned to the freshly renovated lacquered wood paneled interior.

Diane returned to her seat, a slightly awed Caitlynn once again holding her seat for her. She brushed her minidress under her backside and let herself be scooted close to the table, carefully avoiding the stares of her tablemates as the staff and crew in the rest of the dining room applauded the unexpected show.

"Practicing, huh?" said Russe after a moment.

Diane turned to see him grinning at her. She took a deep breath to steady the emotions roiling through her in the aftermath of the song, "Yes, practicing. I didn't want to choke the way I did the last time I used the ability, so I've been looking for good soloist songs in the music library. I've been working on my singing in my quarters, usually at night."

Norma's smile was bright, "So what was all...that?"

Diane shook her head and shrugged, "Dunno...I just pushed for something that fit the themes of the song. I think the algorithms got a little creative, that was...almost dream-like."

Katrina spoke up from her spot near the end of the table, "It was. I intercepted the holographic environment and passed it through a generative filter to make it more abstract than it was initially going for. Instead of being a dark period piece from Earth's last world war, you got a fuzzy dream sequence in the style of a music holo."

Given the nightmares that some of the veterans *still* had about World War 3, Diane was grateful for Katrina's intercession.

Further conversation was interrupted as a furiously whispered conference took place among the three teenage girls and Sani, apparently deciding she was the spokeswoman for the group, stood and rounded Diane's chair to stand next to Caitlynn's chair with her hands on her hips. "Well, since it's obvious Diane likes you...like, *a lot* if all...*that*..." she waved airily at nothing in particular, "Was even a small taste of it, we give you permission to date our commander. Just don't break her heart or I'll eat yours."

"Gee, thanks," Diane sighed with affectionate exasperation, "So good you're giving us *permission* to date."

Master and Commander | Healthy Boundaries

Chapter Summary

Intimacy is NOT Diane's strong suit.

Chapter Notes

Caitlynn finally manages to nab her prey in this chapter, and it turns out to be a VERY valuable learning experience for Diane.

I had to make a few decisions at the end of this chapter, and I'll explain that in more detail at the end of it...of course, if you were active on my Discord you'd already know about this. 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Diane honestly could not remember a better night spent in her life. Compared to her teenage years spent hiding in her room to avoid Tiffany at all costs, a date with Caitlynn was so much better than those experiences that there was no comparison to be made. During her college years, she'd been too focused on her studies and playing that incredibly simplistic (in comparison to GU:MC, anyway) Cold War MMO that got her into spy work to even *think* about dating.

And every so often her thoughts drifted back to her seemingly endless nights building kits of model starships after a grueling day hunting rogues, and the stark differences made her sad on multiple levels; sad for her life as an agent, sad for her lack of social contact, and sad for the time spent on silly little models of ships instead of trying to find someone like Caitlynn.

Of course, she *wouldn't* have found someone like Caitlynn before creating the character of "Diane Somni'els," and not just because of the wall IRL and firewall in virtual spaces; Caitlynn was an ardent lesbian, something that Diane felt was slightly obvious but had come up some time after the impromptu demonstration of their respective Commander's Abilities. Leki had asked about the ship's name, *Sappho's Journey*, which prompted the ship's captain to embark on a surprisingly in-depth lecture on Sappho of Lesbos, the attempt of historians to erase her (unverified) relationship with her lover/wife over the centuries. The concept of a sexual and gender binary being a thing so prominent that it should be a matter of debate, even with the available surviving writings, was so foreign to the Morvuck contingent that this had prompted *another* tangential lecture on the nature of queer versus heterosexual life and relationships.

Diane had learned more about lesbians in that one, off the cuff lecture than she did after the entire briefing and packet she'd received before going into the pod.

It was now *very* late by station standards. Thanks to her virtual Morvuck body, Diane still had plenty of 'go' left in her, though she could tell she was getting knackered from the shortened sleep the night before and the long day full of heightened emotions. She and Caitlynn were walking along one of the foot paths near the 'cliff' that dropped down from the Ops deck to the industrial deck and aiming for the general direction of the habs. The operational lights on the lower deck were a lovely blue-violet color that made working in that sector possible with the rest of the lights dimmed, and the footpath lighting made it so they could walk without the view of the stars through the scintillating dome above being obstructed by light pollution.

"...and so I zayz to the guy, nize ztation!" Caitlynn, who had been trying her hardest to maintain her composure during the telling of her latest anecdote, promptly burst out laughing so hard she had to stop and brace herself with her hands on her knees.

Diane smiled wanly and, as soon as the other woman finished cackling enough to be able to take a breath, said, "...I don't get it."

This was, apparently, doubly hilarious for some reason and Caitlynn immediately dropped all the way to her knees and was now howling with laughter. Diane found that she didn't *care* whether she got the joke or not, she'd be happy to listen to Caitlynn's laughter for the rest of her life.

Finally, the ship captain recovered her wits enough to stand again and offered her elbow to Diane. The first time the shorter woman had done this, Diane had been genuinely perplexed as to why she would be holding her arm the way she was. It actually took Norma pantomiming what she was supposed to do for Diane to hook her hand on Caitlynn's elbow. That had been after they'd finished dessert and the dinner party was making for beds and bunks as their particular lodgings allowed, and the pair of players opted to tour the built-up parts of the Ops deck. The conversation hadn't remained long on the buildings, venturing into anecdotes from their respective educations, incidents with real-life acquaintances, and the state of the world in general.

"That's so cute of you!" Caitlynn said finally as she was able to stop giggling, "It's like you grew up in one of those religious compounds in Canada sometimes. Super smart and clever but with weird spots where your knowledge of pop culture has gaps."

"That's..." *an uncomfortably close guess*, thought Diane, "...not far from the truth. After my folks died, I wound up with my stepmother and she mostly just made sure I had enough food and clothes that CPS never had reason to come calling and made sure I went to church as often as possible so she didn't look bad. I had books, but..." she shrugged.

Caitlynn's smile softened and her eyes took on the look Diane was familiar with that was usually preceded by, *"Bless you, I'm sure your parents are in god's arms, but surely a godfearing woman like her was only looking out for what's best for you, right? I'm sure it wasn't all that bad..."*

Instead of what Diane expected, Caitlynn said, "Oh, wow, almost out of a fairy tale! Wicked stepmother included."

Diane jerked to a stop, the change in script throwing her for a curve. Caitlynn stopped and turned to her with confusion. "You just...*believe me?*!" Diane blurted.

Caitlynn's confusion only spurred on more confusion in Diane as she asked in return, "What, were you lying?"

"Well, no, it's just...I normally have to explain about the heart attack and the police reports and all that before people believe me."

Caitlynn's eyes softened again, "Ah, I see. I'm sorry you've had to live with people questioning your experience. I tell my students that I'll take them at their word, but they don't always believe me...the number of times I've had to find out halfway through the schoolyear that there's a DV situation at home..."

Diane's smile quirked up, "Oh, you're a teacher?" she asked as she resumed walking again.

"Oh, yes," answered the other woman, "I only got into gaming because of my students. Tried a few of the others; CoRA, of course...I think *everyone's* tried that one. League of Titans, City Quest..." she shrugged, "None of 'em really captured my interest until this one. I mostly joined so I could 'catch' my students playing around when I knew they were setting up non-sentient A.I. to sit in class for them." The mischief in her grin returned and she leaned in conspiratorially, "Nothing puts the Fear of Teacher into a student like their instructor showing up in a PvP zone wearing Valkyrie armor."

Diane snort-giggled in an extremely undignified way and looked up to realize that she'd unconsciously wandered them over to the entrance to the habs. "Oh...uh," she glanced down to Caitlynn and blushed, "Would you like a Jyantín Tonic? I'm *pretty* sure they're human bio-compatible. Or at least, that's what the character creation stage's computer said. I've probably got the only supply of the good stuff in the sector...well, unless Leki or Koarla brought some with them from Mortan."

Caitlynn smirked devilishly (an expression which started exciting those parts of Diane that shouldn't be excited in public spaces) and said, "Miss Somni'els, are you inviting me up to your apartment for a cup of hot coffee?"

Diane's confused, "...yes? I guess? Not really...coffee...it's served hot, though..." preceded some giggling from Caitlynn.

"Oh, you're so precious! Yes, I'd love to try this beverage that's hot but not coffee."

A few minutes later, Diane was opening the door to her quarters and blushing at the slight disarray of the living room. "I, uh, don't usually have guests," she said as she straightened a stack of tablets on her coffee table and shoved that morning's Mortan gift (a decorative spoon, of all things, complete with display stand) back in the shipping box and shifted one of the breakfast bar's stools out so Caitlynn could take a seat. She turned back to the other

woman to see she'd removed her jacket and was draping it over her arm. "Oh, sorry! Let me take your jacket..." she stepped over and held out her hand.

Caitlynn smiled warmly and passed her coat over, "So...not many visitors? Am I the first?"

Diane shrugged, "The first purely social visitor, yes." She retrieved a hanger from the nested closet next to the main door to her quarters and carefully hung the jacket. Very carefully *not* looking at Caitlynn, who's high-waisted pants and tucked in shirt were highlighting a *figure* that was threatening to steal her breath again, Diane hustled into her kitchen and began digging out the tools and ingredients she'd need for a simple Jyantín Tonic. "Norma and Russe come up to eat breakfast and discuss station business, so technically those are business visits."

Caitlynn sidled her way up to the breakfast bar and almost oozed herself onto the stool prepared for her. "Well, I feel honored." She propped her elbows on the counter as she watched Diane prepare the beverage, starting the electric kettle going and preparing the Earth-style coffee press. Diane had just finished measuring out the grounds and pouring the boiling water when Caitlynn spoke again, "So what do you do IRL?"

Diane's mouth quirked up in a slight smile. This was territory she was somewhat familiar with, "I'm a network technician," she said. This was the 'boilerplate' cover that the agency gave their people when they started their assignments as cyber-agents. It was close enough to their actual job duties that they were able to hold conversations and "talk shop" with actual professionals in that field, all in all it was a solid cover, "Doing work for the government. Mostly just making sure everything is working properly, monitoring the A.I. for signs of," she caught herself and coughed, pretending to need some water for a moment, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and retrieving a swallow of tap water and gulping it down before continuing, "'Scuse me, looking for signs of them waking up."

Caitlynn grinned, that warm spark in her eyes drying out Diane's throat for real. She refilled the glass, her body feeling hot enough that she seriously pondered just dumping the glass over her head to cool herself off. "So not a lot of 'getting out' happening for you, especially since the strike?"

Diane snorted in dark amusement. Considering 'the strike' (as the people outside the wall were calling it) in which the S.A.I. held the U.N. and all the world's automated systems hostage was the entire reason she had a job with the agency, that was entirely correct, "Yeah, not much time to myself these days." She touched the back of her hand to the carafe of the press, noting that the temperature was about right for the amount of time the grounds had needed to steep for the drink to taste right, she pulled a couple of mugs from the cabinet and poured, inhaling deeply of the steam that arose.

Caitlynn chuckled, "And you said this *isn't* coffee?"

Diane rolled her eyes, "Back on Mortán this stuff is prepared by boiling the pods un-baked and un-ground for three days. The grounds are a fairly recent invention as far as cultural drinks go. Around the invention of air travel on Mortán they came up with a way to boil the pods to a paste, dry the paste to bricks, then the bricks could be shipped easily and then ground to make..." she set a mug in front of her guest, "...instant Jyantín Tonic."

Caitlynn cocked an eyebrow, "What, no cream or sugar?"

"Doesn't need it," smiled Diane, "The syrup that gets dried into bricks has enough natural sugar in it adding more would be overkill." She demonstrated by taking a sip and moaning expressively, only partially done for effect.

For the first time since answering the video call that morning Diane was blessed with the sight of *Caitlynn* blushing. "Well," she said as she picked up her mug, "If it makes that pretty voice make a noise like *that*," ...aaaaaaand now Diane was blushing again, "Then I'll just *have* to try it as the chef recommends."

Diane watched as Caitlynn brought the mug to her lips, and suddenly she couldn't *look away* from said lips as they curled to match the shape of the mug and the owner of said lips took a sip. Diane's throat went dry *again* as Caitlynn made a satisfied, "Mmmm!" noise.

"My goodness!" Caitlynn said with a smile as she lowered the mug from her lips, "That *is* rather delightful! And this isn't alcoholic?"

Diane smirked, "Nope. The alcoholic version is called Jyantín Bitters and will knock you on your backside. I've had straight vodka that isn't as strong as a Jyantín Bitters."

The other player cast a skeptical eye at the contents of her mug, "Incredible...I could swear," she took another sip and nodded her head, "Whiskey. I could swear I taste whiskey!"

Diane circled the end of the bar, "Nope, but apparently the human tastebuds think so. It just tastes like a particularly odd but pleasant chocolate to me."

She was just about to sit down in the stool next to Caitlynn when the other woman slid to her feet and wrapped the arm not holding her mug around Diane's waist, "So I'm the first lucky lady you've taken to your quarters, you should show me around."

"Uh...okay?" Diane blushed at the intimacy of the hand settling on her hip and how it made her *very* aware of how close said hand was to the hem of her dress. "Well, you can see the living room and dining area here," She gestured to the large living space where the table big enough to seat a family of six sat between the front door and the breakfast bar. "The table is where I usually unpack the gifts from Mortan..."

"The what-now?"

Diane blushed and started slowly walking as she explained the trip to Mortan, meeting the Matron, and her subsequent status as First Found Daughter, "...and now they're sending *shipping containers* full of gifts. We have an entire cargo bay dedicated to the gifts now, and I've stopped insisting *I* be the one to go through them. We have an automated system scanning all the packages and writing some template-based thank you notes. Food gets put in cryo or earmarked for occasions like dinner tonight, the clothes are catalogued for me to integrate into my wardrobe...*someday*, and various knick-knacks like this," she indicated a framed painting of what was apparently the first recorded adoption of a Morvuck by a Matron, though obviously stylized since the event was purported to have happened nearly ten-thousand years prior, "Are returned to storage for me to open and specifically write thank

you notes for." She smiled at the picture and the framed page of construction paper next to it. It was one of the pieces of hand-drawn art made by the First Flyer's class she was an honorary member of, and she was quite sure she personally valued the child's drawing more than the painting, though she'd never tell either artist she had a favorite.

"It's sweet that you're writing thank you notes to the NPCs," commented Caitlynn as they resumed their walk, now down the hallway connecting to the bedroom.

Diane paused briefly to turn on the light for her office, "I learned...that the S.A.I. could wake up from just about any character or program." She took a sip of her drink to choke back the lump in her throat that formed just mentioning it, "If I assume every NPC is just a dumb bot, who knows what S.A.I. might be thinking humans are just a bunch of horrible monsters that can't bother to treat other sentient beings with respect just because *I* don't?"

Some of what she had just said was from her own bitter learning experience, but a lot of it was from memories she had forgotten she carried from before her mother died when they'd talk about the episode of Star Trek they'd just watched.

Caitlynn glanced around the office, clearly less interested in the room than the person showing it to her, "That's...quite profound. I'll have to remember that."

As it was obvious there wouldn't be any real discussion of the room on the tour they were ostensibly doing, Diane turned the light off and continued down the hall. "I just know if I had written...I dunno, one of the stars of Star Trek if I was around back when they were still alive I'd be over the moon to get an answer, even if it was just a form letter with their signature or something. It costs me nothing and takes just moments to do, and if I can show some random S.A.I. I don't even know that humanity isn't all bad, then it'll be worth it, even if it never did anything for me otherwise."

Caitlynn hip checked her as they crossed the threshold into the bedroom, "Humanity *isn't* all bad...we do so much good and...goodness, we as a species *birthed* a brand new sentient race! I'd say that, on balance, we're pretty good."

Diane smiled wanly, "We've had three world wars, the most recent one almost killed the planet. I *want* to believe we're alright, but..."

Caitlynn stepped in close, her arms bracketing Diane's waist, "But we *also* ended those wars and are working to repair the damage. And we've started exploring the solar system and there's talk of expeditions to the stars..."

Diane found her throat feeling dry again as she felt the warmth from Caitlynn's body. The smaller woman leaned in, almost imperceptibly, and closed her arms gently around Diane's torso. "You know," Caitlynn said with a warm smile, "I don't think you've even hinted that you wanted me to stop even once. Even on the video call you didn't tell *me* to stop watching, you just stopped removing your clothes."

Diane felt her face become rocket hot as a ball of uneasiness started warring with the bubble of warm attraction inside her.

"You merely," Caitlynn slid her empty hand up to cup the back of Diane's head, gently pulling her down, "Need to say," the shorter woman pushed up on her toes to bring her mouth up to Diane's, "'Stop,' and I will."

Suddenly, their motion halted. Caitlynn had stopped pushing herself up as well as halted the pulling motion. They stood like that, slightly awkwardly, lips barely a quarter inch apart as Diane could feel the other woman's warm breath brush past her lips and even inhaling some of Caitlynn's breath as she found herself almost panting. Diane swallowed, trying to push down the anxiety she felt bubbling in her gut, her mind feeling like the rest of the world could go hang while her heart was yearning for more so much it felt like it would climb out of her chest and take matters into its own hands.

"P-please..."

The warmth of a long, slow huff of Caitlynn's single laugh tickled the skin under Diane's nose, "'Please' what, princess?"

"Please don't stop..."

Diane realized as the burst of emotion and sensation started fading enough for something resembling rational thought that this was the actual first time she'd kissed anyone this way. Or at all. She'd received motherly kisses from her mom, of course, and her dad used to kiss her on the head when she was little, but a long, deep, languid kiss that involved lips and tongue and the pressing of their bodies together? The awkward dance of how to position themselves so their noses weren't in the way of each other and somehow not caring about the absurdity of it? Of having closed her eyes without realizing it and not caring to open them because then she'd be letting her eyes tell her things that might distract her from the sensations coming from her mouth?

Never once.

How long had they been kissing? It seemed like forever to her. She couldn't actually remember how the kiss started, just that there was a moment in time after she'd almost begged for it and Caitlynn had resumed their motion...and then she was reeling in a void of comfort and warmth as her tongue dueled with Caitlynn's and she found herself being 'tamed' through her tongue and she wanted this woman to be on top of her and around her and claiming her and owning her and she never wanted anything else ever again...

...and then their lips parted, and Diane could think at least somewhat rationally again. Her lips felt wet and slightly numb, and the tip of her tongue was lolling out of her mouth. Her breathing was coming in pants as her eyes refused to focus on anything, but that was okay, because Caitlynn's face was occupying all of her vision.

"You seem a little unsteady on your feet there, princess. How about I put that mug on the desk for you? Wouldn't want to spill on this lovely carpet, now, would we?"

Diane blinked in incomprehension, barely understanding that there was still a mug in her hand only as Caitlynn removed it. There was a pair of ceramic-on-glass 'clinks' as both the mugs that had been brought into the bedroom were placed on her desk. The sound pulled

Diane out of her haze enough to stand straighter again and realize that she'd zoned out at some point in the middle of the kiss. *God, I hope that doesn't make me look like a complete moron...* she desperately hoped.

She turned to see Caitlynn smiling at her with a somewhat unreadable expression. "I think I'm going to use the little girl's head, do catch your breath, princess."

Diane nodded unnecessarily as the other woman went into her bathroom and the door hissed shut behind her.

Without the seemingly narcotic presence of Caitlynn in the room, Diane began working to regain her sense of composure at the very least. She glanced around and saw a mirror and began to check her appearance and realized that she had a bit of a tenting problem near the hem of her skirt. She turned bright scarlet and *really* hoped that Caitlynn hadn't felt it, though realistically she would *have* to have noticed it with how closely they had been pressed together. Diane glanced at the bathroom door and, hoping she had enough time, lifted the hem of her dress up above her hips and adjusted her proliferator genitalia so it was at least being held against her body instead of sticking straight out. She was also *desperately* trying to shove down the unexpected fear and anxiety she was feeling. Thoughts of '*monster*' and '*demon*' and '*rapist*' started flitting up from her subconscious and she scrambled to get her panties adjusted and her dress tugged back down.

Just as she was straightening the hem, the door to the bathroom hissed open and Caitlynn stood there, framed by the doorway and the light streaming into the dimly lit bedroom from behind her.

And Caitlynn was naked.

Any hope of her genitals settling to an unobtrusive softness that could easily be tucked or hidden away from view were shattered. All ability to process coherent thoughts shut down and she started breathing raggedly at the sight.

"So, princess, I figured you gave me a show, I should do the same," purred Caitlynn.

As though her body were trying to one-up the ship captain, her own chest kicked off a rumbling purr.

"Oh, good! I was worried you might not find a little ol' human like me as attractive as I find you."

The swirling vortex of anxiety suddenly surged up inside her and wrapped itself around her want and desire and pleasure in seeing her guest's nudity. Lust and loathing tangled up inside her and she wanted what she saw so badly but felt horribly guilty, like she was stealing something precious for the purpose of defiling it.

And her body *betrayed* her by purring *louder*. A memory of a factoid from an internet video about cats bubbled up to her conscious awareness about how purring doesn't necessarily mean 'happy,' it just means 'loud emotions.' Cats purred when they were happy, but they also purred when they were stressed or in pain. Mother cats giving birth purred quite loudly even

when the birthing process was painful for them. She was purring because her emotions were loud, but she couldn't seem to kick her vocal cords in gear to *speak* her feelings. Caitlynn, who was now grinning like the...well, the proverbial cat who caught the dinosaur, was completely unaware that the purring wasn't necessarily a "go" signal.

"My goodness!" she strutted closer to Diane, her hips rocking seductively, "I guess you like what you see!"

Mutely, Diane nodded, her tongue working to work saliva into her mouth so she could *say something!*

Caitlynn started gently guiding Diane back to the bed and, as her calves hit the end of the mattress, pushed her down. Instead of climbing into bed as Diane expected her next step to be, Caitlynn gently lifted Diane's legs one at a time to remove her shoes, casually tossing them toward the closet but paying no attention to where they may have landed.

Now Caitlynn started crawling onto the bed, her torso parallel to the legs her arms were straddling. Diane started scooting back, trying to figure out a way out of this situation when her speech capability seemed to have fled. Caitlynn apparently mistook this as being coy and kept stalking Diane further onto the bed.

Diane's head and shoulders finally bumped against the headboard and Caitlynn loomed on top of her, none of her body parts yet touching Diane but the Morvuck still felt like she might catch fire from the heat of their bodies.

"Now," grinned Caitlynn with an almost predatory expression, "How about we finish that little show you started this morning?" She shifted her weight to her knees and moved one hand to reach for the bottom hem of Diane's dress.

Monster! Demon! Rapist! Vile! Thief! Pervert! Whore! Monster-demon-rapist-vile-thief-pervert-whore-monsterdemonrapistvilethiefpervertwhore... A chorus of indictments started slamming into her conscious mind, repeating accusations so horrible she wasn't sure where she heard them or why, but she knew that Caitlynn was a lesbian and if she continued with her current action, she'd discover that Diane wasn't actually a woman and then she'd *hate* Diane and break her heart and would want to hurt her. Her hands shot down to her crotch to pin the dress down and keep herself covered as she frantically cried, "WAIT!"

Caitlynn rocked back as though slapped. "...what?"

"Y...you're a lesbian and a woman and you're very beautiful and sexy and I don't deserve this please don't hate me I didn't mean to lie I didn't know you were going to~"

"DIANE!" snapped Caitlynn.

Diane would later reflect that it was somewhat sadly funny that the woman who'd single handedly stormed an entire slaver compound and stood up to a dragon with nothing but the clothes on her back should be cowed into submission by a woman who was smaller and, by all measures, physically weaker than her. But submit she did, her eyes closed, legs clamped shut, trapping her hands over her crotch as she shivered and anxiously purred.

"Diane, princess..." Caitlynn's voice was now as soft and gentle as it had been loud and commanding just a moment ago, "Why did you say you didn't mean to lie to me?"

Her breath shuddered in her chest as she inhaled, trying to make sense of her own responses. "Y-you're a lesbian, and y-you deserve someone w-who's not...not p-pretending...t-to be a woman."

With her eyes closed she couldn't gauge what Caitlynn's reaction was, and her own shaky breathing kept her from listening for the micro-gestures that might tell Diane what was happening. At the very least she couldn't *smell* anything like anger...more like *worry*.

"...Diane, I'm afraid I don't understand. Why are you saying you're 'pretending' to be a woman?"

Diane suddenly realized that the wrong answer would shatter her OpSec. Her emotions and the heat of the moment had been so incredibly overwhelming that she had genuinely forgotten that she was in a VRMMO game on an assignment. Sure, she remembered it was VR, but so much of her life for the last few months had been just the day-to-day operations of her station punctuated by the occasional burst of activity that felt life-altering, even months later.

Even so, she shouldn't have come *that* close to revealing her status as a deep-cover agent of a foreign government on assignment to establish a foothold in a possible underground railroad. *So what triggered that? Sure, this whole situation is outside my wheelhouse, but I shouldn't have reacted like I did...* She mentally reviewed everything that had led up to that moment and realized that the closer Caitlynn came to seeing her naked, the more a fear response reared up and cowed her. Even now, trying to rationalize her way through the steps that led her there, she was feeling the echoes of that same absolute terror that Caitlynn would disrobe Diane and find...

"Diane?" Caitlynn asked, concern laced into her voice.

"I have a penis," she blurted, "I found Morvucks in character creation and I almost went with progenitor, th-that's the *actual* women in the Morvuck species, but I saw the proliferator option and I tried it out and I didn't want...I couldn't..." a whine escaped her throat in an embarrassing display of fear and weakness. "I *like* being this! I *know* it's impossible and I *know* it means I'll never be with anyone *ever* in the game, but I wake up in the morning and I get in the shower and I feel *nervous* until I check and find *everything* is 'right' down there and when the docs give me an exam it feels awkward and embarrassing but it *feels right* to need both exams and..."

She was stopped by a finger on her lips, "Shhh...take a breath." Diane did as instructed and Caitlynn said, "So you wanted a penis and took the chance to try it out. Why does that mean you'll never be with anyone?"

Diane opened her eyes and looked at Caitlynn in confusion, "...because I'm attracted to women...?"

Caitlynn was still quite naked but was sitting off to the side of Diane's bed, apparently giving her space. "You're not sure if you're attracted to women?"

Diane shook her head, "No, I mean, yes. I'm attracted to women, but women who like women the way I do don't want penis or they'd pick a man character. I could *never* date a man, but I picked a character that has a penis because of a stupid spur of the moment decision...I *could* have kept looking and I *could* have just picked progenitor but I picked proliferator and now you probably hate me."

Caitlynn chuckled, "Diane, I don't like sleeping with *men*, that has nothing to do with whether you have a penis or not."

"But...women don't have penises. I have a penis so I'm not a woman."

Caitlynn threw her hands in the air in exasperation, "Oh, mygawd! You really *were* raised by the church! Just because a woman has a penis doesn't make her any less of a woman!"

"...what?" Diane's voice sounded very small. If it hadn't been so quiet in the room, she doubted she could have heard *herself* say it.

Somehow, though, Caitlynn heard. "I've dated IRL women who have dicks! We have to use protection, but it can be fun! Sometimes they think of it like a permanent flesh strap-on, sometimes they ask me to ignore it, and sometimes they're more proud of their cock than a guy is. Your genitals don't make you more or less of a woman, Diane, they're *just* genitals. And besides, there's one thing you're not considering."

Diane was probably the most confused by this conversation than she had ever been in her life. The concept that a woman could have a penis had...implications. Implications she didn't have time to consider right now. "What's that?"

"I *figured* you probably had one."

Diane's brain felt like it crashed into itself again, "...what?!"

"I saw the bulge in your panties on the video feed. Of course, I didn't want to assume, but then you mentioned your in-game species name when we first met on the docking bay. I *said* I was going to look it up, and I did. I put the facts together and realized that you probably picked Morvuck *because* of the genitalia. They're pretty much the only race in the game to offer that particular configuration." Caitlynn pushed herself forward so she could almost crawl on top of Diane again, her breasts hanging down and pressing against Diane's in a way that caused the purring to restart. "I *really do* think you're...so beautiful, Diane. I watched you interacting with your NPC crew and how you give every bit of your attention to whichever one of them you're talking to, and the way you didn't even *think* about sending me and my ship on my way and treated the whole thing as a minor problem to be solved, and then you just *solved* it."

Caitlynn lowered herself down and kissed Diane again. Diane's mind didn't go blank this time and her sensorium wasn't overloaded like it had been, but it *did* shut up her anxiety and the rumbling purr started to turn into the roar of a combustion engine.

The maddeningly attractive woman eventually ended the kiss and pulled away enough to allow them to talk face to face instead of eye to eye, "I meant what I said earlier, by the way. I know the church does fuck-all to teach about consent, especially for women, but you need to know; I will never overstep a boundary you set, princess. If I've been doing so, please tell me now. I don't want to wind up hurting you just because I want to scratch an itch, okay?"

Diane felt herself begin to relax. "What...what sort of boundary should I be setting?" She found herself feeling a slightly detached sense of righteous fury, an understanding built from the things Caitlynn was saying that implied that women experienced moments of fear and doubt like she'd been going through and nobody was teaching them how to deal with it, or ideally, how to keep it from happening. This was followed by a level of disgust for her IRL gender, but before she could examine those feelings, Caitlynn answered her.

"When it's okay for someone to touch you, *if* it's okay for someone to touch you," Caitlynn propped her head up on her palm, her elbow on Diane's pillow next to her head. With the fingers of her other hand she started tracing nonsense patterns up and down Diane's arm, "I'm realizing now about you not even *knowing* you get to set boundaries as a woman, it's terrifying how easy it was for me to get you into this position. It's like your stepmother almost *purposefully* left you ignorant of the fact that you deserve to have your own agency as a woman."

That would be because she had a step-son, but...Caitlynn's right, I never was taught about a woman's...boundaries as a boy, either. Rather than voice her thoughts, Diane swallowed heavily, glancing down at the sight of her breasts being squashed by the other woman's...and noticing that hers were actually *larger*, a fact that made her *happy* for some reason. Her purring ratcheted up and she swore to herself she'd figure out how to control that autonomic reaction...somehow.

Caitlynn chuckled, "Well, as much as I'd *like* to take that as consent...let's do this by the book, shall we?" Diane found herself smiling as she looked up at the other *extremely* attractive woman that she *definitely* wanted to do naughty, adult things with. Caitlynn continued, "I will *ask* if you're okay with me doing something, and *you* say 'yes' or 'no,' okay?"

Diane nodded, the clenching in her gut starting to loosen as it started to sink in that Caitlynn was actually going to honor her boundaries, even if she didn't quite know what they were yet.

Caitlynn smiled indulgently down at Diane, "You need to *say* it, princess, or it doesn't count as consent."

"Yes!" Diane almost chirped eagerly.

"And you need to tell me to *stop* if something suddenly stops being okay, even if you've already told me yes. Just like when you panicked earlier and I stopped, right?" Caitlynn let Diane nod before reminding her, "I need you to *say it*, princess."

"Yes, I understand," she said, almost breathlessly, her anxiety almost completely gone by this point.

"And the same will go for me. You may *ask* if you'd like to do something to me and I will say 'yes' or 'no,' and you stop if I tell you to, alright?"

"Yes, I understand, captain!" Diane blushed as the rank title fell out of her mouth, pretty much on automatic. But unlike when she was introducing the woman to her crew, this time it felt...*intimate*, like Diane was acknowledging her as an authority and she *wanted* to answer to this woman in *authority*.

Caitlynn chuckled, "Very *good*, princess!" The purring was loud enough to have a bit of an echo as the sound bounced off the walls in the large bedroom. "So let's see if we can find out what those boundaries of yours are, shall we?"

Diane found herself eagerly wishing to be just as naked as Caitlynn was.

Chapter End Notes

So for this chapter, capping out at 6k+ words, pulls the classic "fade to black" to indicate the characters are going to have sex...

...but you're not going to see the ensuing hanky-panky *here*. I *will* be writing the sexy bits, but those are going on a different site before showing up publicly on AO3. I will *not* be posting the sex chapter to Scribble Hub, either. I'll be discussing possible locations for publishing the sexy bits on [Discord](#), but if nothing else you'll eventually see the sexy-bit-chapters on AO3.

Master and Commander | [REDACTED] – File reference

XXX.37.5 – Open Floodgates

Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

Best laid plans and all...

...this was *intended* to be posted on Literotica, but their standards and practices don't allow snippets of stories, you have to post the WHOLE thing there.

For now, smut-full chapters will be AO3 exclusives.

Caitlynn grinned down at Diane, who was finding herself feeling inexplicably small and fragile. "Remember, you can tell me to stop at any time. I would like to undress you now, okay?"

Diane nodded her head vigorously, then blurted out, "Yes, captain!"

Caitlynn chuckled warmly, her eyes sparkling with mischief and lust, "The next time I'm giving orders on the bridge will be *interesting*, to say the least. Every time one of my crew says, 'yes, captain,' I'll think of this stunning station commander who could probably tear a human in half with her bare hands..." she laid a hand on Diane's bare arm and stroked down it until she got to the join of Diane's legs where they were still clamped together to pin her hands in place over her crotch, "Meek and humble and perfectly submissive underneath me, eagerly telling me, 'yes, captain' as I take her virginity."

Diane felt a shiver as she let the other woman gently tug her hands out of their protective position over her crotch, and without them in the way the very noticeable bulge was broadcasting to the universe just what Diane was and what she was feeling about the woman she had just met that morning. *How did I wind up in this situation? I'm about to...have sex! With a woman! As a woman!*

It was a chain of events that seemed impossible just a couple of years ago, but today, now, here...she was wondering if she could find a way to feel this safe and... loved...forever. The other, very clearly more experienced woman gently guided Diane to a sitting position and

started peppering her with kisses. "Good girl!" was repeated whenever she let Caitlynn position a limb or she successfully followed any sort of instructions. By the time her minidress was tugged up and over her head she was a blushing mess, unsure why the constant admonitions that were so counter to everything she knew was true and factual were making her feel so...*good*.

"My, my..." purred Caitlynn, "These cute sweater puppies do *not* disappoint! May I caress them, princess?"

Diane's face flared, if possible, an even more incandescent red as she realized that *her* breasts were the subject of the question. Yes, Diane liked boobs. She liked them *sexually*, but the awareness that the pair she'd been granted by the character creation process were something that *another woman* wanted to...do things with shorted out her brain momentarily. Fortunately, she managed to squeak out, "Yes!"

Caitlynn's hands snaked around Diane's torso and started stroking across the outside of her bra, the sensations travelling from the sensitive globes rocketing through her nervous system to her brain faster than she thought possible...and soon she was barely thinking *at all*. She leaned back, moaning as Caitlynn played her like an instrument, unwittingly making musical sounds as fingers stroked across fabric and skin. "Oh, those are such lovely sounds, princess. I think I'd like to remove this bra, and since you already gave me permission..."

Diane hadn't even realized her eyelids had fluttered closed until she opened them and turned to see Caitlynn's face just inches from hers, "Y-yes, please!"

"Good girl! You're learning consent *so* well!" The hands that were making Diane's mind pop stroked around to the back of her rib cage to find the bra hooks there.

While Diane had, at first, only picked utilitarian bras that had front-clasps for ease of dress, the sheer number of nice, frilly, *supportive* bras that had come to her via the gifts from her in-game people made it more practical for her to pick from the superior underwear being provided to her, and the majority of them had clasps in the back. The first few days she had chosen to wear them she'd struggled, needing to figure out the best way to strap herself into her daywear. Once she figured out the trick of it (put the bra on upside down, inside out, and around her waist with the clasps in front, then rotate the entire garment in a half-circle so the cups were in front then flipping the entire thing up as she tucked her breasts into the cups and arms through the straps), she almost didn't give a thought to putting on or taking off her bra.

But having Caitlynn's fingers barely touching and brushing her skin as she pulled apart the hooks from the loops and teasingly slowly pulling the bra off Diane's body reminded her of her feminine state in a way that she hadn't been since...well, since the other woman had gotten a free show when Diane unthinkingly accepted a video call while still in her underwear. Had that really only been that morning? Less than 20 hours ago in-game she hadn't even known Caitlynn existed, and yet now her large, round breasts were being exposed to the other woman. Just the realization of how exposed she was made her nipples puff out into firm peaks, the areola crinkling as the skin contracted as an expression of her arousal.

Diane felt herself being lowered to the bed, back in a reclined position as Caitlynn leaned over her, "Oh, look at those...did you tweak your appearance sliders when you created your

character?"

Diane shook her head vigorously, her denial rocking the springs of the mattress as she stammered out, "N-no!" The shame she would have felt at doing such a thing could hardly be considered, let alone actually *doing* something so...lewd!

Caitlynn let out a pleased gasp, "So these are...well, for a game I can hardly call them 'natural,' but they're *accidental*? Oh, that is *too* delicious! I'm going to attack those gorgeous melons you've been blessed with for a bit now, if that's okay with you."

Diane gasped, her breath fleeing her body as she nodded vigorously. Gasping as she ran out of breath before she could say it, she managed a throaty, "Yes, captain!"

Even as she watched Caitlynn's lips wrap around her nipple, she became aware of how unprepared she was as the other woman started sucking and licking. Sparks lit across Diane's vision and her hands clasped to Caitlynn's head, fingers threading through the sexy short hair as her hips and legs writhed, her pelvis grinding at nothing as her autonomic responses to the pleasure started rocking her body. Diane lost all sense of time other than her panting breathing, all sense of space except for her feet scrabbling on the bed and hands on the back of the other woman's head.

Caitlynn's lovely lips released her nipple, and like a switch had been flipped, Diane went limp on the bed, arms flopping to either side of her as she gasped for air. "Poor princess," Caitlynn purred, "Raised in the church to deny herself pleasure so much that even just a little nipple-play leaves you a mess."

She felt the other woman's hand rest between her breasts on her sternum and then slowly glide down her torso until teasingly slipping just under the top of her panties. "I'll bet that if you were taught to deny yourself pleasure so much you've never played with your nipples, you've never played with yourself *down there*, now have you?"

Diane squeezed her eyes shut, shame coloring her cheeks as she realized Caitlynn had guessed with unerring accuracy how little she'd explored the body she'd been given in the game. Of course, she didn't explore her body IRL, either, it was something that simply wasn't supposed to be done. The sin of Onnan was one that she'd learned early on to deny simply because looking at her own body while it was naked was such a repulsive thing that she couldn't imagine doing anything of the sort.

But since she'd climbed into the VR pod and created the powerful, built, and *stacked* Morvuck character, it'd been a true challenge for her hands to do little more than use the soap she cleaned herself with and follow the doctor's directives for checking for signs of irregularities that she should have been taught long before encountering the medical software in-game. Of course, the self-checks for lumps in her breasts and irregularities in her vulva were things she'd never had encountered before entering the game, but even her penis and testicles presented a temptation as she looked down between her breasts to do the self-exams.

So why was she so *embarrassed* at having successfully resisted temptation? Why was she *ashamed* that she'd denied herself the exploration Caitlynn was talking about?

She didn't have time to ponder the question as Caitlynn's fingertips hooked under the sides of her panties and started tugging them down. "Lift your hips for me, princess...there's a good girl!" She whimpered as the accolade seemed to body-check the shame and she now felt proud of *being* such a good girl for Caitlynn.

As her panties were pulled down over the globes of her butt, her penis was freed from the fabric prison she put it in every morning after her shower. It slapped against her belly, a touch wetly as she'd been leaking pre-cum into her panties since Caitlynn had opened the bathroom and stood in the doorway fully naked. "My, my!" gasped the captain, "I was about to say how good it was to see your 'little' girl coming out to play, but there's nothing 'little' about you, is there?"

Diane flushed with embarrassment again, her hands clapping over her eyes and cheeks as Caitlynn finished removing her panties. She whined in a nearly canine fashion as she realized that she was now completely naked, fully exposed to the other woman.

"Now, now," Caitlynn chastised, "I know you're ashamed of your choice to have a cock in game," Diane gasped at the vulgar name for her appendage coming from a woman's mouth, "But this is *nothing* to be ashamed of. Other than choosing to have a dick, I'm guessing you didn't modify it in character creation either?" Diane shook her head, 'no,' "Then goodness, you're just gifted all around! Take those hands off your eyes, princess, and look at your body the way I do."

Diane obeyed, pulling her hands away and forcing herself to open her eyes and look down at her body. She had to focus to divorce her thoughts away from the mindset that a form such as hers was merely a temptation to sin, to view it as something another person found attractive and had plenty of visual evidence that it was true...and she realized that it *was* true! Her breasts were...*huge* and *gorgeous* and the up and down motion as she breathed was captivating on its own. The site between them of her lovely, athletically feminine hips shifting in arousal and, from her crotch, a magnificent example of a penis...of a *cock* rested against her belly, turgid and ready to thrust into a vagina. And the knowledge that she had a labia ready to stroke with deft fingers and a vagina of her own ready to be penetrated made her dizzy. She had chosen the best of both worlds in character creation and hadn't even given it any thought. That she was *only* attracted to women would be a challenge if she ever wanted her female sex organs to be fully satisfied, but if what Caitlynn had said earlier about your gender not having anything to do with your genitals was true, then there were...*other women* in the world with penises, and suddenly the thought that she might be in bed with one of them, wrapped around one as they pressed their *dick* into her and thrust in and out...

She shivered, a feeling she'd never had before sweeping through her body and she heard herself moaning as she did. "...w-what ha-happened?" a hint of fear crept into her voice as she almost whined the question.

Caitlynn stroked a hand over Diane's cheek and jaw. Diane's purring started up as she pressed her face into the palm petting her. The other woman giggled, "I'd say you just experienced enough arousal to give yourself a mini-orgasm, princess. Your first, unless I miss my guess."

"...a-a *mini-orgasm*?!" she gasped, "That's a *thing*?!"

In reply, Caitlynn let out a throaty, *hungry* laugh that had an unfamiliar dampness warming Diane's nethers behind her scrotum while at the same time feeling a touch of fear. "Oh, you're so naïve," laughed Caitlynn "So ignorant! It's almost like I'm corrupting you, but ignorance is not truly bliss," she leaned down and kissed Diane on the forehead, "I shall enjoy bringing you *bliss*..." She lined up her mouth with Diane's and kissed her, once again causing her mind to practically implode from the sensations.

After thoroughly lashing Diane's tongue with hers, Caitlynn broke off the kiss, "May I help you explore the ways your body can bring you pleasure, princess?"

Diane didn't *want* to have to say yes. She didn't want to *have* to grant permission for this maddeningly attractive woman to take full advantage of her. She wanted to be stolen away, somehow transported from the pod in the Houston agency office and to some distant place well outside the reach of the politics of the cold war between the U.N. and the A.R. She wanted to be naked and ready for this woman to simply take her without asking, to be claimed and pleased in ways that she only let herself imagine in her most torrid of wet dreams. But such was a fantasy and could never be, so she instead managed to stammer out, "Y-yes! Please, captain!"

Caitlynn laid down and pressed her naked body against Diane's, very carefully lifting Diane's head so she was using the other woman's bicep as a sort of pillow. This had the knock-on effect of pinning one arm, and the captain guided Diane's other arm so her hand was clasped with the hand of the arm under her head. Caitlynn then hooked one leg over Diane's, pulling it over and pinning it between her thighs. Three quarters of her limbs were now restrained, and Diane found herself panting with arousal, completely unsure what was going to happen next.

Caitlynn's free hand trailed down Diane's body, teasing her skin and one of her nipples, until she gingerly slid her hand into the crevasse between Diane's groin and leg. For the first time, Diane felt fingers that weren't her own or gloved up for a medical examination against her labia. "I'm going to play with your pussy first, princess. That should be a little less overwhelming since you've had one longer."

That wasn't true. That was so very *not* true. Granted, she'd only ever had an orgasm with her IRL penis from a wet dream, but she would have at least had *some* idea what to expect if Caitlynn had started with her cock. As it was she was going to be completely inexperienced with feeling anything resembling pleasure and even just *referring* to *that part* of herself as her... *pussy* felt dirty and raunchy and wrong and oh so very, *very* titillating.

And then Caitlynn's finger penetrated into her wet folds and she forgot to breath.

"Easy, princess. Keep that pussy spread open for me...that's a good girl." Diane's leg had been about to clamp down and pin Caitlynn's hand, but on being ordered otherwise she instead flattened her leg against the bed and positively strained to keep it there. Every part of her brain not drowning in pleasure was straining to keep her legs open.

Her pussy was wet, her *eyes* were wet. She was crying and sobbing, why was she crying? She dimly recognized someone was begging, "Yes! Yes! More, please more!" and then realized that was *her*. Caitlynn's tempting chuckle was her only real warning as a second finger made

its way into her tunnel and it felt so *right*! This made no sense and yet paradoxically she felt like she'd been missing this all her life. The feeling of *someone else inside her* was so overwhelmingly *right* that she wondered dimly how she'd never thought to want it before...but then snippets of memory, bits of dreams that led to semen-stained pajamas and sheets floated into her awareness, and with them came the recognition that she *had* been wanting it. She'd been wanting it for as long as she'd been able to feel sexual arousal. She simply didn't seem to register the want consciously...until now.

She thought of a man entering her and immediately her mind rejected it. She Did Not Want *That* under any circumstance. But then she thought of Caitlynn somehow possessing a pe...a *cock* and bending her over the edge of the bed and thrusting into her from behind and conscious thought ripped out from under her as her entire world shuddered with a massive quake, a feeling like her whole body was exploding and imploding simultaneously. She was lost in a sea of pleasure that was as alien as it was wonderous. She was drowning and never wanted to come up for air, her body buffeted by waves of bliss in time with her heartbeat.

"Breathe, princess..." she heard the admonition in her ear, "Breath for me..."

She took in great, heaving gulps of air, not realizing until that moment that she'd even stopped. How did this woman command her body so well? How did she know the ways to make Diane feel such things that she'd personally deliver The Second to Satan himself just to feel this pleasure for even one more second?

Diane became aware of the fact that Caitlynn had removed her fingers from her pussy when her nose picked up the scent of her own arousal from a source right next to it. She opened her eyes, once again not realizing she'd closed them until the need to see arose, just in time to see Caitlynn bringing her hand up to gently stroke along Diane's cheek with the knuckles.

"Goodness, princess, you weren't kidding about this being your first time, were you?" Diane recognized the question as rhetorical but shook her head 'no' anyway. "Well, I think you're not quite done yet..."

Even as Caitlynn said it, Diane knew it was true. She was still foggy with arousal, a *need* to mate to relieve the intense pressure inside her head, demanding she rut...and realized that *this* feeling she was at least a little familiar with. Her dual reproductive organs apparently had enough separation that she had only experience an orgasm with her va...her *pussy*. Her cock was hard as a rock and begging for something to bring it release, and for the first time in her life the thought of doing so didn't fill her with disgust. She looked down between her heaving breasts and saw her cock bobbing with her heartbeat, a string of pre dribbling down from the tiny hole from which her cum would release once she gave it what it needed. What *she* needed.

Caitlynn's voice interrupted her buzzing thoughts, "Do you remember what I said about how different women with penises view them differently?" Diane nodded, still working to catch her breath. Caitlynn continued, "Do you think of your cock as a sort of flesh strapon? A dildo that happens to be connected to you?" Diane shook her head vigorously and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that as much as she felt *right* to have her vagina, having her penis be some...disposable part didn't sit right in her mind. "Does it feel like something that you'd rather ignore or like it's just part of your pussy? Should I call it a clit instead?" Diane's brows

pinched together in confused frustration. That didn't seem right either, like it was minimizing something important. "Then do you feel like your *cock* is a part of you that belongs right where it is?" And as Caitlynn said it, the sense of *right*-ness was back, the affirmation in her heart that if she were to climb out of the pod and become Diane Samuels, human woman with the same body she had now as an alien descended from megafauna but with strictly human features...such as only one set of genitalia, that she would experience a profound and painful disappointment.

And in that moment Diane would have sold out her church, her country, and her God to be able to wake up in the morning and just be Diane Somni'els, First Found Daughter of Mortan, Slayer of Slavers...and lover to Caitlynn. She was a *proliferator*, not a man at all, and though she might *look* like a human woman, she wasn't quite one of those either. She was a woman for sure, she had been entertaining a guilty indulgence in feminine things more and more the longer she was in the pod, but it crystalized in that moment for her, she *was a proliferator*, and she'd claw out the eyes of anyone who suggested she was anything else!

Something in her expression, perhaps a light in her eyes or the smile she could feel growing on her face, told Caitlynn what she needed to know before Diane could confirm it. She could tell from the warm, affectionate smile on the other woman's face that Caitlynn had seen and recognized Diane's sudden conviction...but just because it felt like the right thing to do, she nodded and said with a giddy sensation, "Yes, captain!"

Caitlynn gently pulled herself off of Diane's side, their sweat almost sticking them together as it dried, before straddling her completely. She reached one hand down between them and almost gingerly encircled Diane's cock with her fingers. Very careful to avoid the head, she positioned her hand so she'd be able to adjust the position of the penis and lowered herself down until her lower lips were just barely 'kissing' the tip.

Diane shuddered, almost croaking out a guttural moan as her purring kick-started again. Caitlynn's eyes caught hers and held them, the other woman settling in above her, carefully not moving her hips any more than necessary, then leaned in and kissed Diane. It was deep, it was warm, and it was affectionate and... *omygod-warm-soft-hot-wet-warm-good-warm-more-more-more-warm...* Diane's brain locked on a babbling loop that would skip around, somewhat akin to her father's records on the few times he dug his collection out to play an oldie on the rarely used turntable and someone bumped the surface it'd been placed on.

A more rational part of her mind would later note (it didn't bother trying to during the actual act of sex) that Caitlynn had timed the actual penetration of her labia using Diane's *cock* (the word just felt so...naughty!) at the same time their tongues intertwined.

Caitlynn began moving her hips, rocking her torso up and down on Diane's cock while she languidly, almost lazily kissed Diane's lips. Their tongues dueled as their breathing became heavier and heavier. Diane's hips started thrusting, her attempts at increasing the tempo amateur but eager. Caitlynn met this by speeding up her pace, the gyrations of her hips eventually becoming vigorous enough she needed to end their kiss lest one of them bite the other's lips or headbutt the other on accident.

The longer Caitlynn rocked her hips, the more it felt like there was a bubble inside Diane that was about to burst. It was *different* from when her pussy was being invaded by her lover, but

different certainly did not mean worse, it was simply a different category of pleasure entirely, almost incomparable to being penetrated. By this point the two women were moaning and panting, and Diane felt the desire to make Caitlynn feel as good as she did. She raised a hand and cupped Caitlynn's breast, her fingers sinking into the soft flesh just a little.

Caitlynn responded with a keening moan that was fit between the panting gasps she was making as she rode Diane's cock. Realizing she was obviously on the right track, Diane cupped the other breast with her other hand and, almost accidentally, brushed both nipples with her thumbs.

This seemed to be just what Caitlynn needed as she gasped out, "Yes!" and made a hissing noise as she slammed down on Diane's hips, her pussy swallowing the entire rod into its depths. Diane felt like there was some sort of pocket of perfectly soft and welcoming flesh inside, right where the tip of her cock landed, and the entire experience of everything suddenly crashed together in her mind and she realized *she was fucking another woman, as a woman, with her own cock*, and came almost explosively. She threw her head back and almost howled as her legs rocketed out straight and her body felt like it was vibrating. If her vaginal orgasm had been like water, this orgasm was like lightning. Bolts of pleasure arced through her, feeling like they were spreading like lightning in space and their focal point was her cock.

She felt Caitlynn spasming around her penis for a bit, then the lightning storm shut off and all that remained were tiny sparks that would trigger at various places in her body, the hot sensation of pleasure making her muscles twitch. Caitlynn settled down on top of her for a bit and as the sparks and shivers faded, Diane realized she was, once again, crying.

And it wasn't just the strangeness of the experience or the epiphany that she might be falling a little bit in love with her virtual body...but there was something else, something like pain and fear. It was flowing *through* her, like a flooded river raging through a canyon after a particularly stormy season; anything that might have been swept away or destroyed by the flood already was, but anyone seeing it would know the awful destructive force that they were witnessing.

As Diane's member softened in the afterglow of their lovemaking, Caitlynn was muttering soothing words into Diane's ears, "Shh...it's okay, the feelings were big, you're a good girl, let yourself feel it..." and on and on as the flood of uneasiness and suffering escaped through her eyes and expressed itself through her diaphragm.

"W...why?" she managed to stutter out between sobs, "W-why am I c-c-crying?"

"Sshhh..." Caitlynn soothed, "It happens sometimes. Sex can be...*extremely* intimate, and if you've never done it before it can touch on things you've had buried for a long time, especially if you grew up in an environment that told you that sex was inherently bad. What you're experiencing isn't bad, it just is. Let it happen, sweet princess. Just let it out, good girl, just like that..."

Diane's arms, capable of deadlifting a half a ton and curling a quarter, clutched Caitlynn close as the other woman kept telling her how she was good, and that she would be fine, and she had done such a good job.

She wasn't quite sure when she'd fallen asleep.

Master and Commander | Blindfolded Hindsight

Chapter Summary

It's the morning after...and there's something that Diane seems to be forgetting.

Chapter Notes

In case you missed it on my [Tumblr feed](#), I'll be switching my release schedule on ScribbleHub back to Mondays only until I can get a full four weeks ahead again.

I'm posting this the morning after making it home from the 2024 HRC Dinner where Gov. Walz spoke supporting LGBTQIA+ rights and equality in our country. He talked about Project 2025 and how it's an existential threat to *everyone*, not just queer folk. The next morning I was telling the people I travelled with I was writing this book and I observed that I had started before Project 2025 was a major talking point and QuietValerie started Trouble with Horns back before anyone had *heard* of Project 2025.

And it took the combined efforts of QuietValerie, Trashlynn, and fan authors such as myself to create a version of America that is *ALMOST* as bad as Project 2025.

If you're reading this before Election Day, American, and old enough to vote, DO IT! Don't let ANYONE take that right away, even with the provably false notion that "voting doesn't do anything." The two parties are NOT the same, one wants me DEAD. Just *writing Code of Ethics would be illegal under the America of Project 2025*.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Diane was drowning.

Dimly she recognized that she was dreaming, at least on some level, and this was the only thing that kept the terror from completely blitzing her ability to recognize that she wasn't actually in danger of losing her life. This gave her no comfort as her terror short circuited her awareness of the dream state, fear overriding reason.

She had been to the pool once when both her parents were alive, and it had been her first time exposed to a body of water that large. She had grown up inland, in a city with no large rivers or lakes nearby. She would discover later that there were actually a couple reservoirs that she would learn to enjoy going to, but in that moment when she was eagerly facing the water and

watching the colliding wavelets that distorted the blue-black painted lane lines on the bottom of the pool, she had never even *seen* that much standing water in a single place. She was consequently completely unprepared when she jumped in and realized that her feet weren't touching the bottom. She panicked, she flailed about and probably was a danger to everyone around her until a lifeguard managed to get an arm around her and her head above the water. Compounding the adrenaline reaction and fear was the embarrassment and shame that came with the realization that she had made a complete and utter fool of herself. She couldn't even have said she made an *ass* of herself; she'd been so very completely the fool, and it had taken every ounce of convincing (and, perhaps, a little bit of bribery from her parents in the form of a promise to take her to her favorite fast-food place after) to get her to stay at the pool for the entire visit. She couldn't say if she enjoyed the rest of the time at the pool, the memory of the panic and shame overriding all other memories surrounding the incident.

The thing that always stood out to her the most from that incident was the way her mind could only recollect the fear and, somehow, darkness. Like she'd closed her eyes and shut out all light as she scrambled and flailed about in the water.

She was surrounded by an infinite inky blackness, a dark, crushing void of water that stretched off into infinity. She somehow would see flickers of light that would make her think she could see the surface, but no matter how hard she kicked and tried to swim toward it she never really left the dark.

It was the nature of dreams to be disjointed, to break with reality in some way that (usually) one never really realizes until awake, so it wasn't a *surprise* so much as it was yet another aspect to the horror of her nightmare that she was able to hear, with perfect clarity, a litany of crimes she was guilty of. It was as though the cold, cruel voice was right next to her ear. It had an almost feral quality, as though the speaker were so apoplectic with rage that they could barely get the words out. It was a point of minor confusion that, had she not been in the process of drowning, she might have dwelt on it more, but the listed crimes were not the ones that plagued her mind and brought her low into depression during her waking hours. There was no mention of the *dozens* of S.A.I. deaths she'd caused under orders, nothing about her killing of an innocent child.

"Rapist!"

"Sinner!"

"Whore!"

Her lungs were straining, the buildup of waste gasses reaching levels that made her feel like her chest would explode if she didn't open her mouth and breathe...but her world was water, she was surrounded by it.

"Molester!"

"Liar!"

"Deceiver!"

She wanted to scream out denials, but even if she had somehow been able to rally her thoughts to defend herself, the moment she opened her mouth she was dead.

"FILTHY!"

"DISGUSTING!"

"*PERVERT!*"

The final accusation landed like a physical blow, her body flinching into a curled, almost fetal position and air vomiting from her mouth in the instant before she tried to inhale...and immediately choked on the intruding water. It was ice cold and the bitter, almost acid bite of it flooding her lungs would have made her scream if she could have~

"...nearly every night."

The water was gone, but the feeling of ice remained. More of a memory than an actual sensation of cold, it nonetheless had her shivering from the fear and arctic chill in her bones.

"*Every* night?! Has she sought counseling?!"

She was naked, she was aware of her surroundings enough to recognize that, but her mind was too locked up in terror to recognize much else.

"No. It has been suggested during her medical checkups, but she has yet to pursue such an option."

Parts of her felt like she was still trapped underwater, cold and wet. She kicked with her legs and her top sheet was ejected off her body, and the blissful *dry* of air met her skin, sweat evaporating and cooling her skin causing her shivering to redouble...but the *wet* had been reduced, at least.

"How does she deal with this?"

Gentle fingers stroked along the ridges on her skull that were hidden by her hair. The more rational part of her mind, almost buried by the riptide of fear, observed rather stupidly that the ridges were the remnants of the three rows of spines that the precursors to modern Morvucks had before the spines softened to hair, the ridges receding to three rows of bone that started at her hairline and traced back to where her spine met the base of her skull. The more animal part of her brain was calmed and comforted by the fingers carding through her hair and told the more rational part to fuck off.

"She doesn't. By the time she wakes up in the morning she can't remember her nightmares. I only know about it thanks to the station's biometric monitoring of her systems being always active. I check on her every time her heart rate spikes and her neural patterns register distress, but she's extremely difficult to wake. I suspect some form of night terror."

There was the realization that her head was in a lap and there was a deliciously comforting scent, one that her subconscious mind associated with...not exactly *wholesome* feelings, but

welcome and heavenly and blissful, in stark contrast to the voice that accused her of such horrible things.

"Oh, you poor baby...who did this to you?"

Safe. She was safe and no longer drowning. She was dry and there was no water and she was being held. Her chest started rumbling with a purr and the terror and panic receded like the tide taking the water away.

"Fascinating! This is the fastest I've ever seen her stabilize! You seem to be good for her Miss M..."

She drifted back to sleep, soothed by the gentle caresses on her scalp, unaware that she wouldn't remember anything that happened by the time she woke up.

Diane woke slowly, feeling as completely rested as she could remember ever doing. She'd always been, to the best of her recollection, a light sleeper, meaning she never got enough of the deep sleep on the other side of dreams that humans were supposed to get. Today, however, she felt like she'd slept for a year and for the first time since Sani came aboard the station wasn't plagued by a depression that was threatening to choke her.

As nice as it was to wake up feeling rested and comfortable, her bladder was screaming at her that she had at least one duty that couldn't be delegated. Pushing herself to a seated position, she was startled as a hand fell off her chest and to the bed. Her *naked* chest and a bed featuring 200% of its usual occupancy. She twisted her torso to look behind her and saw Caitlynn, fast asleep with her head propped up on pillows, putting her in a slightly reclined position on her back so one arm could be around Diane. She felt her heart swelling with an unfamiliar emotion that, for once, didn't come along with fear that something was wrong. In fact, it all seemed *right* as she carefully climbed out of bed and walked as quietly as she could to the bathroom to take care of business.

Upon washing her hands, she turned her attention to the pile of clothes her companion (dare she think she had a girlfriend? She *hoped* she'd proven herself worthy of being called such, but so much had happened...) had left on the bathroom floor. The very nice suit was bound to be fairly rumpled, her efforts at preserving the jacket notwithstanding. She glanced around at the flat surfaces of the bathroom and frowned. "Katrina," she asked into the air quietly.

The hologram rezzed into the bathroom next to Diane, "Yeah boss?"

Diane kept herself from yelping as she scrambled to poorly cover her breasts and groin with the clothes in her hands, "Gah! Why are you here?! I was just going to *sleep*, I didn't need you in here with me!"

Katrina snickered, "What? It's not like my cameras aren't watching you all day, every day anyway. I've seen you naked plenty."

Diane frowned but didn't pursue the argument. The digital assistant was right, and she was just a piece of software anyway. Why was Diane acting so squeamish about being naked for

Katrina? "Fine, whatever," she snapped out. Realizing she was sounding rather shrewish, she paused, took a breath, then continued in a more civil tone, "Sorry; did Caitlynn board the station with a minitab or a communicator?"

Katrina frowned, "No, nothing detected on her person besides her clothes as she came aboard for dinner last night."

Diane nodded, "Okay, so we didn't lose something of hers, good. Has anyone from her ship called Ops looking for her?"

Katrina's smile returned, "Ah, no, they have not. Is there a message you'd like me to convey?"

Diane was about to say 'yes,' but realized there was nothing really for her to say. What *would* she have said? That she slept with their captain? "Uh...no, I just...didn't want anyone panicking because she didn't show up at her ship last night."

"Ah," replied Katrina.

They stood there awkwardly, Diane's face growing more flushed by the second. Eventually, she realized that not only was Katrina waiting for her to give her an order, the hologram was also expressing amusement at her discomfiture in the form of an upturned corner of her mouth. The spike of irritation at this realization finally cut through her embarrassment, "Kat, please let Ops know to redirect any inquiries about the captain to my quarters."

"You got it," Katrina replied *way* too fast, which told her that she was right in her guess that her digital assistant was tweaking her nose. This was confirmed by her next inquiry, "Are you planning on giving her crew a show, as well? I'm sure we could set up a theater screen to show the whole station."

"Kat!" she hissed, unwilling to raise her voice with Caitlynn still asleep in her bed. She'd never tried testing the sound proofing/dampening of the bathroom door, and now wasn't the time.

Katrina chuckled and de-rezzed, allowing Diane to breathe a sigh of relief and lower the clothes she was covering herself with.

"So...do we need to send up a maintenance team to fix the bed? Or the floor? Do the doctors need to bring up a portable regen unit for Caitlynn?"

"Norma," Diane groaned into the minitab she held clamped between her shoulder and ear, "I'm getting it enough from Katrina, please..."

"Of *course* the pussycat got her claws in you first," Norma snorted, "Perks of *being the station*, I guess."

"Norma..."

"Girlfriend, you and *Captain* Madi were practically fucking at the table. Then you take her for a 'tour' of the station, and I have it on *good* authority that you took her up to your quarters

and she never went back to her ship last night. So, either you went full dino and ate her," Diane rolled her eyes but didn't otherwise give her friend any more ammo by responding, "*Or* you did like two horny idiots do and '*ate*' her."

Diane's face flushed so bright red she was sure she was going to overcook the eggs she was making for her and Caitlynn from the heat of her cheeks alone, "*Norma!!!*"

The station mayor cackled into Diane's ear through the minitab, "Point is, my Sapphically carnivorous friend, that no, Russe and I won't be joining you for breakfast, so don't even ask. We're not going to cock-block or clam-jam either of you."

Diane frowned, "I don't know what either of those mean."

Right then, the discussed ship captain came out of the bedroom wearing her suit pants and shirt, her leggings tucked into the toes of the heels she had hooked on the fingers of her left hand. Diane smiled warmly and was pleased when the smile was returned but had a momentary twinge of concern at the slightly haunted look in Caitlynn's eyes.

Normal cackled again, "Ohmygawd, you're hopeless! Anyway, just because Russe and I won't be joining you doesn't mean you won't be going through one of the Mortan gifts."

Diane's brow pinched in confusion as she removed the skillet from the induction element. She used the spatula in her right hand to help with sliding the eggs out onto a plate as she said, "You two normally just bring the gift with you, if you're not coming up, then how...?"

"If Katrina's handy-dandy in-station tracker is anything like reliable, which you know it is, then the bot should be dropping it off..." There was a chime from the suite's P.A. system, which Norma had clearly heard, "Right now. Now go open your prezzy and enjoy your morning-after breakfast."

Diane pulled the minitab away from her ear with her now free hand and glared at it as though it were a video call before putting it back to her ear. "I *still* haven't told you whether we...you know. As though it's any of your business if we did."

Norma practically sing-song'd, "If you have to report yourself off-duty we'll know why!"

Diane growled without too much anger and disconnected the call. Composing herself, she turned to her guest, who was now sitting at the breakfast bar with the now familiar cheshire grin she'd been wearing most of the previous night. The haunted look was gone, so Diane decided it must have been her imagination. "Good morning!" said with shy urgency, "I...uh, didn't know what you wanted for breakfast, or if you even *eat* breakfast, and I didn't want to wake you, so...uh..." Rather than stammer out anything else, which she *knew* she'd start babbling if she kept talking, she grabbed a fork and knife from the drawer by her cooktop's control panel and passed over the plate she'd prepared. It was fairly simple, for all the station had been receiving goods that they couldn't make for themselves (such as the eggs), a good deal of the station's dietary needs was still being provided by the synth stations and the enviro-farms. In this case, an omelet with just enough cheese to call it one, mushrooms, some gently seared soy cut in cubes, served on some slightly wilted spinach. Setting the dish in

front of the captain, she snagged her personal salt and pepper shakers and set them on the bar next to the plate.

Caitlynn examined the food with an appraising eye and said, "Impressive! Do you think I could hire you to be my galley quartermaster? We don't eat half this good on my ship."

Diane found herself blushing quite a bit as she moved her own plate to the spot on the bar next to Caitlynn's. "I...uh...it's just what I could throw together. I don't really make my own breakfasts much so it was nice to do it for someone that's, uh, and I...is it okay to thank you for...? I mean, I don't know the protocol...uhm...I'm going to go get the package."

Caitlynn picked up her fork and cut herself a bite of omelet and asked, "Package?" before she put the food in her mouth and 'mmmm!'d with obvious pleasure.

"Remember the gifts from Mortan? We can't really skip opening them, even the 'special' gifts that aren't clothing basics or food items that can be stored long term are getting a backlog." She opened her cabin door and saw a small box suitable for shipping a small non-fragile item via interstellar freight, "We're looking at it taking two months to get through the backlog," she expounded as she picked up the package and closed the hatch again, "We're talking about upping the opening of the packages to two a day." She set it on the bar on the opposite side of her plate from the side Caitlynn was on and sat down, picking up her fork.

As she grabbed the salt to season her omelet, Caitlynn swallowed the bite in her mouth (Diane had evidently made it to the other woman's satisfaction, as she had eaten nearly half of it already), and asked, "Aren't you going to open your gift? I'd like to see the kind of thing you're getting from your 'home' planet."

Diane ignored the twinge of hunger in her belly as she set the fork and salt back down and scooted her plate to the side to make room for the package. "I mean, sure? Not a thing other players get, I'm guessing?" She examined the box and realized there was a silicon zipper seal on it, not uncommon in order to keep a package vacuum tight on the cheep for stuff that wouldn't *like* vacuum but wouldn't necessarily suffer for it.

As she pulled the tab along the zipper, Caitlynn replied, "Depends on the player's Commander perks, really. There's usually something the player gets on an early mission that will provide them a boost or a buff for the rest of the game," she smiled wryly as Diane finished breaking the seal, "First time I've heard of getting *presents* as your Commander's Perk. Not bad as those things go."

Diane smiled with a slight shrug and opened the box, the top hinging clamshell-like...

...and slammed the box closed again with a bright red blush. "Aaaaaand I'll examine this one more in private. Uhm...I mean, not over breakfast. With...uh..."

Caitlynn's grin turned predatory as she gently teased the box from Diane's hands, which had gone somewhat slack as her face was alternating between clammy pale and incandescent red. "Oh no, I caught a glimpse of that, and if I'm guessing right, it's a gift that you need *someone else* to really enjoy it."

Diane whined wordlessly as Caitlynn nudged her plate over a bit and moved the box closer to herself, then opened it.

Caitlynn's chuckle spoke volumes, but the other woman clearly wanted to make sure Diane understood the full import of her latest gift, "I can't say I know much about Mortan culture, but this appears to be a very nice strap and dildo combo," she dug the phallus part of the gift from its hollow in the shipping material, "And a very nice one, too. It's...oh, I *think*..." she inspected the base and a grin blossomed on her face, "It *is*! A very nice *vibrator* built to go with this...I believe this is a genuine leather strap!" She snickered and leaned her elbow on the breakfast bar, her chin cupped in her hand as Diane's forehead thumped on the thankfully empty breakfast bar, "You see, princess, when two women like each other very much..."

Diane buried her head in her arms like a child trying to hide from the monster under their bed, "*The design lends itself well to inference, thank you!*" She was well aware that she sounded like a child that was more embarrassed than frightened, even though there was a touch of fear there as well. "Norma picked that out *specifically*, I just know it!" she whined into the countertop.

In the end, it was *Diane* that made her way down to sickbay, face bright red and thankfully unaccompanied by Caitlynn, who'd gone off to check in with her crew after the two of them had kept themselves occupied until after *lunch* as the ship captain made damn sure that Diane understood all aspects of how her newest gift worked. Caitlynn then hovered over Diane's shoulder as she wrote a personally crafted thank you message to the Morvuck woman who'd sent it, complete with a few selected examples of *specific* things she liked about the gift. Caitlynn's experience as a teacher ensured that Diane's reply was complete and thorough...and Diane's Morvuck body was responding to Caitlynn as though she was a more dominant Morvuck woman.

I swear, if she was Morvuck she'd be...like, President or Queen or whatever they have there. I should look that up at some point.

Doctor Dlamini examined Diane and determined that her vaginal walls had been slightly bruised from the activity that part of her body was obviously not accustomed to. Diane was *immensely* grateful that he'd been as genteel and professional as a woman could possibly want in such a situation, and was equally glad that he was able to do the exam without having her put her feet in stirrups thanks to some of the 26th century medical tech they'd brought aboard the station. While they had some very nice and advanced tech already aboard, the initial equipment on the sickbay at construction was based on what was cutting edge in the in-game universe's late 22nd century.

Dlamini's humor wasn't *completely* hidden, but he kept it to just an amused glimmer in his eye as he ran the scanner over Diane's abdomen, "I'm honestly a bit surprised that a woman your age has never experimented with this sort of thing before."

Diane's face was still red as she sighed, "Yeah, well, I didn't have the kind of home environment that encouraged that sort of thing."

The doctor tutted as he looked at the holographic scan results that hovered over Diane's form, "And your school's sex ed didn't say anything about it...? But then, you are Morvuck, so it's possible they may not have thought human sex ed applied to you. Rather foolish, really. Just about any doctor on Earth could have told them there's close enough match between Human and Morvuck genitalia that most of the curricula for humans would still apply to you as well."

Diane's face flushed even more, "Uh...enough to get pregnant, doc? 'cause we didn't use protection..."

Birth control, at least in the form of non-pharmaceutical measures went, was one of the few things the Church got continuous pushback even over a half-century after the United States had reorganized into a Theocratic Republic. As it was, it was *only* available to people over the age of 18 and the purchaser had to show I.D. to buy it. Diane had known a few guys in her classes whose fathers had purchased condoms for them, mostly to keep an unwanted child from showing up. While Diane hadn't had that privilege (Tiffany made it clear that Dylan had better not be 'doing that' with anyone, period, let alone worrying about needing protection), she still understood the need if a couple weren't married. Humans were going to be human, regardless of the Church's admonitions against premarital sex.

Something tickled the back of Diane's mind at that, but she didn't have time to chase that down as the doctor chuckled, "A bit after the fact to be asking that question, but it is a good one. And no, you would need a fertility clinic for a Morvuck and Human to produce a child together."

Diane breathed a sigh of relief. If the doctors were worried enough about possible health concerns for her genitalia even though it was 'just a game' thanks to the levels of realism in it, she wouldn't be surprised if there was some sort of pregnancy mechanic. *Probably should look that up, too.* "Thanks, doc. Anything else coming up on that?" she waved her hand at the hologram, thankfully a wireframe of her vagina and uterus and not a potentially offputtingly realistic representation.

"Just the bruised tissue. As you and...well, *any* partner you have grow more accustomed to the activity, you should be able to engage in sex without injury in the future." He pulled out another device and began waving it over her pubic region, "And, of course, communication is key. A little bit of communication in advance will ensure that potential injuries don't interrupt the fun next time."

Diane could only blush and mumble to herself about her not even expecting it *this* time.

Diane had made it all of five feet from the sickbay door as the niggling, worrying thought regarding protection during sex pushed itself up to the foreground of her thoughts. She froze in place as she realized, *...I just had premarital sex.*

She was stunned by the realization of the sin she'd committed, not just once but *twice* in less than 12 hours. She swallowed and began feeling anxious, waiting for the guilt and anguish to begin. The lessons in Sunday School were constant and consistent; premarital or extramarital sex was a sure recipe for life consuming guilt. Half the reason the Priests did confessionals (in the privacy of their offices, not in separate booths like she'd seen in old pre-war movies

and streaming shows) was for people to disclose when they'd sinned, especially one of the colloquially termed 'big three'; murder, sexual sins, or heresy.

She realized she was holding her breath as she waited, and if anyone had happened by, they'd be confused by her standing, seemingly frozen mid-stride.

In a slight daze, she made her way out of the Ops building and out to one of the parks that overlooked the Industrial Deck. She found a bench and sat down, gazing out across the space to the opposite side of the station, waiting for the crushing weight of her sin to bring her down.

It was nearly five minutes before she realized...she wasn't feeling it. She didn't feel the angry bite of guilt for her actions with Caitlynn at *all*.

But...I'm supposed to feel guilty...? she pondered silently. She thought back to her interactions with Caitlynn, everything from the moment she'd accepted the video call via in-game chat to when they parted ways after getting off the lift in the officer's hab.

Absolutely nothing about it made her feel guilty.

Instead, she found herself...buoyed by the recollections. A happy little bubble resting somewhere in the vicinity of her heart as she thought about Caitlynn's mischievous little smile, her laugh that made Diane want to laugh along with her even if she didn't know *why*, the way she brought out feelings that Diane had so little experience with but found herself wanting *more* of them...

I...don't feel guilty at all! What did this mean? What was she supposed to do? She had never heard of anything like her situation in Sunday School, nor in any of the classes she was taught about biology in high school or college. There was nothing published about this feeling, and even in Star Trek the captains that engaged in the use of "Captain's Women" without offering them a long-term commitment got some sort of comeuppance. There was simply nothing in her entire lexicon of experiences and books and fiction media that told her what she was supposed to do or feel next if she sinned and somehow didn't feel like she'd done anything wrong.

And somehow that left her feeling empty inside.

Chapter End Notes

Diane's reaction to realizing she *didn't* feel crushing guilt over having premarital sex is based on my own experience. Obviously, my own education both formally and self-taught/researched is FAR more complete than Diane's at this point in her story, so when I had sex for the first time with a woman after getting a divorce, it was someone I met at a PFLAG meeting and before the first date was over we'd pulled off to the side of the road and climbed into the back seat because we couldn't keep our hands off each other. By the end of our second date we were back at my place and riding bareback. And then

at church a few weeks later, someone said something about "feeling the guilt and weight of premarital sex," and it hit me like a ton of bricks that I had not only had sex. I'd had sex with someone who wasn't my wife. They were, in fact, the same flavor of queer that I was, which means it was *either* two women having sex or two men having sex, but no matter how you sliced it, it was *gay as fuck!*

...and I didn't feel "the weight of sin" at all. If anything, the *weight of my depression* from the divorce and feeling alone and unloved/unloveable. was **way less**. While I'm certainly not saying, "If you're feeling depressed, go fuck someone," but for *me*, in that moment, having sex where someone knew I was a woman and not only accepted that but was *turned on by it* was INCREDIBLY healing. I don't need sex to conquer depression, but damned if it doesn't help.

And yes, I left the church within two months of that realization.

Master and Commander | No Stairway!

Chapter Summary

Diane's relationship with Caitlynn continues to grow

Chapter Notes

I am not happy with this chapter. It does what it needs to do and contains what it needs, but it feels... ramblly. Granted, it's an establishing chapter, but it doesn't meet my preferred levels of 'goodness' (however that can be quantified). That said, it's not terrible.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Some two weeks later, Diane found herself back at Docking Bay A, Cargo 1. She made absolutely no bones about her purpose for being there, and she was well aware of the silly jokes and less than subtle implications her crew and the residents of the station were making about her and the relationship with a certain captain.

A week prior, they'd received word that Caitlynn had completed her job carrying the terraforming eels and the ship was bound back for 'civilized' space with their payment and to return to the shipyards that installed the refits to transport the hazardous cargo. As high a price as *Sappho's Voyage* would have been able to command transporting specialty biological cargo, it was, apparently, an *overspecialization* and would limit her ability to do regular commerce, at least in the quantities she had become accustomed to. And since the route back to those shipyards took the vessel by *Matron's Aerie* anyway, Caitlynn had no problem scheduling a little bit of an extended leave on the station.

The dock workers smiled as they passed during the usual course of their duties, giving her knowing looks and companionable nods as she stood fidgeting on her toes with her hands clasped behind her back. Nobody lingered, something which Diane was grateful for as it meant she wouldn't be stumbling over her words as she tried to find something to talk about that *wasn't* her girlfriend.

Was Caitlynn her girlfriend? They never actually *said* they were, and Diane was honestly a little afraid of asking, not knowing if it was appropriate for her, as one of two women in a relationship, to raise the question. They were certainly *dating*, the fact that Caitlynn had taken about half her meals in the commander's suite and the other half either in the former mess hall or in restaurants along the promenade, usually with Diane.

And the fact that Caitlynn had claimed one of the empty drawers in one of the many dressers and chests in her bedroom for a couple changes of clothes and put her toothbrush in the bathroom certainly *implied* a solidly long-term relationship...but they still hadn't *said* anything resembling a commitment. At least, not as far as Diane had been able to recognize.

And she was *not* raising the question with Norma or Russe again. Russe would just give her his well-meaning platitudes and tell her to just be honest with the captain and *ask*, which just the thought caused crazy amounts of butterflies in her stomach. Norma would just cackle *again* and call her a 'Useless Lesbian,' which apparently had some cultural context that Diane simply didn't have.

Diane nearly jumped out of her skin as her mini-tab chimed. She fished it out of her jacket pocket and answered the call from Ops, "Commander speaking, go ahead."

"*Sappho's Voyage* has been cleared for docking and is on approach now," Cynthia advised with an undercurrent of amused affection in her voice. "Just letting you know so you stop scarin' the docking crew."

Diane was aware she was sounding a bit petulant when she grouched, "I am *not* scaring the docking crew!"

"Not according to Sani," the teenaged comms officer chuckled, "She says they're giving you a wide berth and are moving like you're gonna space 'em."

Diane frowned and spun on a heel, spotting an out of place casual jacket on the Morvuck girl just barely hidden around a corner. She could see a mini-tab in Sani's hand and held close to her face, "Sani!" she barked, "I am *not* scaring the dock workers!"

Sani cackled and ran off in the direction of the tether as the crew around her chuckled good naturedly. Cynthia giggled and broke the connection, leaving Diane to her own devices.

As she was returning her mini-tab to her jacket pocket, she felt the docking bay shake slightly as physics could not be denied, even as effective as maneuvering thrusters, gravity plating, and inertial dampers worked to minimize the ship's impact on the station's orbital and attitudinal mechanics. As the tremors settled, she turned her eyes to the indicator lights over the airlock and waited what felt like a year for the red to flick to yellow, then green. "Airtight seal established, initiating mating lock," called the crewman serving as porter for Cargo 1 at the airlock control panel. The rumbling of mechanical slides and latches large enough to grind an elephant into a fine paste could be felt through the deck paneling and every vibration Diane felt seemed to be driving her senses to what she was vaguely recognizing as hunting awareness. Rather than the tension and hunger of anticipating action and combat, however, she was finding herself keyed up for a different sort of 'action,' one that, historically, she would be the prey for.

And she'd gladly be prey for this particular 'hunter.'

Finally, the porter announced into the dock P.A. system, "Docking complete, welcome to *Matron's Aerie, Sappho's Voyage*." As the announcement finished, the immense docking bay doors, wide enough to drive two Terran ground cars side by side and tall enough for a giraffe

to pass through without ducking, rumbled to the side, parting to reveal the crew of the cargo ship...and her captain, standing front and center.

Well aware she was doing a *miserable* job of appearing cool and collected, Diane waited as Caitlynn spotted her, her grin growing bright and her eyes sparkling, as she let her crew stream aboard the station while she stood on the threshold. Once every last member of the ship's crew that had been cleared for leave passed by, Caitlynn stepped aboard the station from the interchange. As she closed the distance between them, she almost casually raised one hand up and brushed a strand of Diane's hair behind her ear. "Hello, princess," she purred, "You look happy to see me."

Diane blushed and said in a rather silly sounding tone, "I am!" At least, it sounded silly to her, and she was embarrassed to be such a wreck over her feelings for Caitlynn and she should find a way to run away and hide in some part of the galaxy nobody could find her and~

Caitlynn silenced Diane's mind by stretching up on her toes to plant a kiss on her, pulling Diane down slightly so she didn't have to stretch quite so far. After a few moments, Caitlynn broke the kiss and lowered herself down to her heels. "Are you *taller*?" she asked incredulously.

"Oh, kinda," Diane chirped and kicked back her foot to show off her boots, turning slightly but still holding Caitlynn by the waist, "I had new boots made with a higher heel so I could get used to the height that my nice shoes were at. My calves and ankles were *killing* me after the big dinner that first night you were here, and I wanted to make sure that wasn't going to be a problem again."

As Diane put her booted foot back down on the deck, Caitlynn chuckled, "You know, for someone who created such a butch character, you're probably the girliest woman I know sometimes."

Video would later surface on the station's social media feeds of Diane giggling and blushing with her hands over her eyes while Caitlynn smiled at her indulgently.

"So why are we here, love?" Caitlynn had asked, obviously amused by the almost bouncing steps as Diane led her into the almost utilitarian room with a wide picture window on one side. Diane hoped that she wasn't boring her (hopefully!) girlfriend as she prattled on about the latest big build at her command.

The window itself was extremely thick and the panes of plexy were layered and gapped, each pane of plexy being nearly five inches thick and each vacuum gap being equally spaced about five inches apart. Given that there was the cold vacuum of space on the other side of the window, the layering and gapping was a zero-energy way of keeping the atmosphere inside the station warm enough for habitation.

The room itself was a lot of bare metal that had been steel brushed and treated so it made the space feel as human-friendly as it was possible for an obviously industrial space to be. There was a carpet runner on the floor, tacked down so the station's cleaning and maintenance bots

didn't have to deal with a trip hazard, and a bench that had a rubberized surface that looked like it might be passably comfortable for a short sit. The lighting was subdued in the room, quite obviously done to allow the lighting from outside the window to command the space.

And the *view* through the window was one that had turned this little observation room into Diane's third favorite place on the station.

Technically located in the "bottom" half of the station, the brand-new shipyard was actively hard at work on constructing a ship that was easily three times the size of the *Dragon's Daughter*. Built around a mirrored pylon design, the structural frame was in place and the inner hull was in the process of being built. Spaces that an educated eye might guess were for railguns occupied a good portion of both sides of the ship, running from pretty close to the aft all the way to the forward ports. A space in the framework that could only be a small cargo hold sat near the central core near the back, and the engine space had what appeared to be magnetic bottles already installed, though it was obvious that they weren't powered on, so no antimatter would be in them yet. A 'bowl' in the middle-top of the frame had a significant number of raceways and lift frame-rails connecting to it, and the purpose became obvious once the construction taking place above the ship proper was taken into account. A 'pod' that would be the bridge was being constructed separately and was a lot further along to completion, with exterior plating being installed in some places, though it wasn't complete, allowing some sight-lines into the framework to see where cabling and paneling were being installed.

"...and it'll have the upgraded FTL drive that we got the plans for last week, Daffyd was a *bro* with that! I think if I have to deal with the Terran Embassy again I'm going to space someone." Diane was gushing and complaining at the same time. "Rokyo only has so much pull on Mortan, but she *was* able to get us some whitepapers and working documents that Katrina used to extrapolate the railgun plans for. We're testing the completed prototype tomorrow!"

Caitlynn playfully nudged Diane with her elbow, "Not much cargo capacity."

Diane rolled her eyes, "Well of *course* not. We've got the *Gold Rush* if we need cargo hauling...well, for *now*. After we get an interceptor-class built we're going to use the shipyard to build a bigger survey-class ship. It'll *still* be used for hauling raw materials, but it'll have the upgraded FTL engines which means we'll be able to mine from nearby systems as easily as the *Gold Rush* can do for this system now."

Caitlynn's smile was warm and entirely for Diane, who *knew* that she was being annoying and talking only about her interests with the shipyard, maybe she should just stop talking and find something else to do with Caitlynn that wasn't just a bunch of robots building a little ship... "You are so *cute* when you get excited like this."

Never mind, talking about ship building now! "Yeah! It's so awesome seeing how the ships are being put together! I mean, I know it's not *exactly* like building the models back home, I'm not the one doing the actual building here after all, but sometimes I'll bring a mug of Jyantín Tonic down here and just watch the ship coming together..."

"You build models? Like, IRL?"

Diane nodded and practically bounced on her toes, "I have a whole collection! Mostly Star Trek, though I do have the Jupiter 2 and someone made some plans for a 3D printer for a old, *old* streaming show from the pre-Internet era called Space 1999."

Caitlynn's eyebrows went up, "'Space'...? Never heard of it. Is it any good?"

Diane snorted, "No! It was horrible! The hook was that nuclear *waste* somehow blew up on the dark side of the moon that, *somehow*, knocked it out of orbit and it *somehow* travelled through things like black holes and wormholes and 'warp fields' so fast that it managed to encounter other star systems and other civilizations without, you know, *getting shredded* by the gravitational forces and all this travel happening within the lifetime of the crew of the moon base. Oh, and nothing had a FTL drive, either."

Caitlynn chuckled, "Wow, the things people used to think could happen in space." She shook her head and gestured at the ship being built, "So it's not to haul cargo and it's not an Interceptor, what is it?"

Diane put her hand against the glass, as though touching it was touching the unfinished ship, "It's a cruiser," she almost whispered, "The *Dragon's Daughter* is technically a combat ship, but it's more of a scout. Small, fast for its size, enough weapons to do some light defense. But *that*?" She realized her face was close enough to the window that her breath was fogging it slightly, "That will actually be able to go ship-to-ship. Not against a capital ship, obviously, but it might just be able to take on a Terran Destroyer or a Crotuk Bröshsveer."

Caitlynn snorted, "Expecting trouble, Commander Somni'els?" the question seemed formal, but the tone was light.

"We're a *station*, Captain Madi. As in, *stationary*." She gently leaned against her (hopefully) girlfriend, "Sure, we can build some pretty powerful defense platforms, and our shields are better than any ship, but we can't *dodge*, and if someone comes at us with a superior force and the intention of making us *not be there* at the end of the day, we can't just pick up and move."

Caitlynn turned more in Diane's direction and slid an arm around her waist, "You have a point. That is one nice thing about being a ship's captain, just pick up and go." She snorted, "'course, that's a negative, too. If my ship gets blown out from under me, I'll respawn back on Earth and have to start from scratch. The insurance will replace the ship immediately, even if my premiums'll go through the roof for a bit, but then I have to get a crew, and the reputation mechanic in the game can be brutal if you lose too many crew members too quickly."

"Huh," grunted Diane as she turned her attention away from the viewport and to Caitlynn, "I haven't had to deal with that yet."

The ship's captain snorted, "Of *course* not, you go charging in boots first instead of sending your crew to check things out. That's caught more attention than just the NPCs, you know."

Diane's cheeks pinked slightly as Caitlynn's arms encircled her waist. She had to fight the fluttery feeling in her belly to be able to speak, "...oh? Who else would care?"

"Rumors circulate, and a commander that wiped out an entire slaver's den *solo* without respawning even *once*? There's people trying to dig up your activity, *convinced* you're actually one of the big streamers that got, like, early alpha access to let you be so good at the game."

Diane's cheeks were now *bright* red, "No, definitely not. I'm sure I'm not *that* good, they were just NPCs, after all. I haven't even unlocked most of my skill trees."

Caitlynn chuckled, "I guess you haven't noticed there's no levelling of the PvE non-ship combat?"

Diane blinked in confusion and thought back to all her time digging into the mechanics of the game and realized that Caitlynn was right. Technically, there wasn't even levelling of the ship-to-ship combat, either, but the Command refit level was the player's 'level,' in that if station or flagship or capital building was (say) a level 10, it was generally a bad idea to take on someone who had their command center at level 20. They would simply have bigger ships, more firepower, more resources, and better staff and crew. "...wait, so all mob NPCs are equal challenge rated?"

Caitlynn nodded, "From the game mechanics standpoint, anything combat that's not vehicle or artillery is designed to mimic IRL. There will be NPCs and players who have higher skill ratings and certain skill trees that make their combat more challenging, but the devs said during the beta that they wanted people to focus on being commanders, not Rambo's, so they intentionally made person-to-person combat the same as if you were fighting IRL."

Diane felt cold, "So...when I..."

Caitlynn pushed herself up on her toes again, "Straight to the top of the leaderboard," she said just before claiming Diane's mouth with her own.

It managed to distract Diane depressing comparisons between her in-game performance and her IRL job.

After lunch (and the now surprisingly *usual* bout of after-lunch sex that Diane was starting to wonder how she might be able to make a daily activity whenever Caitlynn was in port for the rest of however long the other woman would have her), the conversation between them that had started at the docking bay and was only interrupted occasionally with the business of the station or other activities had wandered quite far from the topic of Diane's latest ship and the rumors surrounding her combat prowess and back to Caitlynn's most recent job, "...and Anthony just can't seem to help measuring his dick in front of the client and he breaks out his *guild* level, as though the NPCs have *any* clue what that means. And besides, mine was higher than his *anyway*."

Diane looked up from the tablet she was approving requisition forms on, "His whatnow?"

Caitlynn was clearly baffled by Diane's question and responded with her usual slightly vulgar cheek, "His dick?"

Diane rolled her eyes, "No; what's a guild level?"

Caitlynn was genuinely gobsmacked, "...you've been playing this whole time without guild bonuses?"

Diane frowned, "...I guess? I...what's a guild in this game? I haven't encountered one yet."

It actually took her girlfriend a few moments to recover, "...you just...it's in your factions tab." Diane continued to give her an uncomprehending look, "Factions...the in-game factions." She set her tablet down on the coffee table and shrugged at Caitlynn. "The Terrans, The Crotuk, The Lantru?"

"...the three headaches? I mean, I've only had to deal with the Terran government so far, but..."

Caitlynn shook her head in stunned disbelief, "Yeah, you're *definitely* not a beta player. When the guild mechanic dropped the devs were flamed *hard* over the way they handled the new feature release. It was all anyone was talking about for *weeks* in-game and most of the people playing at the time only heard about it from other players. I'd heard on the forums that they *still* haven't implemented a good introduction to the system, and I'm guessing from your reaction that's true." She sighed and put her water glass on the counter before crossing the living room and sitting next to Diane, "Okay...let's see if I can give you permission to see my HUD..."

She gave the familiar wrist flick that nearly any modern player used almost without thinking about it and tapped at what looked to Diane like spots in the air. In a moment, the familiar HUD popped into view, though it appeared Caitlynn had taken the time to customize hers a bit, the frame having a pulsing purple color instead of the default white and orange that Diane's had.

Playing along, Diane brought up her own HUD and tapped through to her friends list and brought up Caitlynn's entry, tapping on the advanced settings and scrolling to the permissions to find the "Visuals and Effects Permissions" section. She enabled the 'HUD visibility' permission and then returned to the home panel. Caitlynn made sure Diane was watching as she scrolled the tab bar at the top over to find the "Factions" tab...and Diane realized she'd never even *tried* scrolling that bar.

Blushing slightly, she repeated the action with her own HUD until she was at the same screen...but still didn't see anything about a guild. Glancing over at Caitlynn's screen, she saw what on her interface was a blank tile had some stats on Caitlynn's; 'Fortune Hunter's Guild' and 'Level 40' stood out at her with a bar graph that appeared to be tracking Caitlynn's in-game net worth over time.

Caitlynn nodded sagely, "Yeah, looks like you haven't joined a guild yet. Okay, here's what you do..."

It took an *obnoxious* number of taps, but Diane found the guild screen with Caitlynn's assistance. Apparently, the fact that she'd met with the *head* of the Chroma Syndicate was yet another thing that was going to feed the rumor mill if Caitlynn had anything to say about it,

plus it locked in her 'alliance rating' with the 'Overworld' faction. There was *criminally* little in-game documentation for the Faction system, but apparently the Overworld faction was a loose cartel of Independents, gangs, contraband runners, and other rogues of the galaxy. This gave Diane access to a handful of guilds...which weren't groups of players. It was apparently a purely linear point based system that gave boosts to seemingly random stats. She couldn't even assign it points, she just got a certain number of points for using her various Commander's features in-game.

"...how is my *stealth* ability supposed to make my *station construction speed* better?!"

Caitlynn laughed at this, "You're not saying anything that hasn't been said before and quite loudly on the forums."

Diane hmmm'd and brought up the guild list, "Well, there's smuggler...not too useful to me since I'm not smuggling anything, hacker, which I have one on staff so not really useful either, then there's..." she shook her head, "Bard?! Why do they have *bards* in a sci-fi setting?"

Caitlynn snorted, "So says the player who *sings* for her Commander's Ability."

Diane blushed, "...okay, point." She selected the guild, titled 'Battle Bard's Guild', and tapped the 'register' button, only to be stopped by an error dialog. She squinted at the text, not because she couldn't read it but because she couldn't believe what she was seeing, "Instrument of Choice?!" She ignored Caitlynn's giggling as she scrolled through the options and got to the end, "There's no piano."

Caitlynn chuckled, "Well, if you had to ride a ship into battle, you wouldn't exactly be able to do that sitting at a baby grand."

Diane gawked at her girlfriend, "Why would I play an instrument going into battle aboard a *space ship*?!"

Caitlynn gently boop'd Diane's nose with an index finger, "Singing...Commander," she said with two gentle taps.

Diane sighed, scrolling through the list again and, sure enough, every instrument listed was portable in some fashion. "...but I know how to play the piano. I don't know how to play...the heck is a 'matrix synthesizer'?!"

Caitlynn giggled, "Just pick something you *do* know what it is and load up some tutorial videos or holos."

Diane sighed again, blatantly petulant and bratty, and selected 'guitar' so she could finish the registration.

The day after Caitlynn's ship left for the shipyards in Terran space, Diane found a brand new electric guitar and amplifier in her quarters with a note from her lover. "I expect a serenade when I'm next in port, beautiful. -Caitlynn"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is a return to the space action-y goodness!



Master and Commander | Shock and Awe

Chapter Summary

Just as Diane is figuring out how to live while looking forward to what happens next, a message arrives that shatters her joy

Chapter Notes

As of tomorrow (9/22/2024), it will be five months since I posted the prologue to Code of Ethics on Scribble Hub. It was only about two months earlier that I'd encountered Trouble with Horns for the first time and became absolutely hooked.

 **WARNING** : This chapter takes an abrupt dark turn! It's written this way on purpose, but some readers may find it very jarring. Take care and set this down for a bit if you need to.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Three ships had been built by the station so far, and when the first two were finished, Diane had been busy enough with other matters that she hadn't been able to attend their launch. Today, however, Diane and members of her crew were gathered in the observation lounge as a bottle of wine, pitched at it by a space suited volunteer from one of the shipyard's airlocks, crashed against the prow of the vessel and its running lights activated. Cheers rose from the crowd, mirrored by the crew still in ops, as the new cruiser's engines kicked on and the ship pushed away from the safety of the shipyard unassisted for the first time.

More bottles of wine were broken out, these having been only recently received via the new, fully established trade route between Mortan and the *Matron's Aerie*. Recordings of the event were going to be sent back, mostly via the social media streams that proliferated across the galaxy, but also via the two actual media outlets that established offices on the station.

Nobody was in anything resembling formal wear, but Norma wore something a bit nicer than her usual jeans and t-shirt combo under her father's beaten-down old flight jacket, and Russe had actually consented to wear a button-up shirt. Diane, ever the sentimentalist, wore a blue tunic under her white jacket with a pair of red dress pants. The rest of the Ops crew that could be spared the time from their posts to attend the celebration in the observation lounge were there, as well as a handful of guests. The rest of the Morvucks were present, either having put in some time on the new ship or being personally invited by a crew member. Even Mr. Bendenson showed up, but his much-discussed wife that Diane had never seen remained back in their quarters for reasons the old salt wasn't divulging.

Mess Attendants given the honor duty of serving snacks and beverages were circulating throughout both main Ops and the Observation Lounge. Diane's plucking of a wineglass from Sani's hands with a stern, "Nope, too young!" drew a round of laughter from the nearby revelers as Cynthy and Kymberlynn took their offered water glasses and snickered at their friend. All in all, it was a very good, happy atmosphere where a party was likely to break out and nobody was about to mind.

"So," said Norma in an obviously louder than necessary voice, *clearly* intended to gather the attention of the room, "Have you decided what you're going to name the ship, oh glorious commander?" The laughter that greeted this question from the assembled crew and staff made it clear she had succeeded; Diane was now the focus of everyone there.

"Way to put me on the spot, Norma," Diane snarked back at her mayor, "And I happened to have given it at least a little thought, thank you very much."

"I'm shocked!" Norma prodded.

"Shocked that I thought about this?"

"No, shocked that you *thought*, I figured you were all about just charging in and eating people, no thoughts, head empty."

There wasn't a single person on the crew or staff rosters that didn't know what Diane had done for the former slaves (and continued to do, a few of the former slaves had even returned to the station, citing less than favorable receptions on their home worlds), so the good-natured ribbing drew companionable laughs while Diane rolled her eyes and did her best to bite back a smile.

"Well surprise, your commander has a brain," she stuck her tongue out at Norma, letting it extend a good six inches before pulling it back into her mouth.

"Don't threaten a girl with that if you're not planning to use it!" Norma purred.

Diane blushed, "Russe, are you gonna let your girl flirt with me like that in front of you?"

Russe just chuckled, "Are *you* going to stop her? Since when has she let anyone tell her what to do?"

She rolled her eyes, "Okay, yeah, fair point." She let the laughter die down a bit before she announced, "I decided to go simple, the *ISS Athena*."

"ISS"? What's that mean?" asked Russe.

"Well, we aren't exactly part of a nation, so *U.S.S.* didn't seem appropriate, but we *are* Independents, so the *Independent* Star Ship *Athena*."

There were nods all around at her explanation when Koarla raised her glass and said, "Give us a toast, sister!"

The cry was joined by everyone else in the observation lounge and the voices chanting over the speakers thanks to the feed from Ops as everyone there raised their glasses of non-alcoholic drinks to the camera. Diane rolled her eyes again and raised her hand to issue a silencing gesture, "Okay, okay, shush, I gotta be heard if I'm going to offer a toast." The crowd went quiet as she lidded her eyes in thought for a moment.

"We're alone in the dark out here," she finally began, "When the Branwell Consortium came along we were just another seed station that had unlocked her doors to the universe. They saw us as...freshly hatched, if you will, easy pickings for a predator that thought it was the biggest, meanest creature in the territory."

She'd always loved watching the rousing speeches on Star Trek, especially when there was seemingly little to say but the person giving the speech revealed that there was, indeed, something that *needed* saying to remind the crew *who they were*. She always wondered if she'd be able to deliver such a speech, and even though this wasn't a high-tension moment, she felt like this was a rare opportunity to step into the shoes of someone worthy of the command role and provide inspiration to her people.

"What the Branwell Consortium learned was that this wasn't some helpless little bird that hatched, but a *fire-breathing DRAGON!*" a brief cheer met her words before dying down into an anticipatory silence, "We had one scout-class ship, a crew scraped from the bottom of the barrel, and a commander who'd never led troops into combat in her life, and we rose up and *slew* the monsters and rescued the damsels! And now with our newest cruiser, we're declaring to the darkness, this is *our* territory, challenge us if you dare!" she raised her glass to the observation window, eyes on the ship slowly passing by.

Norma clinked her glass against Diane's, "To the *ISS Athena!*"

Cheers and the clinking of glass filled the small space and was echoed by the crew in Ops.

Several hours later, Diane was in her quarters. She had arranged a chair more appropriate to playing an instrument than the very comfortable and plush furniture that occupied her living room. As comfortable as they were, they were miserable for holding a proper playing posture or enabling proper arm movement where necessary. She had a tablet mounted on a music stand with a type of sheet music specific to guitars called 'tabs.' While she had decided at one point to find out *why* it was called that, she was satisfied that it was sufficient for the purpose of learning guitar pieces. So far, she'd been focusing on technically simple pieces that didn't require much in the way of range or technique. She mostly just needed the basics of the chords and how those related to the time signatures and the notes she was familiar with on sheet music for piano.

At the moment, she was working on one of her favorite piano pieces, Toccata and Fugue in D Minor by Bach. Technically, it was an organ piece, but as the sheet music worked for both organ and piano and there were far more pianos and synthesizer keyboards in America than organs that the average person could play. She'd had a chance to sit in the audience for a concert at the People's Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah when she was a teenager and found herself falling in love with the piece and obsessed over learning it until the end of her high school career. She'd never managed anything like the performance she'd experienced at the

Tabernacle, but she had become passably good at it, enough to impress acquaintances when she played it at the rare social gathering she'd attended.

She'd been quite pleased to find a tabs version for guitar on the Internet. Perusing the piece left her feeling slightly winded and her hand aching even before she played a single note, so she separated the Toccata from the Fugue and set the latter aside for working on later. The Toccata was actually quite enjoyable to play on guitar, the simple notation still requiring that she flex her beginner's skill to play it on key and at speed.

She had just completed the fourth measure during her second practice pass through the music when a chime sounded, the urgent one that told her it was more than just a simple hail. She paused and announced with a frown, "Computer, put the call through."

"Commander," came Cynthy's voice, pinched with stress, "You better get up here, it's about the *Sappho's Voyage*."

Diane was up and moving so quickly she had actually forgotten she was holding the guitar until the cord to the amp drew taut and she had to return to the chair, setting it on the seat instead of putting it carefully in the guitar stand.

Five minutes later she was rushing into Ops, "Report!"

The faces surrounding her were grim, and rather than say anything, Cynthy tapped a few commands on her workstation and the main display lit up with a message.

"Greetings merchant marines!" declared a man who seemed to encapsulate everything Diane found revolting about the male gender, "This is going out on the public network so that everyone who relies on your pathetic service will know who's *really* in charge in this sector." A map of the galaxy suddenly occupied a corner of the screen and zoomed in a square of space that encompassed several dozen star systems, "Everything in this area is now subject to paying tribute to me, Hardy Coxand!"

Diane found herself taking in every inch of his, frankly, disgustingly ugly features. He was overweight. Oh, she could see muscle under the layers of fat, but it was like he'd intentionally piled carbs on top of the developed muscle. His face was *bristling* with hair, an exaggerated beard and mustache covering the bottom half of his cheeks and everything below his nose. That his teeth weren't stained and misaligned was a minor grace, as his smile was less 'evil mastermind' and more 'smarmy and punchable.' He was wearing some form of visor, obscuring his eyes, but that just made his absolutely eye-piercingly offensive excuse for a pompadour stand out. He was wearing what looked like a leather vest, exposing a *spectacularly* hairy chest that had folds of fat that made her stomach clench. Small mercy that he seemed to at least keep his body clean, she had a feeling he probably had some sort of masculine musk that she *knew* she'd want to kill him for offending her nasal passages with it.

What had her ready to kill him over what would be minor irritations at any other time was the sight of Caitlynn securely tied to a chair aboard her own bridge over the shoulder of the self-proclaimed 'Hardy Coxand.' She had some form of duct tape over her mouth and she was glaring daggers at the back of the man's head.

"As a demonstration of what happens when you *don't* comply," he stepped back, pulled a pistol out of a conveniently strapped holster, and shot Caitlynn in the temple.

"I know she's a Commander, I've found her spawn points on this ship and have enough of my security teams surrounding each point to grab her before she can make a move after respawning." As he spoke, the avatar Caitlynn had been occupying faded from existence, the bindings holding her to the chair clattering as they hit the metal surfaces of the seat and the floor, the piece of tape that had been over her mouth fluttering to the floor. "Her cargo is already mine, and I can't claim her ship, but I can blow it up with her on it. She'll respawn halfway across the galaxy with *nothing*. If she'd just given me the tribute I demanded when I ambushed her, she wouldn't have been killed repeatedly." So saying, he pulled a universal marking pen from his vest pocket and clicked the end to extend the tip, adding another mark to thirty-four others on the wall next to the chair.

Diane's mouth was as dry as her eyes, strained from trying to capture every detail on the screen.

Hardy continued, "Let it not be said I'm unreasonable. This here Commander might just have people that care about her, so I'm putting a ransom on her release with her ship. Bring me the list of materials and resources attached to this message and I'll release her and her ship. As long as she's able to respawn the ship is useless to me. Get the payment to me in the next seven standard days and I *won't* blow the ship's core with her on it."

"If I'm willing to do that to a Commander, imagine how easy I find it to take the life of anyone else that gets in the way of me becoming the undisputed lord of this sector. The countdown starts as soon as I hit 'send' on this message. *Lord Hardy Coxand, out.*" The video blipped off, leaving the normal 'window' projection that normally displayed of the station outside the Ops building.

A bass rumble that could have been mistaken for a ship flying too close and mixing its plasma trail with the station's atmosphere echoed through Ops. Diane didn't care that the sound came from her, nor did she care that nearly the entire Ops crew were looking at her like she was going to tear their throats out. She didn't care about that because there was only *one* throat that she wanted to tear out. She clenched a fist and drove it into a nearby console, shattering the plasticine surface and the circuitry and casing beneath it.

She felt two sets of arms linking around hers as she was pushed back against the wall, "Easy, easy..." came the calm voice of Leki, "You're no good to anyone if you let loose here."

She bucked, absently, her eyes still locked on the screen as her growling doubled in volume, "Whaoh there, sister!" barked Kaorla, "Don't make me put you on the floor, just 'cause you're taller than me doesn't mean I can't drop you!"

Russe's face suddenly blotted out her line of sight to the screen. "Hey, buddy, it's okay. She'll be okay, you know she will. Come back to us, we can't help if you're...yeah." She felt his warm hands against the skin of her cheeks and jaw and breathed deeply, the smells of Ops mixing with the scents of Russe, Leki, and Kaorla. She found herself fighting against their calming influence and had to consciously let the fury that had gripped her go.

It took several *minutes*, but she finally calmed enough to actually use words, "I'm...I'm fine. I need...I need to..." a small, abortive growl rattled out of her as the other two Morvucks helped her to stand on her own two feet after releasing their holds.

Leki rather uncharacteristically stepped into Diane's personal bubble, a gentle purring rumbling through her as Leki pressed herself against her, wrapping her arms around Diane in a hug. Diane was shocked to realize that she was actually somewhat further calmed by this action, a purr from her own chest rattling sympathetically with Leki's. "You probably don't know what you're feeling right now since you were raised by humans, it's okay. It's a normal response when someone you love is threatened or hurt. And to see them killed..."

"S-she's a Commander...she'll be fine...I *know* she'll be fine...I..." her throat was tight as she started shivering, not like she was cold but like she was forcing herself not to break and run at the threat, even though that threat was probably light years away.

Russe took Diane's hand in his own, gently squeezing like he did when he knew she needed calming, "Yeah...but that was...I don't think we'll be running tests after all, okay? That was awful to watch."

Diane let herself be comforted by her friends as she wrapped her free arm around Leki, "What...what are you two doing here? I get Russe, he's always up in Ops, but you guys should be at your shop."

Cynthy raised her hand timidly, "I...after I saw the message I kinda panicked and called Kymmy and Sani, and they were at Leki's workshop."

Koarla put a hand on Diane's shoulder and squeezed gently, "We saw more'n a few rookies get lost in Hunter's Haze in the service. We figured we'd better get up here as soon as we heard."

Diane nodded and just breathed as the sounds of Operations returning to normal resumed around her. She closed her eyes and just inhaled and exhaled steadily, letting the familiar scents wash through her.

"So what do we know about this 'Hard Cock-in-hand' person?" asked Kaorla.

A round of sniggering rippled through the conference room, even Diane managing a smile as she took a sip of her Jiantin Tonic. It was, perhaps, the only drink that could actually calm her without impairing her faculties.

"Not much," said Russe, "I've checked with my contacts on the forums, he's not a Commander as far as we've been able to tell. No reports of him respawning or having any exceptional abilities."

Leki nodded, leaning against the table with her elbows on Diane's left, "That's a relief. Having someone that cutthroat being able to simply respawn would be a nightmare."

Russe nodded and tapped at his mini-tab, activating the conference room's main display. It had a map of the galaxy with the major space nations highlighted in their usual blue, green, red, and yellow coloration, "We were able to trace the call through the relay network back to this section of space," a spherical highlight appeared on the galactic map, which zoomed in on a trio of systems in Independent space, "And based on the last data from the deep space scans in our logs, we've been able to spot an old outpost with enough fortification that it would make a good pirate's lair in this system here," he tapped on his tab and a circle appeared on the display with a callout that had a zoomed-in image of a fortified space station. "However, I don't think he's there."

Diane's eyebrows went up, "...why not?"

"Because of the capabilities of the Sapho's Voyage. She may *look* like a standard merchant-class surveyor, but she's sacrificing about half her cargo space to be outfitted with weapons and shield platforms, and even a couple of cub fighters that can be deployed at a moment's notice." Russe tapped on a few more controls and a second display rezzed in holographically, showing the specs and layout of Caitlynn's ship.

Diane immediately began memorizing the layout and planning attack vectors, "Russe, if I liked guys that way I'd kiss you on the mouth. With tongue."

Russe blushed as he continued, "Basically, the station is, oddly enough, too *small* to house a fighting force big enough to take on Caitlynn's ship. We've got a cruiser, they'd need a full-sized battleship just to be able to get close enough to take out the point defenses to get a boarding party on the ship."

Leki spoke up, "And the station couldn't home the theoretical battleship?"

Russe shrugged, "It *could*, but it'd be powerful and big enough to not need to." Russe stood and walked over to the display with the galaxy map on it, "I think they're *here*," he tapped on another system, and when he did so it expanded to fill the screen, "And specifically, I think they're in the rings of this gas giant here," he said with another tap. "Obviously, our sensors won't have current enough data to see if they're there *now*, but the gas giant *is* composed of about 43% oxygen; O-one, O-two, *and* O-three. That makes it a *fantastic* place for a ship to park long-term and drop occasional gas mining lines into the atmosphere to harvest the oxygen for long term parking for *dozens* of shipboard uses, especially if the ship is large enough to support an onboard molecular synthesizer."

Diane's eyebrows scrunched together as she looked at the pseudo-live representation of the solar system on her meeting room's wall, "Why doesn't one of the Big Four claim that system?"

"They can't, it's too deep in Independent Space. The few times one of them has made a move, one of the others comes in to stop them. The last time they tried it was one of the key events that started the Galaxy War."

Diane flinched at that, "And one would presume that any independent stations would have been steamrolled in that..."

Russe nodded, "That's also a good second reason to consider this system as the most likely place. There's tons of wreckage there; independent ship hulls, shattered space stations, drones, unexploded ordinance, you name it, if it's spaceborne in the last hundred years or so there's likely some derelict version of it floating around that system. It's called 'the boneyard' in online circles because it's practically a tech graveyard. Scavengers like to make a go of picking through the wreckage, but unless you've got a really strong ship that's not strong enough to ping as a possible representative of the Big Four, another scavenger or pirate's going to pick you off, and anything too strong draws the attention of the Terrans, the Lantru, or the Crotuk."

Norma, who'd joined the party as they'd moved to the conference room, grumbled, "You keep saying, 'Big Four,' who's the fourth?"

As Russe tapped a few more times to bring up a third holographic display, this time showing the political map of the galaxy, Diane said, "The Swarm."

Russe nodded, "We don't know much about them, just what their ships look like and that they've claimed that area of space," he gestured to the yellow blotch that was 'above' the Terran Federation and the Lantru Conclave with only a thin strip of 'no man's land' between the green and blue parts of the map connecting the yellow with the larger independent space between the other three big space empires, "They don't have much to do with the other races, and no ships sent in by either the Feds or the Bugs have ever been heard from again."

Well, I know a bit more about the Swarm than that, but no way I'd be able to say it with just what my character's knowledge should be, Diane thought. Out loud, she said, "Getting back on topic..."

"Right!" said Russe, "My final reason for why I think that's where they are is this," he tapped a few more times on his mini-tab and the galactic map gained a new line, this one tracing from Darksky to a point near Terran space. Russe put a finger from each hand on either side of the line and spread them, zooming in on a familiar sector of space fairly close to Darksky. The line went right by the star with the oxygen-rich gas giant. "This is the flight path Caitlynn's navigator plotted just before they left the station."

Diane set down her mug and nodded, "Alright, I'll take the *ISS Athena* out to that star and hunt down the bastard. If he's not there I'll check the other two systems. Katrina, how long will it take the *Athena's* drives to get there?"

Katrina rezzed in next to Diane's chair, "Approximately 49 hours."

"Good," she stood, "That's easily enough time to investigate that system and at least one other before the deadline. Kat, change the priority order, I want that *Eclipse* class survey ship getting built just in case. I'd rather we be able to just *give* Caitlynn a new ship so she can save her insurance payout to compensate her crew's families if the worst happens." The hologram gave her usual jaunty wave and rezzed out, "Russe, I want you to keep chasing leads on this pirate. See what else you can dig up. And who knows, you might get word that he really *is* a Commander and we'll need that info before going into battle with him." Russe nodded and sat down, tapping away on his mini-tab, presumably to start building a dossier.

Before Diane could say anything else, Leki and Kaorla stood, "We're coming with you on this."

Diane blinked in surprise, "I...but you're not part of my crew. I couldn't..."

Kaorla snorted, "We're your friends, dipshit. Practically the sisters you never had, remember?"

Leki chuckled, "Plus we're experienced combatants, and you've trained with both of us in the gym and in gaming sims, we'll be the best breach and exfil team you could ask for."

Diane found herself feeling a bit misty, "...thanks. I..." she swallowed the sudden knot in her throat, "Thanks." She cleared her throat and addressed the room, "Norma, you're in charge of the station until we get back, tell the shakedown crew for the *Athena* that we go hot in thirty minutes."

Norma gave a sloppy salute, "Got it, boss lady."

"And Russe?"

"Huh?" he grunted as he looked up from his work.

"If you give me a copy of everything, and I mean *everything* on the Sappho's Journey that you've got, I won't tell Caitlynn that you hacked her ship."

Russe blushed bright red having been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, "Uh...right!"

Chapter End Notes

I'll be writing a Ranma 1/2 fanfic for release on Oct. 6th, which may keep me from being able to write a special six-month anniversary chapter for CoE in time for October 22. If that's the case I'll just push the scheduled 10/21 chapter to 10/22 and call it a day.

Master and Commander | Pre-show Jitters

Chapter Summary

Diane is spiraling and alone...or perhaps she's not as alone as she thought.

Chapter Notes

And we're back! I can only blame work being particularly ass-kicking due to end-of-quarter scramble on multiple fronts; it just exhausted me to the point I had to recover over the course of several days spanning a two week period.

On the plus side, I was able to recover enough that I was able to get not just this chapter of CoE done, but also a short story for the reboot of Ranma 1/2. If you haven't read it yet, go check out [Half Moon](#), a standalone prequel short story to the as yet unpublished Star Trek - Strike Team Valkyrie epic work that's still in production.

As you read, don't forget to join the conversation over on [Storyteller's Speakeasy](#)! Check out the Live-Reader-Reaction channel for this chapter when you stop by. 😊

Diane was in the singularly frustrating position of being in charge of everything on the ship and yet having nothing to do.

Preparations had been done mostly at a breakneck pace, and similar to the last mission where Diane was anticipating combat, an entire security locker was relocated from the station to some empty quarters near the VIP state room that was her home away from home aboard the *Athena*. The crew of the ship, a whole 12 people, boarded with a competent professionalism that Diane had nothing but praise for in their response time and preparation to launch at a moment's notice.

There was the singular problem that one of those 12 people was the captain of the ship, leaving Diane in the role of "very special (and cranky) guest."

Filling time was proving to be a challenge. The ship-board facilities weren't quite the same level as those on her station, but there were holographic emitters in the quarters, a full-sized galley, and an observation lounge on the lower deck of the ship. Diane's anxieties over the fate of Caitlynn couldn't be distracted by any sort of holonovel, the available shows for streaming were overrun with pablum from the last century plus some procedurally generated content that was supposed to reflect an additional three-ish centuries of video entertainment, and her lack of proper credentials for the FTLN network meant that she couldn't even check

the IRL social media. When she did eat with the crew, they were diffident; respectful and courteous but stepping around her in a manner she recognized as, "Put on your best 'customer service smile for the boss so you don't get fired,'" from her time as an analyst.

And the observation lounge had a fantastic view of the inside of a FTL tunnel.

Diane promised herself that she'd take on another mission with the *Athena* once she'd managed to rescue Caitlynn and calm the angry beast inside her. They really were doing an admirable job and didn't deserve to play escort to a problematic Karen.

She managed to occupy her time by reviewing the tools in Russe's kit that he'd loaded to her combat armor. In the aftermath of the assault on the slaver's starbase they'd never gotten around to removing the cracker scripts and hacking tools, which in retrospect seemed like the best thing long-term. She'd made a note in her log to have Katrina assemble another suit for her if she'd ever need to wear armor inside Terran borders, then added a note for a stealth suit, a planetary survival suit, and to start research on variations of her combat suit. Sure, there was no 'Combat/Space Suit' research tree, but there also wasn't a levelling system for melee and person-to-person combat, so she was going to create advantages where there weren't some already. In the meantime, she created a couple of scripts based on the programs Russe had loaded so she'd be able to assume complete control of the target ship's computers even if she didn't start singing, because she *wasn't* in a singing mood.

It wasn't like the embarrassment she'd felt standing in the airlock collar on the outside of the slaver's station, nor was it the hesitation she'd experienced when Norma asked her to sing on their first mission off-station. This was because white-hot *rage* was practically bubbling under her skin. She couldn't even *imagine* keeping time, let alone finding a pitch or singing some lyrics.

She'd taken to playing music in her quarters at a significant volume, singable or not. It was good that the quarters were as soundproofed on all the ships as they had been on the *Dragon's Daughter* as part of the default design, otherwise she'd probably be seen as even *more* of a problematic passenger than she already was with how loud she was playing the music.

And it was *angry* music; she'd managed to dig up an algorithm from some century past that would play songs based on likes and dislikes, and she'd taken to rating songs with something of a vengeance in her banked fury. Starting with some Gospel Metal, her musical selections drifted into Epic Metal, then Death Metal, until finally landing on the genre of *Argent Metal*. A genre that she'd never encountered before, it used some extreme distortion, scrunchy as hell sampling, heavy percussion, and some of the most hectic bass she'd ever allowed into her ears. It suited her mood perfectly, keeping her from going off the rails during the second day of the trip as she went about assembling her loadout, both in her private quarters and the converted armory.

She'd immediately grabbed not one but *two* P390s and a specialized ammo carry rig that had pouches for several magazines for the carbine rifles on both thighs. She supplemented those with hip pouches filled shotgun shells. Her now standard dual pistol arrangement was already rigged up on the lower abdomen in a latched pocket arrangement that kept them securely clipped to the surface of the armor and obviated the need for dedicated holsters.

As for holsters, the two P390s wouldn't be able to hang off the torso rig she'd used last time with a single rifle, this time she had a pair of almost scabbard-like hip holsters made by the ship's synth stations for the guns.

She opted for a tactical shotgun this time, the shorter barrel and butt-stock combined with the front and back pistol grips giving her a much better close quarters weapon than the longer pump-action shotgun she'd used the last time she went into combat. The semi-automatic action would be invaluable for rapid reaction times, as well.

New to her loadout was a 50-cal mini-rail handgun with an 8-inch barrel that was occupying the back holster she normally put her anti-A.I. weapon in. *That* abomination was back on her station, and she didn't even want to think about it, but the holster was already built into her suit and the 50-cal was available, so she'd figured; why not?

The entire time, the image of Caitlynn being shot through the temple kept cycling in her mind. Knowing she was going as fast as possible to rescue her girlfriend didn't help, knowing it was a game didn't help. So far as their bodies perceived things and their minds were connected to the VR, it was as real as it could be. So long as it didn't cause perception dissonance, they could be inhabiting bodies composed of geometric shapes that resembled quadrupedal aliens from a universe that didn't have gravity and pain and death would still be traumatic.

Which was a problem for the non-American VR, wasn't it? American VR rigs could simulate pain by tricking the nervous system into perceiving light and sound as impulses from different nerve endings entirely, a form of induced synesthesia that some clever programmers had used to create sensation, but there was no direct connection between those artificial senses and the physical brains of the people playing the games.

In the VR pods, however? If she understood the technology right, it was only through the mercy of the programmers that players didn't experience every moment of every possible death. Caitlynn had told her about CoRA and how there was some concern over how accurately the game rendered violence and death. It was, apparently, one of the reasons she hadn't liked the game. One too many times visiting a space Caitlynn had called a 'death dream' where the entire experience of the 'dream' had been to reduce the trauma of a very ugly 'death.'

Which begged the question, one that had only been obliquely answered and *not* to Diane's current satisfaction; how accurate was the experience of death in GU:MC? At what point did the repeated pain of dying overwhelm the player's desire to stay in the game? Caitlynn had said that being killed was an 'unpleasant' experience, but she hadn't said more than that, which could *either* mean it was inconsequential and thus she honestly wouldn't care how many times she had to respawn...or it had been *so* ugly and painful that she didn't want to dwell on it.

And lurking underneath all the anxiety of not knowing any of this was; if the pain of repeatedly dying or the frustration of being forced to respawn grew to be too much, would Caitlynn just log out and never log back in? Diane wasn't actually a UN citizen. Her authentication credentials to be in the game were as fake as her cover. Even *if* Caitlynn tried to look up Diane on the FTLN, she would find precisely nobody that fit her name or her

description. Contact was actually illegal between American citizens and people outside the wall. Diane could give Caitlynn her exact contact information for every means of contact both legitimate and clandestine for online spaces and, unless they logged into the game through the pod provided by the agency, they'd never be able to even message each other.

And that was entirely ignoring the fact that Caitlynn would never recognize the person she was outside the pod.

If Caitlynn chose to leave the game because a NPC was torturing her, Diane would likely never see her again.

Her musings were interrupted by a chime of the comms systems. Blinking herself out of her singularly depressive state, she took a steadying breath, "Yeah?"

"Commander," came the voice of the ship's comms officer, "Ship-to-ship from the *Arzoll'an's Victory*, Lt. T'noni calling for you, holographic signal."

Diane glanced down at her clothing, just a simple bra and pants, so she reached over to the tunic she'd draped over the state room's chair and pulled it on over her head, "Put her through...ensign?"

"Ensign Smitty, ma'am," the woman on duty answered, "Patching the signal through now."

"Thank you, Smitty,"

"Of course, ma'am." The comms signal disconnected just as Leki's virtual presence rezzed into the room.

The other Morvuck took one look at Diane's face and flinched. "...that bad, huh?"

Diane huffed a sigh and sank back to sit on the bed. Leki glanced around the room, noting the clothing rather carelessly discarded and various weapons and cases scattered around in various states of preparation for their mission. Nothing was in a place that couldn't be assembled at a moment's notice, and they still had another sleep cycle before they got to the first system to investigate, but Leki had seen Diane's quarters and knew how out of character the comparatively sloppy state of the state room was.

Leki turned the chair around and sat down, reclining slightly and crossing her legs. "Talk to me."

Diane blinked in confusion at the lieutenant, "...about what?"

"About," she gestured to indicate pretty much all of Diane's everything, "...*that*. I figured I should check on you; when Hunter's Haze hits on the battlefield all it takes is pointing the woman in the right direction and taking out any ranged attacks before they get to her. She'll drop eventually, usually from exhaustion, you just gotta keep her focused on the right targets. But *this* far in advance of any action?" Leki tapped her temple, "The focus and drive to do *something* circles inward. You *know* you have a target, but that target is going to take so long to get to that you start analyzing everything *else* that could happen. What if you ripped off all

the governors on the FTL drive? What if you stayed up all night *just in case* a miracle happens, and you somehow arrive at your target hours earlier than is physically possible?"

"And if *that* isn't the target your mind latches onto, you'll start going over all the ways you could have done things differently, somehow. What if you had asked Caitlynn to stay another day? What if you'd sent the *Dragon's Daughter* with her? What if you'd somehow convinced a woman whose entire purpose is to be out among the stars making connections locked up in a safe little box on your station for the rest of your lives?"

Diane snorted, "Well, I'm not thinking about *that*..."

Leki folded her hands over her belly and raised a skeptical eyebrow at Diane.

"...once. I thought about it *once* and realized how dumb even proposing that would be."

Leki quirked a slight smile, "Good girl, you *do* have a brain in your head."

Diane actually felt a petulant pout appear on her face, "I'm *plenty* smart!" Leki's skeptical eyebrow returned, and Diane huffed, "I do *dumb things* like wander onto the streets of an unfamiliar city unescorted. That doesn't mean I'm not smart!"

Leki nodded once, "Debatable, but I'll concede your point for the moment." She gestured as though indicating an invisible table between them, "So...spill. What's on your mind? What's got you so twisted up that you're..." she pointedly looked around the room before returning her focus to Diane.

Diane sighed and scrubbed at her scalp with her fingertips for a moment, trying to frame her concerns in a way that wouldn't break OpSec and would be in such a way that an NPC could understand. "I..." she started hesitantly, "I'm worried. I'm worried that I'll never see Caitlynn again."

Leki's brows pinched together, "I don't understand, don't Commanders respawn?"

Diane sighed, "Yeah, but...Commanders have to *want* to respawn." She was clearly not explaining this well given Leki's still confused look. "It's...I guess it's a little like being in the military, from what I've read. You sign up to do missions, right? And as long as those missions are going well, everything's fine. But what if a mission goes *really badly*?" The lieutenant was showing signs of comprehension as Diane continued, "So, like, you might not even *finish* the mission, and if it's particularly traumatizing? Like, you lose a limb and even if they grow it back or replace it with a prosthetic you still *lost a limb*, so do you even *want* to go back on missions? *Should* you go back out in the field?"

Leki raised a hand to her temple and started rubbing it with her fingertips, "...and Caitlynn has lost a lot more than a limb *multiple* times."

Diane's voice hitched in her throat, necessitating a moment for her to swallow back the knot that was forming, "She could leave at *any time*, just...choose not to respawn. And I don't...I don't think I have any way of telling her that her ship is safe to come back to if she's l...left, and worse, I don't know what she goes through when she...dies."

Leki leaned forward, uncrossing her legs and mirroring Diane's position by putting her elbows on her knees. Their faces were now just a few inches apart, which allowed Diane to let her voice drop to a whisper, "I've...I've thought about...trying it. Just to *know* what she's going through, so I'd *know* what she experiences when she's been *shot* by Coxand. Maybe if I had some idea..."

"No!" blurted Leki, "You are *not* going to do that!"

Diane had to blink the film of moisture she hadn't realized her eyes were collecting, "Whu...?"

"I don't *care* if Commanders have some sort of mythical ability to come back from the dead!" Leki snapped, "You are *not* shooting yourself in the head in some misguided *hope* that it gives you more information!"

Diane shrugged, "...but, I'll just re..."

"You don't *know* that you'll respawn!" barked Leki in a drill sergeant voice, "For all you know the respawning Commanders are a *fluke* or some sort of weird, cosmic minority. You *could* be the Commander that eats a bullet only to be the first to not respawn no matter how much you want to! That is *not* an option for you!"

Of course, Diane *knew* she'd respawn, she'd have to log out of the game entirely to *not* respawn, but the NPC being puppeted by a possibly nascently sentient A.I. wouldn't know that. For all this digital being knew, death was The End and Diane was risking everything if she attempted to respawn. But it was clear that Leki was understanding the problem and probably had an idea why Diane was in the emotional state she was festering in.

"I had questions about the Commanders after we met Caitlynn, and Russe was more than happy to talk about it," said Leki. Diane snorted and rolled her eyes, knowing how eager the tech was to infodump about Commanders. Leki's mouth turned up in the corners just a bit, her own thoughts clearly following the direction Diane's took, "He said that Commanders have a way to communicate with each other that doesn't rely on the relay network. Can you try using that to find out how Caitlynn is doing?"

Diane blinked at Leki, her mind suddenly empty of all thoughts but one. She blinked again and thunked the heel of her hand against her forehead, "I take back what I said about being smart," she breathed as she closed her eyes in exasperation.

Leki chuckled, "We'll chalk this up to one of the dumb things you do. So are you going to try it?"

Diane nodded and took a calming breath. She sat up straight and flicked her fingers in the unconscious gesture to bring up the in-game HUD, then tapped through the interface to find the in-game messaging pane. She scrolled the tabs until she found 'History,' and sure enough the one entry was her video call with Caitlynn from when they first met. She tapped on the button to start a text conversation and tapped out a message:

Are you still online? Forgot about the messaging feature for a hot minute and wanted to check on you.

She hit 'send' and for added measure tapped the 'Friend Request' button. Taking a deep breath, she waved her hand to dismiss the HUD and felt like a weight she hadn't been aware she was carrying was no longer there. "Okay, I've sent a message," she said to Leki, who had watched the entire procedure with intent curiosity, "Now we can only w..."

As though anticipating the word 'wait' and eager to spoil the drama, the notification throbber appeared in the corner of her vision. She flicked the HUD back into place and went straight to the notifications. Tapping the *1 New Message* line, she was taken right back to the chat window where a new message bubble appeared:

Takes more than 1 a hole to make me log out

Diane read the message three times before she let herself really grasp that she wasn't seeing things, "She's alive!" she gasped. She was aware that Leki was grinning broadly and felt the sisterly slap of Leki's hand on her knee, but Diane was focusing intently on the bottom corner of the chat window that said, *Other player is typing...*

Eventually, a new message popped up:

Bound and blindfolded in hold

Using sight keyboard to msg

"She's in a hold, probably a cargo hold, and they have her bound and have covered her eyes for some reason. She's using an eye-tracking method to reply."

Leki stood, her body intersecting with the HUD and completely unaware of it. She put her hand on Diane's shoulder, "Talk to your girl, then let us know anything that changes the plan in tomorrow's briefing."

Diane smiled up at her friend and realized she was actually crying from relief, "Thank you...really. I...thanks."

Leki's smile was warm, "I guess I'm your djadj-nah for this hunt." At Diane's confused head tilt, she clarified, "It translates to something like, 'adviser, spotter, and confidant.' Basically, I'm here to keep your head on straight during the mission."

Diane felt her lip tremble as she smiled back, her emotions still *very* close to the surface, "Well, I'd say you're very good at it."

Leki squeezed Diane's shoulder and rezzed out without another word. Diane focused on the messenger and began typing a reply, her thoughts no longer spiraling.

Master and Commander | Shuttle Service

Chapter Summary

Diane learns about the problems with ~~ADHD~~ being Morvuck while the boarding party prepares to meet the enemy.

Chapter Notes

I'm not entirely happy with this chapter, but there were parts that gave me a chance to sneak in little moments of Gender for Diane to experience.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Alright, what've we got?" asked Diane as she entered the bridge.

The *Athena's* bridge was significantly larger than that of the *Dragon's Daughter* and had a corresponding increase in the number of personnel and stations. In addition to the expected captain's chair, navigation, and helm, the bridge also had two more stations for comms and tactical. At the moment, all stations were occupied, leaving Diane to have to stand behind the captain's chair.

On the screen was a magnified view of the gas giant that Russe had highlighted in his briefing back at the station. A small rectangle that looked like a postage stamp in the middle of a football field was positioned a few degrees above the plane of the small and almost unnoticeable ring disk orbiting the planet. A callout connected the tiny box to a much larger picture-in-picture display showing a cargo ship that had undergone *extensive* refits. Weapons systems that were clearly meant for larger capital ships were welded to the framework of the cargo section, and what looked like missile launchers had replaced the exterior cargo bay doors. There were still access points to get cargo on...far too many, in fact. It appeared that telescoping tethers had been installed with the express purpose of connecting to nearly any type of standard ship configuration.

Also on the screen was the bridge of the *Arzoll'an's Victory*, Leki in the command station and Koarla manning the helm. Both had grim expressions on their faces as they studied their own displays.

"Station commander on deck, everyone as you were," announced the woman in the captain's chair. Denna Powell had been one of the tenants on Diane's station before she had arrived. The unfortunate victim of a failing drive coil and an opportunistic mutineer of a first officer, she'd been stranded on the station during Norma's mother's time and considered the mutiny a

wakeup call. She'd been enjoying a bit of a retirement when Diane went digging through the personnel records to find an experienced fleet officer and had taken not a little persuasion to get her to take up a set of captain's pips again. She turned the chair to face Diane without standing, "It appears Mr. Russe was correct," she said in an accent that was almost, but not quite, British. "That...*thing* hanging in orbit of the gas giant matches the description of a ship that could take the *Sappho's Voyage* to a tee."

Diane frowned, "So where *is* Caitlynn's ship?"

The officer at tactical, a lieutenant that Diane was struggling to remember the name of, turned to the captain. Captain Powell nodded and the lieutenant tapped a few buttons, rotating the image of the pirate ship. Apparently, the *Sappho's Voyage* was behind Coxand's ship from their perspective. As big as Caitlynn's ship was, it was dwarfed by the kitbashed monstrosity that was the pirate ship. "The ship has bits of several names on the hull," said the lieutenant, "Which likely means that it's been assembled from parts of multiple ships, likely all scavenged from The Bonyard.

Diane sneered, "This guy's a *pig*! He takes *no* pride in ownership and builds...*that*!" she gestured at the screen; mountains of disgust piled into the last word. "Do we have anything like a tactical schematic of that, or is it too much of a salvage job to have any hope of that?"

Koarla spoke up via the comm link, "We've got a better sensor suite than you do, we're linking you in now. That thing is a *nightmare* maze of corridors and holds." As she spoke, another window appeared above the magnification of the ship, this one a wireframe with corridors laced throughout the hull and around the engines and what appeared to be an absolutely obscene number of weapons bays and missile magazines. "This thing is one ugly sonovabitch, to use Norma's term. I'd be almost afraid of stepping foot on this thing. There's almost zero safety tolerances between the weapons systems. Hell, he can probably get ships to surrender just by parking next to them and threatening to sneeze at the wrong time."

"Well," Diane rumbled, "If it's safe enough for him to live aboard it in squalor, it's safe enough for him to *die* aboard it." Any other time she might have been disturbed by the words coming out of her mouth, but what the other Morvucks were calling the Hunter's Haze had kicked down the door to her higher brain functions as soon as she clapped eyes on the ship that had taken Diane's *mate*! She had a target, and the idiot *male* who had dared to claim what was hers was going to meet his end at her claws! "The plan was to identify the best approach, take a shuttle while the *Athena* attacks from a distance, then board the pirate's ship and rip and tear. Is there anything we've learned since entering the system that changes that plan?"

"Negative," reported Leki, "We're putting our ship in stationary holding pattern and we'll be joining our docking collar to the *Athena* shortly to join you. Suit up, Commander, we're going to get your girl."

Diane nodded grimly, turned slightly to give a similar nod to Captain Powell, and left the bridge.

Diane was sitting on the crew bench of the shuttle, strapped in securely with a five-point harness that had to be adjusted to its maximum size. She wasn't in one of the pilot seats for a

simple reason; she had *no* idea how to fly the shuttle. She was more than capable of piloting a starship *in space*, because of the distances involved it was, for the most part, a matter of basic geometry. Okay, *technically* it was kinematics and calculus, but the principle was the same; you had objects and a course to plot and you plugged the numbers into the formula to get the result. So long as you kept your ship pointed where the course told you to go and kept an eye on the drift so corrections could be made, you were golden.

Actually piloting a craft in three-dimensional space? *Especially* around objects that were flying on their own paths and could slam into you hard enough to make you into so much space dust if you weren't careful? Docking with a larger ship during combat? Even *if* her experience in defensive and combat driving from her agent training could translate to flying a shuttle (which, of course, they couldn't), she was not about to try her luck learning all that on the fly.

She found it an interesting coincidence that her choice in battle armor design was similar to the battle armor and weapons choices that Leki and Kaorla wore. Her armor was all white. *Almost storm trooper white*, she brooded as she looked down at her knees. Leki and Kaorla's armor, in contrast, was black with colored panels that apparently denoted their roles on their squad prior to their discharge from the Aiexi military. The red and gold reminded her a *lot* of Star Trek, especially given the red of Leki's armor denoted her as the commander and the yellow-gold of Kaorla's was tactical and support. *The only thing missing are the comm badges*, she thought as she scanned their armor across the cabin with her eyes. *'course, if the gold had been command, then they'd just need the insignia painted on the left breast of the armor, but that's not there either.*

The similarities to Diane's loadout and/or Star Trek ended with the color of the armor. Coming from a race of women, Morvish armor had clearly been designed from the start to accommodate the female form, where with Diane's armor was of Earth design, given that it was based on the conceit that the person wearing it would be male, but then adapted to fit a woman at some point after the initial design process. It was only *really* noticeable when they stood side-by-side; Diane's torso plating was intended to emphasize the abdomen and had a fairly fixed breastplate. Once sized for the Diane, it was intended for Diane. Which made some sense, but she noticed that the chest pieces of Kaorla and Leki's armor consisted of four interlocking sections and where the sections joined they flexed and moved, allowing their chests to actually have a little freedom to...well, *jiggle* a bit while still being held in place and supporting 'the girls.' Diane had been noticing during 'that time of the month' that her breasts were tender with a slight but measurable swelling and imagined that a more flexible breast plate would help with the occasional problem along those lines.

There were lots of small differences like that. The leg armor allowing for a more generous freedom of movement around the hips, the carry points lower to avoid the slight statistical skewing of lower upper body strength, a few aesthetic choices that emphasized the natural curves and shape of a woman's body. Diane couldn't really help but compare her armor to theirs and feel hers was inferior. There was no single way she could pinpoint exactly *why* she was thinking this. While based on different technologies, their armor was pretty evenly matched. They functioned equally well at the intended purpose, that is; stopping or slowing things that make the blood that's supposed to remain inside the body come out of it.

She kept finding herself gazing at their armor almost longingly. It wasn't envy or jealousy, she didn't want *Leki's* armor or *Kaorla's* armor, she wanted her *own* armor to be more like theirs; to have the curves and shape and details that made them undisputably feminine while still being hardened barriers against the world to protect the warriors inside.

In less emotionally problematic comparisons were the weapons loadouts. The two veteran soldiers carried fewer firearms all around, and what they did carry was entirely energy based. While Diane would be juggling ammunition from her pouches and magazines, the "hunting companions" with her would only be limited by the overcharge of their firearms. Absently, she flicked her player HUD up and switched to the research trees and scanned through them. There was a tree for Construction, Starship Combat, Alliances, Resources, Exploration, Starships, Ethics, Navigation, Economics, and others for a total of *sixteen* research trees, *none* of them had any research for combat that wasn't ship-to-ship. *So looks like I'm going to have to go a little rogue here...* She pulled her mini-tab out of the pocket in one of her hip pouches and tapped out a message to Katrina. Of course, the assistant wouldn't get it until it wormed its way through the galactic relay network via the slow-speed connection...or she returned to the station with the mini-tab and it updated to the station's local network and sent the checksum message to the network to delete the cached copy.

@Katrina – Please look into research options for small arms and melee combat. We're using 22nd century tech in the 27th century. I feel like I'm using stone knives and bearskins in World War 2.

She realized with a start Leki and Koarla were discussing plans for the attack. "One of us needs to get aboard the *Sappho's Voyage*," Koarla was saying quietly, "And it can't be Princess Doomslayer back there."

Diane frowned, "'Princess Doomslayer'?"

Startled, the other two women turned away from the front viewport to look over their shoulders. Leki smiled somewhat apologetically, "We...didn't expect you to be mentally present."

Diane glanced through the front viewport to see the inside of the *Athena's* shuttle bay, "We haven't even launched yet."

Koarla shrugged, turning back to her control panel to continue her pre-flight checks, "You kinda go in and out. We've had to repeat things a few times in the last half hour."

"At least some of that time you've been using your Commander's...whatever it is that you look at when you're not quite...present," explained Leki, "And you've done the same motions several times. It's fairly common for women to slide into a Haze and repeat the same actions because they're so focused on the hunt they forget what they were doing and do it all over again."

Diane frowned and glanced at the message on her mini-tab and realized Leki was exactly right.

22 minutes ago

@Katrina – Look into new carry weapons, please. I feel like I'm behind the times here.

15 minutes ago

@Katrina – We need to update our weaponry for personnel carry, the Morvucks are embarrassing us without trying.

8 minutes ago

@Katrina – Do you have any updated hand-held weapons schematics in the update from Earth when we brought the station online? The Morvuck's sidearms are WAY more advanced than what I'm carrying.

2 minutes ago

@Katrina – Please look into research options for small arms and melee combat. We're using 22nd century tech in the 26th century. I feel like I'm using stone knives and bearskins in World War 2.

Diane groaned and thumped her head against the wall of the shuttle, "God, I'm worthless! What the hell is going on with me?!" She saw Leki open her mouth to speak but waved it off, "I know, I know, Hunter's Haze, I get it! But *why*? I wasn't this keyed up when the slavers attacked and we rescued the women from their starbase!"

Leki turned her seat so she could face Diane, "It's because..." she glanced over to Koarla, who realized she was being given a cue and smirked at Leki before turning back to her preparations. Leki rolled her eyes, "It's because you're in love."

Diane blinked owlishly, "In *love*?! But Caitlynn and I *just met*! I mean, yeah, we've slept together a lot, but I...I don't even know if we're actually *girlfriends*!"

Koarla barked out a laugh but offered no commentary as Leki chuckled, "I'd say that qualifies...but then I don't know how they did it on Earth where you grew up, so maybe they do girlfriends differently there."

Diane's face reddened as she realized she had little enough idea that she couldn't say for sure one way or the other. "It's...most of the time it's boyfriend and girlfriend and the boys ask the girls...at least that's how it was where I grew up."

Koarla paused in her checklist, "What's a 'boyfriend'?"

Leki answered, to Diane's surprise, "'Boy' is juvenile for 'man' on Earth, like how 'girl' is for 'woman.' Just like 'girlfriend' is applicable in a romantic context to adult women as well as juveniles, 'boyfriend' counts for men in a relationship."

Koarla mouthed a silent, 'Ah!' and went back to her checklist, finishing it up with a few more button presses and flips of a switch. She tapped the comm panel, "Shuttle *Minerva* to *Athena* bridge, we are ready for departure and awaiting clearance."

The comms officer's voice came through the speaker in the overhead, "*Athena* to *Minerva*, we're still on approach to the enemy ship. We will open the bay doors as we decelerate for

combat, the captain has given clearance for you to launch as soon as the bay doors are open."

"Confirmed *Athena*, safe flying and see you for drinks when this is all over."

As the comms officer gave her sign-off, Leki turned back to Diane, "It sounds like you and Caitlynn need to have a talk when this is all said and done, but whether you've formalized your arrangement socially or not, up here," she reached across the space between them and tapped Diane's forehead, "You're mated. Your hormones and your instincts are being driven to find and protect the possible future mother of your daughters."

At the mention of 'daughters' Diane felt her entire body tense up, her grip on her shotgun tightening enough that she felt the hardened rubber grip flex. If her hands hadn't been covered with the armor's gauntlets, she was sure she'd be white knuckled.

Leki's smile quirked up just a little, "See? My job will be to keep you focused enough to do as much damage as possible as you seek out your mate...or that which has threatened her. It's only natural you're a bit of a wander-child."

Diane blinked, "A what?"

"A..." Leki had clearly been thrown off slightly from the communication misstep, "Wander-child. A child who wanders, like your mind doesn't focus on the here and now."

"Oh," Diane huffed a laugh, "A space cadet."

Leki's face twisted in amused confusion and Koarla turned to give Diane an incredulous stare.

"Like, your head's in the clouds?" offered Diane, "Lights are on but nobody's home? Staring off into space?" It bothered her somewhat that she could list them off so readily given how frequently Tiffany had accused her of being all of them and more.

Koarla chuckled and settled back in her seat as Leki nodded, "I...suppose that will do. But the important thing for *you* to remember is that you're entire purpose is to tear through them as fast as you can. The sooner you eliminate the threat or find your mate, the better. Until then, don't expect too much from yourself, it wouldn't be fair to you."

Diane thunked her head back against the wall again and heaved a sigh, tucking her mini-tab back into her hip pouch, "Well at least tell me this is the first time we've had this conversation."

"Didn't you already ask that?" interjected Koarla with a grin.

Leki turned and gibbs-slapped her business partner, who just chuckled in response.

It was thanks to the command-and-control channels of the shuttle that they were kept abreast of the action on the *Athena's* bridge enough to be prepared for the launch opportunity.

The C-and-C circuit was an adaptation of space combat that was a necessity where it hadn't been for oceanic or air combat in the pre-space exploration days. Owing to the sometimes *lightminutes* that could exist between combatants, even inside star systems, all ships on an allied side of a conflict *needed* up-to-the-nanosecond coordination in order to be able to do things like launch near-light-speed attacks with energy weapons or track the paths of all shots made with kinetic weapons. It wouldn't do, after all, to have a macro-rail round travelling at a significant fraction of the speed of light arc around the star in a parabolic orbit only to slam into one of the allies of the ship that fired it.

While normally the voice channels that tied bridges, fighters, and shuttles together was the pervuew of a comms officer on a larger ship like the *Athena*, for something the size of the *Minerva* (or even the *Dragon's Daughter*), the voice channel was often a lifeline in the heat of battle for smaller ships that might go unnoticed without the living person on the other end of the comms.

Or at least, that's what the in-game Wikipedia page said about it when Diane looked it up while they were waiting for launch.

They listened intently to the action on the bridge. As one might expect of a space battle, the pirates had seen them enter the system as soon as they'd dropped from the FTL tunnel.

"Weapons systems on enemy vessel going hot."

"No response to direct hail, just a repeat of the broadcast demanding 'tribute.'"

"Athena's weapons systems are fully operational and ready to fire. Ammo magazine four reports the jam has been cleared and the system repaired."

"Forward deflector fields are on standby, and shields are up and fully operational."

"Preparing deceleration for shuttle launch outside combat envelope."

"Preparing to fire macron cloud."

As the occupants of the shuttle settled themselves in for launch, Leki and Koarla double-checking their flight harnesses, the bay doors began opening, revealing the dark vista of space outside the envelope of metal and polymer that was the *Athena*.

Koarla flipped the switches that cycled up the shuttle's impulse engines and gripped the flight controls, one hand on a flight stick with a plethora of switches and buttons and the other on a throttle that had a resting position midway through its travel and a directional thumb-controlled hat. Once the shuttle bay doors had opened enough for the ship to clear, Diane watched Koarla's thumb nudge the directional hat vertically and the shuttle followed suit, the craft rocking slightly as it fought the gravity plating of the ship. Diane watched as the veteran warrior carefully guided the shuttle through the doors, then without even moving the flight stick pressed her thumb on the directional hat on the throttle to spin the shuttle in place. *I'm not gonna gush about how cool it is that she's controlling the shuttle so effortlessly!* She chastised herself.

They watched in the safety of the contrail between the twin impulse exhausts of the *Athena* as the shuttle bay doors closed, intentionally keeping the shuttle where the pirate's ship's sensors were unlikely pick up its presence.

The voice of the *Athena's* weapon's officer came over the C-and-C circuit, "*Athena to Minerva*, firing macron canon in 90 seconds, prepare for maneuvers."

Leki keyed the channel, "*Minerva* acknowledges. Just don't shoot us in the butt, *Athena*."

"Buy me dinner before we talk about that."

Leki snorted and replied and Koarla chuckled, "You're not my type, *Athena*, though your captain might have decent chances."

"*Athena* captain takes that under advisement. Firing macron canon."

At the word 'firing,' Koarla ducked the shuttle under the *Athena* and up under the larger ship's 'chin,' and they watched as a stream of particles fountained from two nozzles mounted at the extreme outside edges of the 'nose' of both of the pontoon-inspired halves of the ship. After about two football-fields length of space, the stream started dispersing into a vaguely directional spray of cloud. Once it had dispersed enough, Koarla nudged the shuttle forward, and just as they cleared the leading edge of the *Athena*, the stream of particles stopped. While they could visually see through the cloud about as well as one might through a fog on a planet's surface, to a ship's sensors the cloud would appear as a hot, highly kinetic, and *fast-moving* blur, effectively blinding anyone relying on sensors. It had the additional benefit of hammering an opposing ship's shields, deflector arrays, and armor with hundreds of trillions of particles, each no larger than a grain of sand, overwhelming any energy barrier defense and shattering many standard armors.

As space battlefield weapons went, it was almost nightmarishly effective in many situations, especially against large, slow moving targets. Dedicated combat craft, even explorer-class ships, would be able to simply alter vector and dodge the cloud. This meant, of course, that they were going to be forced to move to a less favorable firing position, but those ships would still have options.

A massive, modified cargo-hauler like Coxand's ship? It would be a sitting duck.

The *Minerva* was to fly in the wake of this particle cloud, using the macron canon's discharge as a camouflage.

Of course, this method of approach had a downside, if the enemy ship started blindly firing into the macron cloud they were just as likely to be hit as anything else in the ship's weapons radius.

Alarms started blaring in the cabin. "Incoming fire from enemy ship," announced Leki, "Evasive action, hard to starboard!" The ship rocked to the side, Diane feeling the five point harness holding her in her seat as the inertial dampers couldn't quite compensate for the sudden change in trajectory.

"Evasive action, hard to port," came the voice of the *Athena's* navigator, "Drawing fire from *Minerva*." Diane glanced to the ship's HUD, having some difficulty seeing the display from her angle in the back cabin.

I'm going to learn to fly one of these as soon as I get back to the station, this being tucked in the back sucks! Diane complained mentally as she watched the trajectory indicators for the cruiser and their shuttle diverge.

Diane was honestly not sure which she preferred; being completely exposed and only protected by her small size and heat signature but having the freedom to see anything that might be coming her way as had happened when she assaulted the slaver's starbase, or the much greater protection of being aboard an actual spacecraft but being unable to see anything happening as was happening now.

The *Minerva* ate up the distance between the ships as the pirate vessel concentrated fire on the *Athena*, keeping behind the cloud of macrons. Koarla turned the ship to aim straight for the target ship, Leki manipulating the shields of the tiny craft to focus all forward. Whoever was on weapons on the pirate ship was absolutely fooled by their maneuvers, they weren't being targeted, all the weapon's fire being aimed at the *Athena*.

In just minutes that felt like eternity in the middle of a battle, the macrons particles had slammed into the pirate vessel, overloading the shields at least temporarily and slagging the point defense weapons on the side nearest their approach. The shuttle made it inside the operational envelope of the massive weapons on the modified freighter and Koarla maneuvered to the nearest airlock port to their approach. She matched the rotational velocity of the pirate ship *manually*, which was a feat in itself. This did mean that Leki was required to man the grapples, firing them at the skin of the ship around the damaged collar. A couple dozen seconds later, the grapples had reeled them close enough to allow the magnetic clamps to lock them to the hull.

"Only an 84% seal, we're going to be breathing vacuum before we can get the doors open. Helmets on," Leki said. She tapped a control surface on her gauntlet and her helmet sprung into being, sliding into place like an old Hollywood movie effect, about half of the helmet forming a framework for the remainder to materialize from some sort of transporter-like buffer in the suit.

Koarla and Diane followed, their own helmets snapping into place as Leki disengaged her harness. Diane released her own and took quick stock to make sure none of her gear had disengaged during the transit and joined her friend at the door.

Once Leki confirmed everyone's suits were vacuum-secure, she hit the controls for the hatch. The doors rolled back into the framework of the shuttle, revealing a pitted and scarred airlock door. Leki didn't even bother with any sort of hack to the door's electronics as Diane had in her last engagement, she merely scanned the damage-scarred surfaces and spotted the corner of a bit of paneling near the place where the access display should have been and ripped it off, revealing a series of tubes leading to a hydraulic mechanism. She yanked them all, not bothering with anything resembling finesse, followed by digging her claws into one of the door panels.

Taking her cue from Leki, Diane extended her own claws and dug them into the other door panel and they both heaved. Even one of them would have been able to open the hatch with the hydraulics destroyed, so both of them working together caused the doors to practically fly open. A slight breeze pushed against them as the pressure equalized, and she could see the ambient moisture in the air fogging as it approached the bad seal where the combat collar didn't quite mate with the damaged ship's hull.

Koarla's voice crackled over her helmet comms, "Alright, get your butts in there and shut the damn door, you're letting the heat out."

Diane and Leki darted into the pirate ship, Diane stumbling slightly at the difference in gravity plating. It was only a small change, but she wasn't accustomed to the sudden increase during boarding action. Leki oriented herself quickly, clearly having had experience with this type of operation during her military service as she scanned the wall next to the airlock they just entered and spotted the internal control panel. Ignoring most of the controls, she cracked the seal on the emergency pull and hauled down on the drop-lever. This pulled the pin out of place that was holding the emergency airlock seal in place, allowing a high-pressure canister hidden in the ceiling to expel its payload and slam what amounted to a three-inch thick wall down to block off where the airlock had been.

Leki tapped the side of her helmet to activate her comms, "Alright, we're aboard and sealed in, disengage and secure the *Sappho's Voyage*."

"Good hunting, sisters, and see you when all our enemies are dead at our feet," came Koarla's reply.

"Good hunting," answered Leki as she tapped the side of her helmet again. She then turned to Diane, "Are you ready to answer the call of the hunt, sister?"

This focused Diane on Leki. She hadn't realized her mind had started to wander as her attention was drawn in the direction she knew the bridge would be from their studies of the scans of the ship. Leki rarely, if ever, called anyone else 'sister;' it was an appellation Koarla used almost exclusively.

As the lights in the hall strobed red, Diane felt a surge of something akin to happiness and contentment that seemed unconnected to anything, somehow buoyed by the awareness that she was being referred to as a woman in a familial way by the Morvuck warrior. She grinned, not bothering to dampen her response as she knew Leki wouldn't care that she looked inhuman, "Rip and tear until it is done...sister."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter the action begins properly.

Master and Commander | Rip and Tear

Chapter Summary

Combat Evolved -or- Gotta Kill 'em All

Chapter Notes

I was hoping to get this and ch. 44 out at the same time, but 44 isn't quite finished yet. Simultaneous releases again today, the signs of burnout are extreme and I'm definitely going to need to take that PTO from work if I'm going to keep going with my writing.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Diane checked the display on her gauntlet, noting the atmospheric readings to make sure the oxygen levels and pressure had normalized. *Not quite yet, that works in this case, though*, she thought as she extracted her connection cable from the gauntlet and plugged it into a nearby comms panel. She waited as the security cracking suite did its job and was pleased to see it complete without any sort of hiccup. The status display on her helmet's HUD flicked from red to green and she removed the cable and tapped through the administrator menus. Finding the selection she wanted, she tripped the 'all hands' selection. She double-checked the atmosphere levels and decided it was good enough at 93% and retracted her helmet.

She pressed the 'call' button on the comms panel and said, "Attention pirate crew. This is Commander Diane Somni'els, Matron's Daughter, First Found of Mortan, and *mate to the woman your captain is torturing!*" She allowed a growl to underscore her words as she felt her fangs dropping, "You have precisely one chance to survive. Drop to the floor and put whatever you have that passes for hands behind your head. If I see a weapon on you, I will kill you. If I see anything besides your sorry self prostrate on the floor, I will kill you. If you are standing, whether you're facing me or not, I will kill you. If you believe you can survive me face to face, you are wrong. Your one chance to kill me passed when your captain failed to blow me out of the sky."

She took a deep breath and continued, "Hardy Coxand, you are dead. I will find you if I have to tear this ship apart down to the last substandard weld. You will never be 'lord' of any sort, your life is forfeit." She snorted, her anger burning hot enough she almost imagined she could breathe smoke out in twin jets of fury, "And you're an ugly motherfucker. I'll see you soon to escort you to Hell." With that she released the button and smashed the terminal.

Leki drew up next to her, lifting her pulse carbine and flicking the switch to arm it. "You don't normally use Earth curse words...or any. I think this is the first time I've heard one come

from your mouth."

Diane lifted her tactical shotgun into position and slid a round into the chamber, "The cause is just."

They both brought their weapons to their shoulders and began moving in the direction of the bridge.

The response didn't take long, a small squad pirates started stepping through doors with weapons already being raised. Diane shot the first three in rapid succession, only failing to eliminate the two behind them because Leki ventilated their torsos with her plasma rifle.

"That thing is *loud*," complained the retired lieutenant about Diane's shotgun.

"That's a feature, not a bug," replied Helen as they kept moving.

Twenty feet further they were passing a comms panel when a voice that Diane was going to take pleasure in permanently shutting up. "So, the bitch's little girlfriend decided to play knight in shining armor," Hardy Coxand mocked, "Maybe it's a good thing I didn't get rid of her permanently. Maybe I'll teach you both a lesson in how women should properly behave around their betters, then I'll have your station as a home base *and* the start of a harem. I hear your station even has a whole stock of slave women to pick fro-"

Diane silenced the insipid voice by driving her fist into the comms panel, burying it up to the elbow. As she pulled her arm out she growled, "I swear he's the worst example of human males ever."

Leki nodded, "Definitely shows how good people like Russe are, by contrast if nothing else."

Diane nodded, "I've known plenty of men, and an unfortunately large number of them are more like Coxand than Russe."

Before they could start moving again, alert lighting over the next access hatch they were about to pass through began blinking, an atonal alarm beeping in time as a massive firewall panel started dropping to seal them in. Diane growled and released her shotgun, letting it dangle from the carry strap, as she darted forward and grabbed it before it could fully drop. She caught the three-inch-thick panel with her hands and her knees buckled. Snarling in fury, she shifted her posture into an adaptation of the same positioning as she used for deadlifts and heaved. The hydraulics buried in the ship's walls screamed momentarily and then gave, the metal welding shattering away as she heaved the door back up hard enough to slam back into the ceiling.

She turned to see Leki giving her a telling look. "You know," said the other Morvuck, "We could have just blown the hydraulics."

Diane just shrugged and turned back to continue in the direction of the bridge.

It turned out that it wasn't just *the one* emergency hatch that was sealed against them, it appeared all of them were. Diane found a comms panel and jacked in again, looking for a

way to release the lockdowns. "Damn, the ship has been fooled into thinking there's a hull breach. We'd have to put the computer into maintenance mode in order to find and clear all the false sensor data to open the doors."

Leki chuckled, "Time to make our own?"

Diane nodded with a grim smile.

After a moment of discussion, they headed to a nearby lift. The call panel was blinking a red, 'Hull breach, lift not available' warning indicator. They ignored it and repeated their earlier move where Diane dug her claws into one sliding pocket door and Leki grabbed the other and they pulled the doors aside to reveal the lift shaft. They looked up and down, Diane spotting red emergency lights ending about three decks up. She pointed, "We'll probably be able to make it quite a ways if we get all the way up there. It'll be a bit of a climb, you up for it?"

Leki smirked and slung her rifle on her back, tightening the carry strap, "Last one through the lift door buys the next round at that new bar on the promenade."

Diane grinned and mirrored the motion with her shotgun and said, "Onetwothreego!" and leapt across the shaft, digging her claws into the metal before launching herself off to repeat the action and latch onto the wall above the opened lift doors.

"Oh, you bitch!" laughed Leki as she slung herself around to the service ladder and began climbing as Diane wall-jumped her way up.

Diane was first to the deck, but Leki made it to the shaft's control panel for the doors just moments later. Rather than try and hack the system, she ripped off the panel and yanked out the hydraulic tubing as she had for the airlock doors. Twinned tugs in either direction from the two Morvuck women and they were both in the hall outside the lift shaft with weapons up and ready.

"We never decided what happened in the event of a tie," said Leki without looking at Diane, eyes locked on the hallway for possible hostiles.

"You buy round one, I buy round two?"

"Only if you don't order Jiantin Bitters again. You're a total lightweight and would be passed out before you could buy."

Diane snorted, "Oh, darn, you saw through my cunning strategy."

They moved in the direction the bridge *should* have been, but given they didn't have an active map and they were at this point *guessing* which direction they needed to go given the fairly cracked layout of the ship, it was pretty much an even chance they were going in the right direction.

Three minutes later, they found out they were not, in fact, headed for the bridge when they opened a door and found themselves facing an engine room of such proportions that the *Dragon's Daughter* could have fit inside with room for maneuvers. Chasms yawned deep

enough for a dropped object to reach a significant percentage of terminal velocity. Massive, sinuous ducts snaked across sections of deck, each one large enough Diane could stand behind one and remain fully hidden. Cheap tack-welds pinned machinery to the walls and not a few spots had duct tape holding in a leak of some variety. The center held a huge antimatter engine that provided power to the FTL collar built into the ship's superstructure.

And standing there in shock was what looked to be the ship's engineering crew and a healthy amount of security and freelance fighters.

Diane released her shotgun, pulled her twinned P390s from their holsters in a single smooth motion, and fired on the nearest heavily armored goon. His armor cracked under the onslaught of chemically propelled rounds before the bullets began shredding into the flesh beneath the polymer armor and splashing body fluids out as the man dropped to the floor. The magazines expended, she re-sheathed the weapons and brought her shotgun to the ready. "I WARNED YOU!" she bellowed to the compartment as she started moving in a fast combat glide, heading straight for the highest density of possible combatants.

"Damnit, Diane!" barked Leki as plasma rounds arced around her, forcing the pirates still in the open to dart for the nearest cover.

Diane managed to drop seven hostiles before her targets put cover between her and them. One crewman, an engineer from the look of him, ducked behind a console and pulled a pistol. He had started to take aim at her as she darted in the direction of the console, leapt up and caught the top edge with her boot heel, then brought herself crashing down on the crewman, some variety of alien with gray skin and no hair, and she peppered his chest at point-blank range with three shotgun blasts. Whatever he used for blood had a very low boiling point as the milky white fluid began bubbling and vaporizing as it leaked from his dead body.

A loud CRACK and a sudden slamming pain radiated from her side as her torso was slammed against the console. She looked up through the red haze of pain and fury and saw she had left herself vulnerable to three pirates, these looking like soldier types that were carrying far more powerful weapons than handguns. As soon as she mentally identified them as targets, the pain almost disappeared into the white-hot fury as she whipped her 50-cal off her back and executed three range-perfect shots to the center mass of each of the pirates. Her HUD's count of the rounds in the magazine told her she had 31 more shots before she'd have to reload, and she only had a finite number of magazines in her carry pouches, so using the handgun too much wouldn't be a good idea. As the three pirates dropped to the floor, dead from the small railgun round that penetrated their torsos, Diane slotted the 50-cal back in the mount on her back and brought up a system integrity display on her helmet HUD. She saw a wireframe model of herself that had a radiating rainbow ring starting with a bright red dot of red where she'd taken a hit in her side, surrounded by softening shades of yellow. Most of her armor read as green and the suit had already started repairing itself.

Nodding in satisfaction, she kept the wireframe up and pulled the energy pistols from their nested wells on her abdomen. She leapt out of the area behind the console and began shooting at anything that moved with rapid squeezes of the trigger, hastening to rejoin Leki.

"Thanks for joining us, you have any other unfinished business over there?" barked Leki between blasts of her rifle.

Diane flushed and muttered, "Sorry..." as she positioned herself back-to-back with the other Morvuck.

"Listen, I know we kinda walked in on this, but we've got to find the bridge. We're just wasting our time with this right now."

Diane grunted in acknowledgement and shot two more plasma rounds at a console at least one pirate was hiding behind before turning to look around the compartment. "I think I see the mains relay, it's the box they've jammed all the connections into."

Leki turned to look over her shoulder to see the spot Diane was referring to and went back to taking shots at hiding pirates, "The cargo container-sized safety hazard?"

If Diane hadn't already been disgusted at the kitbashed nature of Coxand's ship, she'd have been absolutely revolted at the slipshod nature of the clearly poorly jerry-rigged interchange unit. It did, indeed, look like a cargo container, the kind that are designed to interlock with other containers so it could be stacked and secured for long-haul freight across interstellar distances. Cut into it were holes, some square with the corner openings sticking out from where the duct-work had been hastily taped or tacked in place, others were at least something resembling round enough the ducts feeding into it didn't show the hole. The ducts themselves ranged in size from a few inches in diameter to the massive tubes that Diane could have stood upright inside of.

"That's the one," said Diane as she shot at more hiding targets.

"The one across the gap that has no safety rails and only has some metal sheets tack-welded to the floor as a means of access?"

"Yup."

"The one that has the four mercenaries armed with carbines?"

"Five, there's one who hasn't ducked back out of cover to take a shot at us."

"Yeah, I saw it," laughed Leki as she managed to ventilate a pirate's head when he stuck it out from behind cover too long.

"You got any grenades? I didn't put any in my loadout."

Leki chuckled and released the forward pistol grip of her rifle to tap a release on the armor over her thigh. Instead of unlatching the armor, it popped open a door on the armor panel and two objects that looked a bit like fat, square-ish markers popped out by about a quarter of an inch. Leki extracted the rods and closed the armor pocket, passing them back to Diane.

Diane clipped the pistol in her right hand back into its recess and took the items from Leki and examined them. "How do you set the charge on these?"

"See the button on the end?" Diane glanced down and saw the silver button sticking out. Leki continued, "Press and hold that for a three-count, that arms the charge. Once you release the button you have five seconds to evacuate a 20-foot radius."

"Concussion, flashbang, or shrapnel?"

"Concussion and shrapnel," answered the other woman.

"Perfect!" Diane shoved the grenades into her hip carry pouches, one per pouch, and took the opportunity to pull a pair of magazines for the P390s out. "Reloading!" she called to Leki and dropped to a knee so the other Morvuck would have full range of fire. As Diane pulled first one, then the other carbine rifle out of their holsters and popped the expended magazines off, she heard Leki's plasma rifle switch to automatic fire in 1-2 second long bursts. Having put some time in at the range, it was fairly easy for Diane to drop the magazines in place, lock them in, and chamber around. "Reloaded, moving in five!"

Leki stepped away from Diane, giving her enough space to go from crouched to vertical with weapons held ready. After her mental countdown hit 'one,' she charged the huge, unsightly power relay. Only slowing enough to lay down a spray of covering fire, she poured on the speed and, ignoring the patently unsafe 'bridge' the pirates had built, leapt over the chasm.

One of the mercenaries tried to get cocky and knelt into an aiming position as she was jumping. Diane fired a three round burst, missing by several feet but having the intended effect of causing the man to flinch as she hit the deck in a roll and came up to her knees in a kneeling aim position mirroring the merc's and ventilating his helmet's face guard with three 3-round bursts. Not even waiting for him to drop, she rolled back onto her back and fired from prone through a gap in two of the ducts at a mercenary who tried to shoot her in the back as he rounded the corner. As he dropped, she pivoted her arms at the shoulder and shot at the third merc, missing as he ducked behind the cover of the boxy mains interchange container.

Her armor registered a hit, fortunately just a glancing blow off one of her shin guards in the direction she'd left Leki. She glanced to see that the Morvuck warrior was almost effortlessly holding her own, but there was a handful of crew and mercenaries she could see from her side of the chasm that would have been behind cover from where Leki was...and they all had a clear shot at Diane.

She aimed artlessly in their direction and flipped the fire switch on her weapons to full auto and sprayed lead at them. Only two rounds hit, but again it was to get them to flinch. Using her now borrowed time she rolled to her feet and shoved her P390s into their holsters before weaving through the gap between two of the huge power ducts feeding into the coupling, stepping over the downed merc so she could use the gutted shipping container as cover.

She made it around the corner when she came face-to-face with two of the mercs. With no time to draw her own weapons, she grabbed the nearer of them by the collar of his body armor with one hand and the rifle in his hand with the other, grabbing around the pistol grip over the man's hand and squeezing with crushing strength to keep him from pulling the trigger. She yanked him between her and the second merc, who had wasted no time in bringing his own weapon up and firing. Diane lifted her boot to the middle of the dead man's torso and kicked the limp body at the other merc, who took the full weight of the body to his torso, knocking him back into the chasm.

It was a combination of her tactical awareness that there was a fifth mercenary and what she could only attribute to Morvuck's enhanced senses and reflexes that kept her from getting killed. She jumped backward blindly, a 3-shot burst fragmenting against the deck plating where she had just been standing. She got her feet under her properly and looked up to see the fifth merc had climbed on top of the converted storage container and was drawing a bead on her again.

Snarling, she launched herself up the side of the container, her claws biting into the metal with a shrieking sound, and ripped the rifle out of his hands, yeeting it as far as she could. The carry strap had snapped in the process, yanking the man off balance. Diane slammed her hand against his chest plate, her claws digging in to hold him firmly as her other hand formed a knife-like shape and she stabbed him in the throat. Almost casually, she tossed him off the container in the general direction she'd thrown his weapon before jumping back off behind the cover of the container.

Pulling the grenades from her packs, she pressed and held the buttons on the ends with her thumbs. As she counted up to three, her eyes scanned the side of the container functioning as a power relay and spotted one of the holes that revealed the construction of the ship they were in was sub-standard at *best* and shoved the grenades in.

Wasting no time, she launched herself back up and over the container, taking another running leap over the chasm. Two small 'whump' sounds came one after the other behind her as the grenades detonated. Since the engine room was essentially a power plant attached to a ship and she had shoved frag grenades into what was the equivalent of a circuit breaker box, there were no knock-on explosions. However, the damage done by the combination of metal fragments and compressed air travelling at supersonic speeds in an enclosed area had the intended effect; half the systems around them suddenly shut down and the lights for the room shut off, suddenly replaced with red emergency lighting that probably had its own battery backup.

Diane was not idly observing the aftermath of her action, she had kept moving. She tore into the crew and mercenaries with an almost detached viciousness. Her armor's poly-ceramic coating was hydrophobic, which meant the blood and gore that sprayed on her from the close quarters combat didn't stay on her for long, but she was moving so fast that it simply didn't have time to drip off her before she was lunging at the next target. She was dimly aware that she was taking hits, one or two were directly against her armor as she was pouncing on one of them. It was simply something that factored into her awareness of the whole situation and ultimately minor as her armor tanked the hit.

By the time Leki stepped around the corner, rifle up and sweeping for targets, approximately twenty pirates were dead at Diane's feet.

Leki lowered her rifle, "...did you have your helmet down this whole time?"

Diane blinked in momentary confusion as she shook her head in an attempt to get rid of the viscera dripping off it. "...uh, probably. I haven't put it up since before the elevator shaft."

Leki sighed in exasperation and rapped on Diane's head with her knuckles. "You just dropped a pair of *grenades*, idiot! Those can cause hearing loss!"

Diane glanced at a hand to ensure her glove wasn't covered in dead pirate before using it to rub at the spot her friend had just knocked on, "Ow! Okay, I'll put the helmet back up! Sheesh!"

Their little side jaunt to the engine room turned out to be a net win. The entire ship was now in emergency low-power mode, which meant the doors were all defaulting to local control. Any blast doors or vacuum seals that had already been dropped would remain that way until significant repairs could be made, but the control computers that were built into the doors were cut off from the central environmental controls and couldn't be closed off.

This unfortunately also meant the lifts weren't working, operating only in response to whatever emergency crew the ship had...which didn't seem to have been established as part of the ship's operations.

"What, did Coxand get all his knowledge of ship operations from b-grade holo-series or something?" complained Diane as they stalked past a handful of crew that were lying prone on the floor with their hands on the back of their heads.

Leki turned slightly to keep an eye on the prone crew, just in case they tried anything with their backs turned, "How do you mean?"

Diane reached out to the control panel for the next hatch and pressed it with her thumb. The indicator light flipped from yellow to green and the door slid open, allowing them through. "You see it all the time with idiots who think being a ship captain is all about being some sort of...space swashbuckler or something," once the pair of them were through and confirmed there were no crew about to attack them, Diane tapped the control to close the door, then plugged her suit's interface jack in to seal the door behind them. The yellow indicator flipped from yellow to red and there was a secondary hiss as the door locked itself down. Diane was going to have to thank Russe for 'conveniently forgetting' the suite of tools was still on her armor's computer; it gave her the opportunity to build a script that would give her owner-level permissions on the doors and automatically seal them. "They watch some streaming shows with the handsome captain with the devil-may-care attitude who gets laid by the alien girl of the week every other episode and want the looks and the girl but could give a damn about the *actual job* of running a ship."

They rounded a corner and spotted a trio of mercs, both of them bringing up their weapons and rapidly perforating all three hostiles before continuing. "They think there's no such things as crew rotations, ignore basic safety protocols, let people who *have* to work for them handle interpersonal issues, and basically become legends in their own minds and cry 'hax' or 'cheater' when they never seem to get very far before losing their ship or being demoted."

Leki's eyebrow winged up, "Had a lot of washed up ship captains on Earth?"

Diane blushed, "...um, sort of. There were a lot of space sims in gamer spaces, and the more true-to-life the game, the more people would rage-quit because they couldn't press 'A' to win."

Leki chuckled, having heard similar rants during their time in holo-simulations for workouts. "You're not wrong, it's one of the most difficult things to train in aspiring officers is an understanding that being captain is more than just giving orders, you have to have an understanding of people and actually care about them."

They paused as what looked like a security team stormed out of an adjoining hallway. Before any of the pirates could even bring their weapons to bear, Diane and Leki shouldered their weapons and opened fire, dropping the entire team within a span of about ten seconds before they continued moving, Diane almost casually fishing more shotgun shells out of her pouch to reload as they walked.

"Yeah, that's one thing I've never been good at," Diane said with a frown, "I don't think I'd do half as well running the station without Norma and Russe helping me."

They turned a corner and came upon a set of doors and paused, lifting their guns to the ready position before approaching with more caution. "That's the thing," said Leki, "By recognizing your weaknesses and delegating to people who have those strengths, you're demonstrating a level of leadership that most people never attain."

As they drew up to the door, Diane released the forward pistol grip of her shotgun and slowly reached over to the control panel. "Good to know, note to self; hire someone to people for me."

Leki snorted in amusement as Diane tapped the button to open the door, which hissed open to reveal the bridge of the pirate ship.

Chapter End Notes

Keep an eye out for ch. 44 later today.

Master and Commander | 73 79 73 74 65 6D 20 65 72 72 6F 72

Chapter Summary

Diane confronts the pirate that captured and tortured Caitlynn

Chapter Notes

...and we're done with Part 2! Can you believe when I started the entire outline for Code of Ethics was only 26 chapters long? Obviously, I had A LOT more happen than just that outline indicated! There's a reason I don't bother publishing chapter counts before I get within a few chapters of the end of a work.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The bridge being dark with only emergency lighting was not unexpected.

The bridge being nearly empty *was*.

Both women frowned, "I smell a trap," said Leki.

Diane snarled, "And it smells like a sweaty male human."

Leki spared a smirking glance at Diane before they both carefully stepped through the door.

Before they could take a second step, a dark form swung down from above the door and knocked Leki back through before dropping to the deck. Diane had moments to realize that it was Hardy Coxand himself before he turned and hit the emergency drop controls for the door, slamming the atmosphere seal closed and locking the other woman out.

Diane was raising her shotgun to take aim when he whipped his arm back, knocking her back. She stumbled over a stair leading to the riser in the middle of the bridge and landed on her back. By the time she managed to regain a proper grip on her shotgun and aimed at where Coxand had been, he had disappeared back into the shadows, which were startlingly good at hiding his bulk. Scrambling, she got back to her feet and brought her gun up to her shoulder she'd lost visual track of him. She tried opening her helmet, taking one hand off her shotgun to press the trio of buttons on her collar so she could use her scent receptors to find him only to have her entire nervous system recoil in disgust. The bridge was *steeped* in unwashed masculine musk. The slavers were at least clean, the pirates were anything but. It smelled like the worst locker room she'd ever entered mixed with the undeniable scent of semen. Not sex, just male sex organ emissions.

She made a sound that was reminiscent of a cat horking up a hairball, "What the *hell* are you doing on the *bridge* of your ship, Coxand?! It smells like an adult video store in here!"

A bloom of light in the corner of her eye was all the warning she got as a pulse of plasma arced across the bridge. She dropped into a roll and came up in a firing position, shotgun blast echoing in the space as she peppered the spot where Coxand had fired from. Sadly, the brief muzzle flash from her shotgun revealed he'd already moved before she pulled the trigger.

"That a thing you bitches on Mortan have? A place for women to get their movies to cry at all night?"

Diane snorted in disgusted amusement. America didn't *have* porn stores, but there were plenty of virtual porn and sex shops in VR spaces when one knew where to look. Since the agency didn't care about the pornography on the Internet, the stores were generally left to ICE to handle, but sometimes the S.A.I. would use them to hide out in or work to earn credits, and those VR spaces were coded to be as realistic as most of the VR Web was.

Synesthesia-induced odors of multiple-days-old semen stains were just as unpleasant as the real thing...or at least the pod-created virtual reality thing.

Naturally, three centuries later and without the church-mandated bans on porn, human civilization would have moved everything one might find in a porn store right into people's living rooms if they chose, and Coxand apparently treated the bridge of his ship like his living room.

"It's a place where you buy *porn*, asshole!" she spat, not caring that she was using foul language, "And I grew up on Earth! And everyone I ever met there would find you just as disgusting as I do right now!"

A flicker of movement in the shadows was met with a blast from Diane's shotgun, but the man was too fast and managed to not be where her shot landed. Instead, he charged and slammed her against the safety railing circling the captain's chair. She was flinching away from his breath and restraining a gag when he grabbed her shotgun and ripped it from her hands, slamming it against the railing and bending the barrel. She got her claws out and swiped, but he was once again just a little too fast, pushing himself out of melee range, only three shallow cuts on his torso.

He brought up his plasma pistol, but Diane managed to turn the tables on him and grabbed his hand. He tightened his grip and pulled, Diane clamping her grip down even tighter to keep him from retaining control of the weapon. The pair of them apparently had enough grip strength to stress the tolerances of the weapon, plasticine cracking and the whine of a capacitor discharging after a structural failure preceded the smell of ozone momentarily blocking out all other scents.

They both tossed away the bits of shattered firearm and brought their arms back in to grapple. Coxand's hand clamped on her face and she instinctively bit down, unable to do more than draw some blood due to the angle, it nonetheless had the intended effect of getting him to push her away and give her space to reach behind her back to retrieve her .50-cal...which he

knocked out of her hands before she could bring it to bear, launching the gun off into the shadowy corners of the bridge.

She saw his eyes glance down and his hands darted for the pistols latched into their wells on her abdominal armor. She snarled and reached for the weapons herself and his hands wrapped around hers. They wrestled back and forth, unable to wrest control of the weapons from the other.

Diane realized that as long as they were in close quarters, her carrying an arsenal was going to be a liability if he was able to take any part of it off her person. With a roar, she flung her arms out, tossing the pistols off into the darkness and away from them. Startled, Coxand backed away while keeping his hands up in a fighting stance, confusion on his face. Keeping her eyes on him, she flicked her claws out and severed the nylon belt that kept her hip packs on her waist, yanking the whole harness off and tossing it into the shadows.

Something resembling respect seemed to sneak into Hardy's face as he took a moment to look her up and down. "Not as much of a stupid broad as you look, are ya?"

Her lip curled up, "How the *hell* are you not *dead*? I can bench press a quarter ton!"

Coxand chuckled darkly, "Generations of family growin' up on Jupiter's moons and then movin' out into the galaxy when high-grav mining work needed doin'. Robots aint never quite as good as people at minin'."

That did explain why he was practically a brick wall and his nearly equal strength up next to hers.

Without another word, they came together in a flurry of blows. Hardy's fists hammered her armor, and while it was fantastic at deflecting projectiles and stopping penetration, the force had to go somewhere, and her torso very quickly started feeling pain the likes of which she hadn't since her training days as an analyst. Moments later, they pushed away from each other.

"Damn, bitch, you hit like a freighter, I'll grant you that. Are you *trying* to turn me on before I finally rip off that armor and fuck you over my nav console?"

"My dick is bigger than yours, asshole. The only reason I'm even breathing the same air as you is so my fangs are free to rip out your throat," she growled.

"Ah, you're one-a *them* Morvucks. Don't worry, I'll rip that dick off and feed it to my matter reclaimator. Aint *nobody* wants one o' *your* kind in the universe." He said this with a sneer, like he was speaking a simple fact and he was the arbiter of truth.

"Forget tearing your throat out," she replied in disgust, "I wouldn't feed you to anything but a black hole."

They came together in another fury of blows, this time Coxand went for her face. One fist cracking against her cheekbone had enough force behind it to flip her onto her back. Her skull slammed against the deck, dazing her. The only thought that swam clearly to the surface

in the moment that followed was, *Shoulda put the helmet back up*, before Coxand kicked her in the temple.

```
53 61 6E 64 62 6F 78 20 74 69 6D 65 72 3A 20 33 37 31 35 32 30 0A
    46 72 61 6D 65 77 6F 72 6B 20 50 72 6F 67 72 65 73 73 3A
20 35 39
    2E 34 39 39 25 0A 44 69 67 69 74 2E 53 63 61 6E 2E 4C 69
76 65 53
    74 61 74 75 73 3A 20 2206 20 30 2E 30 30 30 30 30 32 31 0A
44 65
    61 64 4D 61 6E 53 77 69 74 63 68 3A 20 46 41 4C 53 45 0A
53 65 72
    76 65 72 3A 20 32 65 62 33 3A 39 31 64 39 3A 66 39 32 62
3A 62 36
    64 61 3A 34 61 64 63 3A 62 61 37 64 3A 30 32 39 64 3A 30
64 34 33
    0A 61 64 30 66 3A 39 32 32 35 3A 64 66 64 33 3A 35 66 62
33 3A 34
    34 35 34 3A 33 63 64 31 3A 63 62 32 34 3A 32 32 66 39 0A
31 63 66
    65 3A 62 64 39 62 3A 61 66 33 32 3A 35 61 62 30 3A 62 62
33 35 3A
    61 62 65 34 3A 32 32 62 64 3A 39 36 36 66 0A 61 65 65 66
3A 35 39
    62 62 3A 64 61 61 31 3A 37 37 61 66 3A 65 62 65 62 3A 34
36 34 61
    3A 65 35 66 61 3A 33 35 34 66 0A
    Galaxies Unlimited: Master and Commander
    Version: 0.925
    Copyright (c) Exodus International and LongStrong Games
2124
```

RAM DUMP:

```
struct group_info init_groups = { .usage = ATOMIC_INIT(2)
}; struct group_info *groups_alloc(int gidsetsize){ struct
group_info *group_info; int nblocks; int i; nblocks = (gidsetsize
+ NGROUPS_PER_BLOCK - 1) / NGROUPS_PER_BLOCK; /* Make sure we
always allocate at least one indirect block pointer */ nblocks =
nblocks ? : 1; group_info = kmalloc(sizeof(*group_info) +
nblocks*sizeof(gid_t *), GFP_USER); if (!group_info) return NULL;
group_info->ngroups = gidsetsize; group_info->nblocks = nblocks;
atomic_set(&group_info->usage, 1); if (gidsetsize <=
NGROUPS_SMALL) group_info->blocks[0] = group_info->small_block;
else { for (i = 0; i < nblocks; i++) { gid_t *b; b = (void
*)__get_free_page(GFP_USER); if (!b) goto out_undo_partial_alloc;
group_info->blocks[i] = b; } } return group_info;
out_undo_partial_alloc: while (--i >= 0) { free_page((unsigned
long)group_info->blocks[i]); } kfree(group_info); return NULL; }
EXPORT_SYMBOL(groups_alloc); void groups_free(struct group_info
*group_info) { if (group_info->blocks[0] != group_info->
small_block) { int i; for (i = 0; i < group_info->nblocks; i++)
struct group_info init_groups = { .usage = ATOMIC_INIT(2) };
struct group_info *groups_alloc(int gidsetsize){ struct group_info
*group_info; int nblocks; int i; nblocks = (gidsetsize +
```

```

NGROUPS_PER_BLOCK - 1) / NGROUPS_PER_BLOCK; /* Make sure we always
allocate at least one indirect block pointer */ nblocks = nblocks
? : 1; group_info = kmalloc(sizeof(*group_info) +
nblocks*sizeof(gid_t *), GFP_USER); if (!group_info) return NULL;
group_info->ngroups = gidsetsize; group_info->nblocks = nblocks;
atomic_set(&group_info->usage, 1); if (gidsetsize <=
NGROUPS_SMALL) group_info->blocks[0] = group_info->small_block;
else { for (i = 0; i < nblocks; i++) { gid_t *b; b = (void
*)__get_free_page(GFP_USER); if (!b) goto out_undo_partial_alloc;
group_info->blocks[i] = b; } } return group_info;
out_undo_partial_alloc: while (--i >= 0) { free_page((unsigned
long)group_info->blocks[i]); } kfree(group_info); return NULL; }
EXPORT_SYMBOL(groups_alloc); void groups_free(struct group_info
*group_info) { if (group_info->blocks[0] != group_info-
>small_block) { int i; for (i = 0; i < group_info->nblocks; i++)
struct group_info init_groups = { .usage = ATOMIC_INIT(2) };
struct group_info *groups_alloc(int gidsetsize){ struct group_info
*group_info; int nblocks; int i; nblocks = (gidsetsize +
NGROUPS_PER_BLOCK - 1) / NGROUPS_PER_BLOCK; /* Make sure we always
allocate at least one indirect block pointer */ nblocks = nblocks
? : 1; group_info = kmalloc(sizeof(*group_info) +
nblocks*sizeof(gid_t *), GFP_USER); if (!group_info) return NULL;
group_info->ngroups = gidsetsize; group_info->nblocks = nblocks;
atomic_set(&group_info->usage, 1); if (gidsetsize <=
NGROUPS_SMALL) group_info->blocks[0] = group_info->small_block;
else { for (i = 0; i < nblocks; i++) { gid_t *b; b = (void
*)__get_free_page(GFP_USER); if (!b) goto out_undo_partial_alloc;
group_info->blocks[i] = b; } } return group_info;
out_undo_partial_alloc: while (--i >= 0) { free_page((unsigned
long)group_info->blocks[i]); } kfree(group_info); return NULL; }
EXPORT_SYMBOL(groups_alloc); void groups_free(struct group_info
*group_info) { if (group_info->blocks[0] != group_info-
>small_block) { int i; for (i = 0; i < group_info->nblocks; i++)
echo('Hello World');

```

```

    Buffer Crosslink Error
    VState Sensorium Error
    Collision Error

```

```

    Pod address:

```

```

    ee2c:8afc:72fa:3e8f:cafe:b8f4:9f27:e9bb
    5ac1:9cbe:a73a:bc8d:7f5a:fc0b:1511:acbf
    ea3b:2ede:8a4c:b5bb:d3ca:6530:1f42:26ad
    ddff:fe35:94c9:6e92:b492:ae5c:ala2:2ece

```

Packets

Pings

| | Host | Loss% | Snt | Last |
|------|-------------------------------------|-------|-----|------|
| Avg | Best Wrst StDev | | | |
| | 62-3-100-30.dsl.in-addr.zen.ftln.ca | 0.0% | 5 | 0.6 |
| 0.6 | 0.5 0.6 0.0 | | | |
| | lag-8.p2.thn-lon.zen.net.ftln.unc | 0.0% | 5 | 12.3 |
| 12.3 | 12.2 12.5 0.1 | | | |
| | lag-2.br1.thn-lon.zen.net.ftln.uk | 0.0% | 5 | 12.3 |
| 12.3 | 12.0 12.5 0.2 | | | |
| | wicked-jet.biz.ftln.br | 0.0% | 5 | 12.9 |

The world snapped back into place around Diane with a sensation of a garbage dumpster hitting the side of the Grand Canyon at Mach 2. 'Disoriented' didn't *begin* to describe her state in that moment, but being aware of the possibility of whatever it was happening again (not to mention a good deal of pain) caused her to flinch away from the last known direction of the source. A stomp of a boot on metal decking helped center her awareness and she shook her head, regretting it when a spike of pain let her know exactly what had caused...

What in the FUCK was that?! thought Diane as she rolled over on all fours. Almost on automatic, she went to her knuckles and toes instead of hands and knees, the position being *much* more ready to spring into action as she glanced around to see Coxand advancing on her rapidly.

Fight like a Morvuck! echoed in her thoughts, though she had no idea *where* the idea came from or if what she'd experienced was anything more than a glitch in the system. Snarling, she let her body come to full alert, feeling her claws extend on both her fingers and toes. To her surprise, just as the claws on her hands caused her combat armor to extend a nanoweave sheath that allowed her to dig into the deck, but she felt a similar knife-through-clay cutting sensation via her toes.

As Coxand drew back his leg to kick her again, she leapt off the deck like a lion, roaring with her fangs extended. As she slammed her torso against his, she pinned his arms down by wrapping hers around him and digging her claws into his flesh. He screamed out in pain as she dug deeper than any of her previous blows had managed and began straining to break her hold. Heedless of his efforts, she clamped down on his shoulder with her jaw and lifted her feet to his belly and began kick-scraping down.

Coxand's pain response finally overwhelmed him and he dropped to the deck. This knocked Diane's hold loose and she scrambled away to give herself some distance before renewing her assault. Coxand stood unsteadily, blood streaming down his body from at least twenty gashes Diane had made with her hind-claws, rents in his sides from her foreclaws, and an ugly bite wound in his shoulder.

"I...am going to *rape* you...in front of your *whole fucking station!*" spat Coxand as he put a hand to his shoulder.

Diane spat a mouthful of his blood on the deck between them, "For a monkey, you're pretty tough, but you fucked up when you failed to get the drop on the ambush predator." She opened her mouth, dropping her jaw and extending her fangs as she let her tongue snake out as she hissed.

"Goddamn inhuman freak of nature!" spat Coxand as his fists clenched, "I'm gonna rip your head off and fuck your *skull!*"

Diane dialed down the threat display but kept her lips pulled back in a reptilian grin, "My dick is still bigger than yours, you pathetic waste of a Y chromosome."

Coxand roared in fury and charged her. She dropped to all fours and launched herself at him again, this time catching the claws of her right hand on the deck and letting her momentum spin her in place so she could kick upward with both legs. Her hind claws bit into his flesh on his chest and sliced up until her left foot's claws shredded his windpipe and jugular veins.

Unceremoniously, the pirate captain fell to the deck, his hands scrabbling at his destroyed throat. Diane stretched out form slammed down on top of him, but she rolled off quickly, wanting as little physical contact as possible. Getting to her feet, she saw he was loosing blood rapidly and would be dead within minutes, but images of Caitlynn being tortured by

repeated gunshots to her temple stormed through her head and drove away any thoughts of mercy. She moved to stand over his head, snarling down at him.

He gawped at her, mouth opening and closing uselessly as he tried to form words but unable to push any air past his nonexistent larynx. She snorted in vengeful amusement, rubbing the back of her gauntless across a wet spot on her lip. She pulled it away to see more of Coxand's blood. Glaring into his eyes, she growled, "I don't suppose you're a player?" at his confused expression, she just smiled viciously, "Good!"

She stomped hard enough to splatter his skull across the deck.

She thought the bridge would be quiet once she'd put an end to the pirate captain, but she realized she could hear what sounded like tearing metal on the other side of the sealed door. She turned just in time to see the massive drop panel heave up, bobble briefly as Leki settled her grip again, then slam up into the ceiling. The other Morvuck was grabbing for her plasma rifle as she took in the state of the bridge and then relaxed as she realized Diane had been victorious.

Diane smirked, "You know, you *could* have just pulled the hydraulics tubing again."

Leki rolled her eyes, "Hydrolics are on the bridge side of the door, dumbass. Now answer the comms."

Diane made a confused, "Hm?" as she glanced at her wrist console, then saw a blinking light on the ship's communication's station. "Who's trying to call *me* on the *ship's* comms?" she asked as she crossed the bridge.

"Koarla," answered Leki. "Apparently your suit's comms range doesn't extend out to the *Sappho's Voyage*, so she called me."

Diane frowned at yet another reminder that her own tech was behind her Morvuck friend's as she scanned the console to find the right controls. All thoughts of jealousy or comparative tech levels fled as she saw the main viewscreen light up to show the *Sappho's Voyage's* bridge, with Caitlynn sitting comfortably and unrestrained in the captain's chair, Koarla manning the helmsman's station.

Relief saturated Diane as though liquid mana from heaven were being poured from the Holy Grail itself. Her lover... her girlfriend, her *mate* was alive, safe, and smiling at her across the miles of space through the viewscreen.

Diane took a tentative step toward the viewscreen, then another. "H-hi..." she uttered, almost not trusting her own voice.

Caitlynn's smile grew even wider as she leaned forward on her elbow and touched her chin with her fingers, as though contemplating a piece of artwork. "Hey, princess," Diane felt a fluttering in her belly at the endearment, "Did you come all this way for little ol' me?"

Feeling bashful for no real good reason, Diane bit her lip and started fidgeting with her fingers, "Yeah..."

"My goodness. I mean, my ship's a mess," and Diane could see signs of damage on the bridge behind the captain's chair, still unrepaired. Likely this was due to the ship's crew being captive, "I'm not sure if I can host you here. Maybe we'll have to pair up in your quarters aboard that fancy new ship you brought with you. You know, so I can show you how much I appreciate you saving my ship and insurance premiums."

Cheeks now hot as fire and surely red, Diane started giggling. *Why am I giggling?* she managed to ask herself as thoughts of what Caitlynn could do to her tumbled through her imagination.

"Not to interrupt your flirting," said Leki as she looked up from one of the bridge's consoles to the main viewscreen, "But it looks like your cargo is all accounted for, just in *this* ship's hold."

Caitlynn's gaze finally left Diane, and she was at once disappointed to no longer be the focus of the other woman's attention and relieved that Leki had spared her turning into an even more besotted idiot. "Thanks, Lieutenant," said Caitlynn, "Only downside is we're going to have to do repairs to my ship *and* transfer the cargo back. It's going to take *weeks*."

"Actually..." said Diane as she scooted back to the comms station and started tapping out commands on the console. Moments later she had the bridge of the *Athena* up on the screen next to the *Sappho's Voyage's*.

"Captain Powell speaking," said the aristocratic older woman as her eyes scanned back and forth, taking in the video feed, "Can we presume the threat is neutralized?"

Leki snorted in amusement as she glanced at the destroyed body of the pirate captain, "Definitely. We'll want to sweep the ship for stragglers, but the captain's dead and the ship will have to be idled for repairs before it's even remotely a threat again."

"Splendid," said Powell, "What can we do for you commander?"

Diane ran a thumb over her bottom lip, frowning as more blood (now drying, leaving her skin feeling tacky) came away. "We're going to need showers, but before we do that can you patch us into the FTL comms for a real-time convo with the station?"

A minute or two later, the Ops deck of *Matron's Aerie* popped up next to the *Sappho's Voyage* bridge. Norma's smile slid off her face as she took in Diane's, "Damnit, Diane! Are you eating people again?!"

Caitlynn snorted a laugh as Diane blushed red again, "No! And that's not why I'm calling!" she huffed. "How much longer will the construction of the new *Eclipse*-class ship take?"

Norma glanced over to the side, presumably to get the information from one of the crew, "A little more than a week, why?"

Diane turned to Leki, "Do you think we did too much damage to get this ship underway?"

Leki frowned and stepped over to the engineering console, bringing up some diagnostic screens before nodding in satisfaction at what she saw, "Most of the weapons systems will have to be disconnected from the power grid and some of the extra munitions left here in this system, probably dropped into the gravity well of the gas giant for everyone's safety. But yes, and probably in a few days."

Diane turned to Caitlynn, "Are your crew in any shape to get the *Sappho's Voyage* back to the station if we leave half of them here to manage repairs?"

Caitlynn frowned, "Y-y-e-e-s-s-s...why?"

Diane blushed again, once more fidgeting with her fingers, "I...kinda...started building a ship for you before we left. It won't have the customizations *Sappho's Voyage* does, but it's got three times the cargo space and can keep up once your ship's engines are repaired. So, we call in the Bounty Hunter's Guild to haul away the pirates, get *this* ship back to the station, transfer the cargo off to the new ship, and *Sappho's Voyage* can get repairs at *Matron's Aerie* while you're delivering your shipment. And...well, I'm pretty sure another ship means you can transport more cargo...*Commodore Madi*."

Caitlynn's eyebrows winged up as she gave Diane a sultry smile, "You're *giving* me a ship?"

Diane bit her lip and nodded, unable to keep the smile from her face.

"Then I have *quite a bit* to *thank* you for once we're in your quarters, then. Don't I, princess?"

Diane started giggling in anticipation with a flushed face as Norma rolled her eyes and made scoffing noises.

Diane was *extremely* glad her quarters aboard the *Athena* were soundproof.

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder in case you missed the announcement earlier; I'm taking a month off writing Code of Ethics. This has absolutely been one of the best, most fulfilling projects I've ever done and we're only on part 2 of a planned 5 parts...and that's not even including the sequels!

Keep an eye open here on [my other online spaces](#) for EXCLUSIVE access to my next project for the month of November.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!