

We Die Alongside This Universe

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/18003731) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/18003731>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Star Trek , Star Trek: Discovery
Relationships:	Hugh Culber/Paul Stamets , Mirror Hugh Culber/Mirror Paul Stamets
Characters:	Mirror Hugh Culber , Mirror Paul Stamets , Mirror Philippa Georgiou , Hugh Culber , Paul Stamets , Mirror Tracy Pollard
Additional Tags:	Mirror Universe , TW Tagged on each chapter , Blood and Torture , Blood and Violence , Slow Burn , Character Study , Don't copy to another site
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-03-05 Updated: 2021-10-19 Words: 38,661 Chapters: 7/?

We Die Alongside This Universe

by [Aphelyon](#)

Summary

Hugh Culber has only known a society of violence and greed. He is a respected experimental physician, master of psychological and physical coercion, tasked with a man-hunt when the Empire is faced with a new threat. His world is rocked when he is forced to face his greatest fears and Culber finds himself displaced in a universe that he once thought he knew how to survive. He has to relearn exactly what the price of survival is.

Notes

Unauthorized copying of this entire work, any and all of my works - inclusive of writing and all artwork imagery of my creations - to any and all other sites is not permitted.

Also please note: *Only* the prologue and interludes are written in second person. All of the rest is third person. Something something stylisation. :)

Prologue

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings in End Notes

Holy fuck, finally getting this out there. Hope to have you along for the epic journey I have planned for our beloved Stabbyboos!

Big, massive huge thank you to ALL those who have been so supportive of this, and put up with me talking about this for a g e s. Huge thank you to Wolfchasing for Beta-ing the Prologue and Chapter 1.

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

 We Die Alongside This Universe - Arc I - By Aphelyon

*

Your eyes open on another new day. Another day to endure. Another day to survive.

The light of a nearby star that you're orbiting streams through your cabin's window. It's dying and the light it emits is a desperate attempt to be remembered in a far off time and a far away place. Its story, however, is not unique. A galaxy full of stars, that has been torn apart, stripped of their life and the resources they contain to aid a so-called better cause. Perhaps if their lives were cut short to beget new life, those dying stars would not scream in silent agony, but instead their drained life only fuels the intent of those who take life, harnessed, canistered, weaponised. They have become unwitting proponents of causing death to the very life of which they were once born to nourish.

In another life, you would use this quiet time you have to yourself in the morning to dream, think of all the things you aspire to, how to inspire others - how to keep yourself inspired.

But not in this life. Every day is a fight to lay your claim on your very next breath.

But really, could you have ever imagined that life could be so different from that which you've known your entire life? The only life you've ever known. The only kind of life that *everyone and anyone* around you has ever known.

No, you can't.

Not really.

Or perhaps you can, but you dare not to.

How could you when life in your universe is nothing but cruelty and pain? It doesn't allow for dreamers. It doesn't allow for such ideas to form, lest you want them to cut you down. Dreams such as these are frivolous and dangerous. Through your entire existence you are shown nothing but endless cruelty; a cruelty that stretches to the farthest reaches of your known universe, a cruelty that all life has come to know as their existence. What other counterpoint do you have to compare anything to?

Nothing.

It's all you know.

So what you've come to know is strength. When strength begets dominance, and dominance begets strength - anything less is considered weak and is culled. If you want to live, you have to embody strength, dominance - *life* . You kill off any part of yourself that is less than that - *weaker* than that. That's what it means to live.

So you have to have discipline, and if you have that, you have control. If you have control over your environment, you have strength. If you have strength, well, it's the only way you will flourish. Flourish from a bed made of all of which and who you cast aside, screaming and bloodied. Anything that is weaker than you will fertilise the garden bed which feeds you strength. Feed you and let you become virulent and unrelenting.

What else is there? It's the only life you have ever known and the only way that you know life to survive in. Living like this is the only way that you have survived.

So you breathe in.

You do so; deep and full. With your intake of air, you breathe in life itself. The whole universe and all that you know. You breath in the demure glow of the dying star, you take its strength for yourself. You hold onto that breath, holding life itself captive within the cage of your chest, and each moment the screaming in your head becomes clearer. Louder. More shrill. Desperate. Pleading.

Pleading for *life* . Life that you stole and claimed for yourself.

You steel yourself and don't give in. You never do. *You never can.* Not for one moment. To give in is weakness, is death. To fight for control is strength, is life.

You let the screams tear through your mind - they're familiar - like an old friend. But you know they're no friends of yours, because friends do not haunt your existence like this. Some of the screams are your own, some belong to people who you had once considered friends. When you had been foolish enough to consider anyone friend. Friends do not call you a monster, do not make you into a monster, try to splinter you, tear you down, threaten you. Now their threats fall off your hardened facade; they are idle and useless towards your life and those you love. If you had anyone left you loved. Not that you were capable of such things anymore, anyway.

You're stronger than that now.

You buried your heart a long time ago. You do not have any loved ones, nor friends, not anymore. Such things only serve as a weakness, they only sap your strength, threaten your life. You've seen what happens to lovers and friends.

You know what you've done to lovers and friends.

This world has no place for such things. So you've turned your heart to steel and made it impenetrable by the world. The screams no longer pierce you: it is impervious to all. So long as your will to live remains, they are rendered powerless.

So now you breathe out.

As you do; silence falls. Every voice, every breath that you have cut short, every life you have taken - it all dies with you as you exhale. Their weakness dies. As does yours.

Every shrill scream extinguished as your breath passes through your parted lips. Their pleas are silenced. Your world becomes silent. It's as silent as it is dying; surely and loudly - but no one pays any heed. Not to the dying screams of others, not even to the dying scream of the cosmos itself.

This is your meditation, you do this every morning as you wake to another day in the screaming and silent world. You acknowledge the horrors of the world by breathing them in, they flood your being and course through your veins. The pain and horror of the world becomes you, and you become it in return. It is how you can face your reality.

Breathe in.

As the screams return to your mind, upon your inhale, you adorn yourself with your armour. Strap, clip and lock in hard breast-plate, array of plates that cover your arm, belts and a manor of braces. You holster your phaser at your thigh. Finally, you sheathe your blade. It sings to you with it's sharp, metallic, operatic hum as it settles into its place at your side. Each day it buzzes with anticipation of being wielded to fulfill its purpose under your sanctioning hand.

Now exhale.

You look up, looking at who you have become in the mirror reflected back at you. Harsh lines on your face reflect the choices of your life, your hardened expression will not allow for anyone to read what those choices might have been, how they changed you. Your eyes become cold and piercing.

You look like someone who knows what it takes to survive.

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Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings;

Mentions of torture
Copious mentions of death

Thank you for reading! As always I *really* love your thoughts and feedback, it's tremendously appreciated.

Thank you to [Wolfchasing](#) for your hard work Beta-ing('n love.)

You can also come find me over at [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#) - I post drawings of Stabbyboos and regular Culmets stuff I do there too.

Beware Gifts of Silver

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings In End Notes.

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

Commander Hugh Culber did not consider himself a lucky man. He was careful, meticulous, relentless - and of course when times called for it; he was dangerous - brutally so. But for all things that he was, lucky wasn't one of them. Nothing came to you within the universe by luck.

There was no such thing.

You had to fight, claw, bite, scratch, stab to make anything of yourself in this world and perhaps occasionally having to dispose of a few bodies along the way. Every moment that you were here, you had to fight for what you have. To be alive was to prove your ability to succeed at all of this, and it showed in a manifestation of a river of blood that coursed through your entire history, carving its way into your identity; shaping you.

However, this wasn't a unique experience. Anyone and everyone had the same bloodied trail. The history of your acquaintances, colleagues, enemies, rivals and your entire race was woven in a messy, bloodied, and deadly web.

You had to give life back what it demanded from you, and its only demands were brutal and relentless. Culber knew this. He made sure those dues were paid.

You could not bribe luck, but there was always a price to pay.

The doors to the processing facility which he was overseer to hissed open. The sound of his boots against the black mirrored floor rang out as silence fell over the room as he strode in. All personnel that were in the direct vicinity of the entrance turned to salute him as he walked through, and those who were out of sight stood to attention, ready to salute in turn when he made his way to their vicinity.

Coercion Ministrative Overseer, Commander Culber; the Chief of the Starbase 33 Coercion and Central Intelligence facility. A fundamental and vital component to the operations of the Terran Empire. The Empire had many enemies, outside of the Empire and within it, and units such as this one provided the ability to extract intel from those otherwise unwilling to betray their own self-interest.

He began his rounds. He does this at the start of each shift, combing through the entire department station by station, taking note and investing his time in making it known that his presence was everywhere through this facility. Those who worked under him knew that they worked for him, that they were noticed - but were aware that this meant that all of their actions, good and bad, were under constant and immense scrutiny.

It was a large space that the C.C.I. facility occupied and this entry hall was simply a small part of it - a large hexagonal central area that had doors on each wall, leading into different and larger areas. One the areas was assigned to weapons storage, which also housed a large array of tools to be used at their disposal; another was medical supplies. Another three of those doors led to bulk processing floors, with most sections therein spread over several levels, all of which were maintained and locked down with high security - lest someone tried to escape the confines and escape from their ill fate. If someone had to be processed through his facility, it stood a great chance that they deserved to endure whatever was inflicted on them, for the good of the Empire.

The last door, right at the head of the room, lead to Culber's private office. Only he and his superior officers ever ventured in here, and he seldom entertained any guests within. All personnel who worked here approached the room with great caution if it were at any time necessary to do so.

Inside his office, it was split into two areas. On the left were where his desk and console stood - the wall behind was a large window shouldered by display pillars on either side, which showcased weapons that were hardwired to respond only to his biological signature. The window looked out into the endless sprawling star studded abyss and onto whatever space they currently occupied. Often enough, it happened to be the coordinates into the void that their executed insubordinates were beamed out to die. If he was looking out of the window at those particular times, he could see them screaming meaninglessly for all of the few seconds they had left to live, before the the vacuum of space sucked all the remaining life out of them, erecting another icy pillar in the endlessly sprawling graveyard. They floated in suspension, left there forgotten, a monument to their failures. They would be a warning to all

- that is, if they weren't such an immeasurably insignificant blip in the vast and empty space they were cast out into.

Sometimes he watched them. Other times he turned away.

On the right side of the room was a fully secure area, which held a large, fully equipped space where he conducted his own private sessions and research. Only he and those with higher clearance were permitted to enter, but he had gained enough respect that even then, those who did would wait in his office.

Before he settled into his office, he always made the rounds to inspect that his team was working to his standards. Any that fell short could be subjected to time at the mercy of their own departments - time spent *personally* testing out the effectiveness of their own devices. All personnel worked to administer those ' *consequences* ' on the subjects that were brought into this facility - whether they were enemies of the Empire, or were from the Empire themselves. They were all witness to exactly what was in store for them if they did not perform - they knew the consequences of poor workmanship, betrayal and insubordination. The screams echoing off the walls were inescapable and served as a constant reminder. Out of their own desire to survive; they made sure to pass the Commander's strict standards.

And he was vigilant.

So they all fell into place. They knew their place, but more importantly, they knew *his*.

He is deep within one of the holding facilities, being debriefed by this section's Warden on the state of the residents within and on the subjects being primed for their next round of psychological exercises. A project that the Commander heads and has a deep investment in. The project is known to so few, that when he hears the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching them on the hardened floors - running towards where they stand - the conversation is cut off immediately.

Culber turns on his heels, hand resting on his phaser as the Junior Lieutenant slows his approach. He pants from exertion, with Culber taking note of his weakness.

"Sir, no intrusion intended." He doubles over again before straightening up, alert in his presence. Culber thinks to himself that this one might not have a long serving career in the Empire. He glowers at him and flares his nostrils with impatience. "There's an Admiral waiting for you in your office, Sir. He's requested that you return promptly, Sir."

"Admiral *who*?" Culber's voice is cold and harsh.

Who the Admiral was made all the difference as to *who* was making the demands and what Culber might expect on entering his room. The Junior Lieutenant stumbles on his words, trying to spit out an answer, pitifully shrinking into himself at the realisation of his error. Culber turns to his associate and nods silently to her. She is a veteran in his team, and would

see that the Lieutenant would learn the importance of precise information.

She seizes him by the arm and an iron grip at the back of his neck, forcing him down the long corridor in the opposite direction as Culber makes his way back towards his office.

The Admiral stands looming over his desk, turning to see him as he entered, the Admiral's silhouette glowing in the light streaming through the window of the star that they are orbiting. Culber notices that there is a large silver box placed on top of his desk. His hand rests over the hilt of the blade at his hip as he crosses the room, eyes never leaving the Admiral, to stand behind his desk.

"I don't appreciate waiting, Commander."

"About as much as I appreciate surprises, I imagine, Lord Alvarez." He assumes his position at the head of his desk, leaning on it with both palms resting on the edge. His thumb tickles the button he had hidden under the ledge, ready to activate the mechanism if he needs it, in case this surprise turns sour. "What can I do for you, Sir?"

"Ah! It's more what I can do for *you*, Commander." He says far too amiably for Culber's liking, with demeanor shifting entirely. Culber was already suspicious and did not like the tone of his proposition. The Admiral moves, tapping the box that rests on the front end of his desk. "A gift, if you will."

He eyes both the man and the box itself in assessment, wary. "Computer, threat and content analysis of the unknown container."

' *Working.* ' The computer chimes at his command, the affable tone ringing out and cutting through the uneasy air between the two men.

"Culber, Culber, Culber. You are *still* so cautious and meticulous."

"Consider it a symptom of the job, Sir."

' *Analysis complete; no threat detected. Contents; deceased remains in first stage decay.* '

"Charming gift." Culber sneers at the unflinching Admiral. He taps the button on the top and it releases the lock, the top crumpling down over the sides and into the base revealing the contents; a severed head of a pale man, made paler still from death, with dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. It was unusually ceremoniously lopped off, with a clean wound where his neck should have been - a tactic usually reserved for sending a clear message to the receiver. And now this was presented as a supposed gift for him, however, the circumstances surrounding it did not forebode the usual grim warning that a gift like this usually did. Everything feels wrong about this.

He does not recognise the face from first glance, but it was misshapen from poor handling, the dark slick tussles of hair partially obscured the eyes which had been left wide open. A conscious choice, confirming this execution had indeed been conducted as a ceremonious affair rather than just some botched and unfortunate end to a confrontation.

“What I am supposed to do with this? It makes for a disgusting and ...” he glances over it again, assessing, his lips curling in repulsion “...an ugly paperweight. At this rate and stage of decay, if you wanted extraction of intel, it’s far beyond salvageable.”

“Commander, you misunderstand.” The Admiral steps forward, and Culber’s finger dances playfully on the surface of button out of sight once more. “You see, there has been an opening for the position of Imperial Inquisitor.” He pointedly glances towards the severed head that sits heavily between the two of them. “The Emperor extends her blessing that you might consider yourself for the role.”

There was no *might* about it. Or considerations to be had. If the Emperor wished for you to be placed in a position, the only choice you were truly presented with was to take the position or be beamed out into the dead of space for treason. Culber knew that if this proposition was in fact endorsed by the Emperor herself, he had no choice, not if he wanted to live. He resists the urge to look towards the fate of the last Inquisitor. How had he failed her? The higher position, the higher the stakes, the harder you fall.

They both knew this fact. Culber retains his cool look, not giving a response either way to the admiral-turned-messenger and listens as he continues.

“You are committed to secrets and information, you no doubt know many more than I ever will.” He smiles, but he does not seem as resigned to that fact as what he let on. Culber narrows his eyes. “Perhaps you have heard from your little birds, perhaps not. But a snake has taken up residence in our nest, we don’t know who or how deep their reach has infiltrated. It is for the good of the Empire and the Emperor herself, long may she reign, that we smoke out this traitor. The Emperor herself is aware of the invaluable work you have done for many years within this remarkable facility, and because of that, she has chosen you for the task.”

“Yet, with all due respect Admiral, she is not here.”

“Ever the cynic, Commander. I assure you that official arrangements will be organised promptly.”

“As my mother used to say; ‘Trust not the man who brings you gifts of severed heads in shiny little boxes and pretty promises of promotions.’”

“That’s a very specific imparting of knowledge.”

“Indeed. She was very wise.”

“Ah, it sounds like I would have liked her.”

“She would have not liked you.”

“Ha!” He guffaws loudly, and while laughing obnoxiously, his face contorts into ugly, cruel mirth while he entertains the thought. “She would have been one of the few. So are you,

apparently. Now, Culber, you will come around. We'll have many opportunities to get to know each other better with your new rank and your new privileges. Welcome to the Elite, Culber."

"I look forward to beginning my work." He says tightly though a clenched jaw. He may have been offered a higher ranking, but it was tentative and any misaction now could and would still jeopardise his life. He is still very much out-ranked in this moment, regardless of the apparent endorsement from the Emperor. That alone would not save him from any misstep.

"The arrangements are already underway," - *of course they were* - "we will be in contact, *Inquisitor* ." The Admiral salutes, and Culber returns the formality, staying in his position as the Admiral departs his office.

As the doors slide shut again behind him, he allows his eyes to fall back on the head of his ill-fated predecessor.

He had liked his life. He had liked the life that he had built for himself from the ground up. He had fought hard to have every brick and mortar in place, he had control over each and every element. *Had* .

Despite the opportunity looking fortunate and in his favour — after all it was an offer that was served to him in a silver box, one he didn't even have to fight for — he remained leery. It's an offer that he would have to be out of his mind to turn down, as if that was actually a choice. If he turns it down, his life would be forfeit, that much was certain. He is all too aware that he no longer has control over this. He has yet to be briefed in what exactly his role would be, but he knew his routine life has been forcefully uprooted in an act of so called generosity.

And despite the opportunity awarded to him, Culber still would not willingly call himself a lucky man. He remains entirely unconvinced that luck had anything to do with it. One generously fortunate opportunity bestowed on him, wasn't it? Universal law dictates that there is always a price to pay.

He wondered just how much this would cost, and by what means of immeasurable misfortune he would then have to pay for it.

Culber stares into the lifeless eyes in front of him, unable to tear away his gaze, and wonders if he is now staring into the fate of his future self, wondering just how imminent it may be?

"Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings;

Mentions of torture

Gore

Severed head

Copious mentions of death

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Amber Faces

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings In End Notes.

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

Culber exits his office holding onto his *gift*, his fingers gripping onto it by the hair . He lets it swing low by his side as he marches over to the nearest console.

“Dispose of this.” He commands to the personnel stationed at the console - he doesn’t care who it was - and unfurls his fingers from the hair of the head, tossing it in disdain at their feet.

The officer startles nearly imperceptibly — enough for Culber to notice, although certainly not enough for him care in this moment. He is consumed by his seething fury.

All of *this* : everything he had built up, everything he invested himself in, every bit of respect he had painfully earned - all of it is being pulled out from underneath him by forces beyond his control, by powers greater than him - the powers that he served. And to what end? To become an Elite? What use did he have for prancing around at galas and pandering to the egos of those who attended? He’s seen plenty enough of the Elite to know that they’re brown-nosing cowards. They grow paranoid and afraid of their own shadows. They think that they can fool Culber otherwise. He is not fooled.

Their mounting paranoia is only the beginning of their end. Eventually their egos become so large and inflated that it overshadows them, crushing them, becoming the death of them. Their reckless callousness becomes an overcompensation manifested by their fear so that they either fall victim to their own entanglement of allegiances - and end up strung up by a single oversight - or, their ego is cut down to size, along with their lives.

He refuses to become weak from the false sense of security that he has witnessed his new, so-called power cause. Nor is he interested in becoming someone else's puppet.

He scowls at the direction his thoughts have taken as he enters the hallway leading back to the processing floor. He doesn't even notice two passing officers swerving to give him a wide berth.

He re-enters the section of the facility, turning down long, dimly lit corridors, stalking in the direction that he last saw the lieutenant commander heading in with the unfortunate messenger.

The corridor leads him to a series of doors that automatically open upon scanning his features as he approaches. He had set it up to scan everyone who approached this area, so that he wasn't slowed by any inconvenient measures during a critical situation - and to ensure that unwanted, prying eyes would be preemptively stopped. Everyone who worked in this facility knew to never step foot near this section unless they had the authorisation.

He strides through the final door and heads directly to the large glass window on the far side of the room where his Lieutenant Commander is standing. He sees her flicking her gaze between the readings that display on the window and the device in her hand, making the occasional adjustment or notes. On Commander Culber's approach, she looks up at the distinct sound of his boots, giving him a slight, formal bow, and returns to her readings. When it's just the two of them in this secure area, he finds that there is no need for the full theatricality of formality.

Culber notices that her usually tightly coiled hair has been loosened and stuck up in places. Perhaps the handling of the young fool had not gone so smoothly. However, there is no sheen of sweat reflecting on her dark skin under the low lighting, and no cuts, swelling, or bruising - so he has no reason to doubt her ability to handle whatever had come up with efficiency. She always did.

"I trust that the complications with handling the *messenger* were dealt with swiftly, Commander Pollard," he says while coming to stand next to her, shifting his gaze to the files displayed on the window.

Out of the corner his eye, he can see her mouth twist into a smug smile. "Always, Sir."

He remains impassive, reaching for the screen and pulling up several files, opening others and sorting them out next to each other in front of him. "Let me know once he's released. I want to talk to him in my office *personally*."

“That won’t be possible, unfortunately.”

He turns to her, frowning. “A defector?” She shakes her head. “Dead?”

“No, but, that is likely.” She touches a dial on the window and the display before them fades from its dark shroud to reveal a room full of people standing immobilised behind it. He only recognises the boy, the foolish messenger, but the rest are unknown to him. “He volunteered himself for the program. He *hoped* that it could prove his loyalties.”

The tone of her voice matches exactly what he is thinking; *a fool indeed, right to the end.*

Project Artemis is what he had volunteered himself for - the product of Culber’s entire career.

He had originally trained as a Doctor, specialising in neuroscience, before the Empire had seen potential in his skills - his natural talent for reading and assessing people with frightening degree of accuracy. They had given him a choice - a genuine choice - to continue on the mundane path that he had chosen, or to work towards becoming something great under the eyes of the Empire. Being a Doctor was gruelling, thankless, and uninspired work. He had chosen to flourish and forge his own path.

Project Artemis is still experimental at this stage, even after many years of research. It had lain relatively dormant until he had worked his way to the top of the food chain in this facility. He had finally been able to stretch his muscles and could begin to dedicate resources and time towards his research. He had all the bodies he needed thanks to the seemingly endless supply coming from all of the unending conflicts that the Empire comes up against in its continuing domination of the galaxy.

Conflicts that would be easier won if they had an upper hand. This is exactly what Culber is trying to develop; the upper hand. Sleeper Agents, just like the ones in those old blacklisted movies and novels that he had enjoyed when he was just a kid, surviving on the edges of society before he had been old enough to enter the service of the Empire. They had once served as fantastical daydreams and helped him escape his reality for just a little while each day. These days, they served as his inspiration in the fight for his survival and place in this world.

It is true that the Empire uses agents for infiltration all the time, including beings who weren’t even Terran. Culber never failed to be amused by what people would do for a pretty coin. However, these agents were flawed and unpredictable; their mission could backfire at the slip of the tongue, or they would turn on their promises at the last minute, having chosen their pride over living.

All wasted potential, if you asked him.

They create spots of weakness within the Empire. Culber saw to eradicate that through his neural reconfiguration and memory implantation. He would make a system so flawless that their agents could tear apart civilisations from the inside out, and all the cavalry would have to do was show up and sweep away the remaining dirt.

There was one particular thorn that was a constant blight in the sides of the Empire, more than any singular civilisation: The Resistance. They were made of several factions of enemies of the Empire that had unified under the common goal to seek the destruction of the Empire. Vulcans, Klingons, Andorians, Tellarites, the odd Orion, and traitorous Terrans. They were vicious and rabid fighters who would stop at nothing to wreak destruction on Imperial facilities, bases and planets. You name it, they want to destroy it.

Culber has personal investment in hitting them hard - they had killed his parents. It had left him to survive on his own, surviving on nothing but scraps and only the company of the galaxy's scum that sought to kill him for the mere fact that he was Terran. For as long as he could remember, he had been fighting to survive.

Since the project is still in its early stages, there had been many failed attempts of the implants not taking, or of the neural reconfigurations and connections reforming in unstable ways. It isn't ready to be brought to the Emperor, not yet - he has to perfect it first. He needs something viable to show her his worth. If he presented anything that had potential but could not deliver on it; it would be taken from him - and so would his life.

He keeps the project under close guard, a secret that only him and a small team of hand-selected individuals knew about Project Artemis. Not even Lord Alvarez or any of 'The Elite' knew. Not even the Emperor. It was to be *his* legacy, *his* gift to the Empire. This is what was supposed to *earn* him a position of power when the time was right. He wants to be recognised by how he had dedicated all of himself to his work, and not just *handed* some cheap promotion through someone else's misfortune. It further pisses him off that it hadn't even been by his own hand.

He finds himself staring into the room before him, at the face of the *stupid boy* standing in his confinements, and is reminded of what is being taken away from him, right before his eyes.

"All he's proved to me is that he has a lack of self-preservation." He glowers at the fool inside. "Disgusting."

"These new conscriptions are too soft, if you ask me," she agrees with him, but doesn't look up from her screen. Silence falls between them as she silently continues her work.

He simply stares at the boy, transfixed by his circling thoughts and rage at the injustice of this new development. After a few minutes he shifts in his stance and breaks the silence. "I don't know what the fate of this experiment will be."

She hums impassively, still analysing her scans. "Well, these past few batches have trended promising results, and -"

"No, Pollard. I meant Project Artemis itself." He turns his head to look at her, and at the use of her name, she looks up at him. "Lord Alvarez was the Admiral who came to see me and he came bearing... *gifts*."

There was a long pause before she answers him, turning her attention fully to him and giving him an assessing look. "What kind of gifts? If he's after the extraction from the rebels at Castor - they're not ready yet, they're... proving to be incredibly stubborn."

"He wasn't."

"Then what did he want?"

"He gave me a promotion."

"... Just like that? Lord *Alvarez* gave you a promotion. What does he want?"

"Don't get me wrong, he is gaining something out of this. But, it's not *him* who wants something from me." He let the implication of whom he was referring to sit heavily in the air between them for a moment. "I'll be contacted with more information shortly, as for the fate of this facility, I will not allow it to fall into the hands of any imbecile. If I'm to be sent away, or spend any time abroad; you will assume the Directors position."

"Yes, Sir."

"Including *all* of the responsibility that comes with it." The cost of failure was high.

"The Project?"

"I will continue to oversee that."

"Yes, Sir," she reiterates. He watches her as she turns back to her device, only the smallest flinch of her brow giving away any concern she might have. She straightens her posture ever so slightly, her chin lifting in a way that signified her satisfaction. "I'm glad."

He watches as the restrained junior lieutenant looks nervously around the room - he has no idea what he had subjected himself to. The room was full of others that he had now bound his fate with - a collection of people captured and sent to the processing facility from the Empire reclaiming an outpost on Castor that had been infiltrated by the Resistance. These ones had no useful intel, having been nothing more than ground soldiers, so Culber had altered their records to show that they had been disposed of and then transferred them to this section for use in his project.

In this sample selection, there was two of every major race; Andorian, Tellarite, Bajoran, Klingon, Terran and Vulcan. The Vulcans had proved to be most promising, thanks to their advanced neural developments, closely followed by the Terrans - although, this was largely because there was centuries of research on the human brain to build on, and healthy, misbehaving Terrans were much easier to acquire than any other being.

He resumes his work on the screen, adjusting values to test against the last results.

"Prepare the Inducers and send them in."

From the side of his eye, he sees Pollard nod in confirmation and activates a sedative that would keep them silent while they transferred them to the Inducers. He watches as the junior lieutenant sags in his restraints in his final unwitting submission to the fate he had sealed for himself.

“I’ll begin with him.”

With a motion of his hand, he pulls the data off the screen and down into his handheld, pivoting towards the door. He heads towards his dedicated station to prepare for what would be a gruelling and long procedure.

*

The dagger cuts through the air, flying past him. He doesn’t have a spare moment to think about the air that whispers against his skin as it flies dangerously close to his shoulder. He bends his body away from the projectile, and instantly raises his left hand that holds his own knife to parry away the second dagger that makes its way through the air towards him. There’s a sharp clang as metal meets metal, and he knocks it off its trajectory, sending it clattering to the ground.

It’s a diversion, but he sees through that. He drops to a crouch as a sword sings through the air where he had stood. His knife flips in his hand to hold it offensively and he slashes out at just below the knee of his attacker. His assailant howls as the knife cleanly slices its way through the soft tendons, catching on the bone. The attacker falls onto his other knee, his right leg - slashed at the knee - jutting out awkwardly to his side. The blood begins to pool onto the ground. Still, he persists and goes to raise his sword to cut down Culber where he crouches.

With a quick stab, Culber sinks the knife into the side of his ankle. The man screams, and Culber pulls the knife out, then stabs the knife into the attacker’s exposed thigh, knowing he’ll hit the femoral artery. This causes his attacker to drop his sword. He knows that even if he cuts down Culber right in this moment, he will die. There is no help that will come for him quick enough.

As Culber rises, he drags the knife that’s still imbedded in his opponent’s thigh upwards, opening the wound, slowly and agonisingly. He stands fully over his once-attacker, now-pitiful-victim, holding the man’s sword in his hand. He pushes the tip into the golden armoured chestpiece, making the man collapse backwards pitifully.

The attacker is sprawled out beneath Culber in an ever growing pool of his own blood, his body twisted, useless and helpless. Pride was the only thing the man had left, and for how long would that last? He knew he was dying, he knew he would die under the hand of Culber, he knew he was helpless to his now sealed fate. Still, he held back his choked sobs, not wanting Culber to revel in these revelations.

Oh, but Culber knows, he sees it all flash on his face.

So he spits up at him in defiance.

Culber doesn't flinch. It lands square on his cheek and he wipes the blood tainted saliva from his face, smiling a cruel smile down at the fool below him. But it is short lived. The dying man's eyes flicker to behind him, and all too late he hears the footsteps.

Arms around his neck. Holding him, choking him. He lashes out, ramming his elbows into the form behind him. He's hard enough and fast enough that it winds the person holding him. Their grip loosens enough for Culber to drop the sword and grab onto their wrists, pulling them from him. He twists around, twisting the arms with him. He's met with a headbutt that disorientates him and a punch lands in his gut. He stumbles backwards.

He shakes it off.

He looks up just as his new assailant is coming at him with a clenched fist. He meets it, grabbing onto it, yanking it further towards him but slightly off to the side. He rams his other fist into their chest, again, again and again in quick succession. He's met with a jab to the side and a forceful chop to his arm. He lets them out of his grasp and they break away from each other.

Both weaponless, they circle around, sizing each other up. Their eyes remain forcefully locked together, Culber reading the smallest twitches and movements from beyond his focus. Culber takes slow steps towards them, and they take slow steps away from Culber.

His assailant lunges first, attempting to bridge the gap between them and land a blow to Culber's head. They don't get a chance. Culber grabs the oncoming arm and swings the attacker around, using the full force of his body as a counterweight to send them flying. Culber quickly brings his leg up in a practiced motion, conferring all of that velocity into a powerful kick to the attacker's chest. They fall hard, crashing to the ground. There's a beat where the stranger tries to stand, but they lose their footing and slip in the slick, thick pool of blood that has spread out from the first man. By then, it's far too late - Culber descends on them, straddling their waist, holding the stranger down with his legs and forcing his arm across their throat, a mean glint in his eye.

They're punching at Culber's chest, pulling him, trying to destabilize him in a desperate attempt to force him off. They're blinded by fear, and Culber takes advantage of that.

The body of the first attacker only lies several feet away from where they are grappling on the ground.. The dark pool that haloed under him is vast. He's still now.

The hilt of his dagger catches his eye: it lay just beside them, having clearly been cast aside after being torn from the wound. Foolish, but the man wouldn't have survived anyway, and in doing so he chose to embrace death on his own terms.

Culber reaches for it as the assailant tries to push him away, realising at the last second what he's lunging for and desperately trying to pull back Culber's arm from getting a hold of the knife.

He catches it in his fingers, just too far to get a grip, but it spins on its hilt, closer towards his scrabbling hands.

Culber is pulled from his reach when a pair of hands suddenly work their way around his throat, squeezing with a desperate, mighty force. He tenses, holds what remains of his breath and lunges forward, trying to grasp it again.

His fingers dance with the hilt of the blade as it slips and slides just outside of his reach, as the fingers around his throat tighten their grip around his throat.

He tries again, scrabbling with a hint of desperation, but it only slips further away.

Running out of air, he can feel his pulse pound in his head, but his grit only intensifies. He pulls back, trying to break away from the grip around his neck. His attacker was latched on firm, determined to win. Determined to survive.

Not nearly as determined as Culber.

He balls his fists up and slams them up and under the other's arms, relentlessly pounding at them, then one final time as hard he could. It weakened the assailant's grip, and it was enough for Culber to take advantage of. He surged downwards, cracking his head against theirs. In a poor call of judgement, the attacker let go of the chokehold and Culber gasped for air. He knows that he can't spare a moment to stop and praise himself - the attacker would recover from his dazed state at any second.

Culber lunges for the knife. Grips it fully and firmly in his hand. He raises his arm, ready to drive it down. He seizes the man's jaw, pushing it upwards to expose the smooth expanse of skin, and let his arm bring down the blade with its full force into his -

'Simulation Paused. Incoming transmission: Priority one. For security purposes, state your acceptance code.'

The knife pauses mid-air, shimmering in its holographic form, but Culber's fist continues on its dedicated route, going straight through the projection underneath him and coming in contact with the floor. He feels himself fall through the rest of it and winces at his knees hit the floor, the jarring sensation ripping him back into reality.

"Fuck." He swears, steadying himself on the ground with both arms outstretched in-front of him.

Priority one? It had been a long time since he had received a priority call of this calibre.

"Computer accept transmission, clearance *four-nine-one-echo-lima-seven* ." He pants, pushing himself off the floor to stand ready. He stands formally to attention, breathing deeply in an attempt to even out his breath and lower his heart rate.

When the the transmission holograph shimmers into focus, his heart rate spikes with a new kind of tension. His posture stiffens as he salutes, and he bows deeply, ensuring that his eyes

are only trained on the shoes of the figure before him.

“Emperor.”

"Commander Culber." The sound of his own name coming from her sounds alarming to him. It grants him permission to rise, so he does.

" I will keep this short. I'm busy and so it seems-" Her eyes flicker over him, assessing. "-that you are too." As she spoke, her icy tone crawled over his skin and he realises how exposed he is. He is without his armour, without anything other than his training attire, drenched in sweat, and his chest is heaving with exertion. He feels exposed under her scrupulous eyes.

“You’re to be my new Imperial Inquisitor,” she continues on, cutting straight to it. “I believe you met your predecessor earlier today.”

The image of the pale and battered severed head that had sat on his desk earlier flashed in his mind. He simply nods to affirm her statement without offering any more words.

“You will remain on your station, for now.” her over-pronunciation spikes his curiosity, listening even more than before, and watches as she begins to pace, her sharp eyes never leaving his. The dark training floor glows in the wake of where she steps. “All assignments will be deferred to your facility, and you will process them there until my new flagship has completed its construction. A facility will then be built to your specifications and you will transfer there.”

“While the Inquisitor will be your official title and role, I am tasking you with a secondary role.” She pauses in her track, shifts her body to face Culber fully, and moves to rest her hand on the hilt of her sword. “Your discretion regarding it will be imperative to its successes and your longevity in the position. I have *personally* relieved all personnel who have known the truth regarding your new position.”

There’s a pause as she lets that sink in. “There is a traitor among the Elite that wishes to usurp me. I am charging you to smoke them out so that I can prune that weed, and feed their body to my dogs.” Culber watches as her jaw clenches after spitting the last words out. Her assessing eyes pass over him again and Culber fights back a shiver. “You look capable to me, Commander, and that is what I *expect* of you.”

He stands to attention in perfect form as her eyes scan over him. “I give my all to those I serve, Your Highness.”

“I believe that. It is why I chose *you* . The ceremony will be held next week, and I look forward to personally touring this facility of yours.”

“Yes, Emperor.” He salutes stiffly again, and bows deeply. While he’s lowered, he hears the faint static crackle as the holograph dissipates with the ending of the transmission. When he looks back up, it’s to the empty training simulation deck. He lets out the breath he didn’t know that he was holding.

It was real. Not some sick ploy that Lord Alvarez was dragging him into to further himself. *The late Lord Alvarez*. It seemed a few new positions had opened up in high command for the sole reason of keeping his new role - his *true* new role - a secret.

“Computer. Reset simulation, run program Echo-Sierra-seven.”

‘ Generating Program Echo-Sierra-Seven. Standby. ’

As the false environment shimmers into reality around him, it oddly feels more real than the events happening in his life.

*

He idly turns the tumbler in his hands, the golden liquid inside gently sloshing around the glass with his movement, shimmering as it caught the dim lights around him. It looks just about as surreal as the days events have been.

He is backed into a corner again, forced into a position where he had no choice but to embrace it and carve his own way on this new path that had been lain out for him.

His communicator that rests on the table in front of him chimes, and he spares a hand to reach for it. Pollard. He flips it open.

“Speak.”

“Sir. The the results of this batch have just manifested, I’m sending them to you now, they are... Abnormal.”

“In what way?”

“They’re far accelerated in subject four and subject six, a Terran and an Andorian. Even though these were our most promising results yet, ultimately... this round was also a failure, Sir.”

He suppresses a long sigh, clenching his jaw in frustration instead. “What percentage of them are salvageable?”

“None, Sir. They’ve all succumbed to madness.”

“Irreparably?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He taps on the edge of his glass, churning over his options, trying to decide what action to take, knowing the sound of it would ring through the communicator. He looks into the glass, and a face that did not resemble his stares back at him through the distorted amber ripples.

He knows he is left with only one decision. "Kill them all."

"Yes, Sir." The commutator cuts out as Pollard moves to execute his order.

As the silence of his quarters settles back over him, he's overcome with the overwhelming urge to lash out in frustration, to send the glass in his hand flying across the room to smash against the opposite wall, to dispel the distorted face that stared back, taunting him with his failures and judging what he had done. Perhaps he would gain some semblance of satisfaction that *something* had happened the way that he wanted it to, that something had gone right, even if that was as simple as smashing the glass.

He knew that wouldn't help. Who would he even be proving his brutality to? An inanimate object? What a joke. Instead, he closes his eyes and takes several deep, slow breaths and continues to do so until he finds his balance, his grip around the glass easing.

He downs the last of it and with it, the face that haunted him from the amber liquid. He dispelled it, absorbed it, made it part of him. He gets up to wash the glass in his bathroom sink, cleansing it, before returning it to its exact place on the mantle by the decanter.

Falling back into his nightly routine, he resets the night security protocol, then strips off the last of his clothes and checks that his spare dagger is still under his pillow before laying down with the covers cast aside. He stares out the window, watching as the stars beyond glitter in the void, completely indifferent to his life being torn out from under him, the life that had been torn away *for* him, and the lives that he had torn from others today.

When his eyes finally grow heavy, he closes them and slips into the nightly meditation that helps him ease off to sleep. As he drifts off, he is vaguely aware enough to chastise himself for the stray, weak, and childish thought that invades his mind; *Why me?*

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings;

Mentions of torture

Copious mentions of death

Light Violence

Thank you for reading! As always I *really* love your thoughts and feedback, it's tremendously appreciated.

Thank you again to Wolfchasing for your **incredibly** hard work with Beta-ing('n love.)

You can also come find me over at [Aphelyons.tumblr.com](https://aphelyons.tumblr.com) - I post drawings of Culmets stuff I do there too, including Stabbyboos.

Time, Enemy of Mine

Chapter Summary

Oouf, I know it's been a little while since an update. But for compensation about this; here is TWO, longer chapters in this update!! (This being the first - the next will arrive soon! i.e not in several months time lol)

I'm also happy to say that all the pre-written stuff I have *so far* for this story has reached 85K, and still very much going. Which is mind-blowing, never thought I could accomplish this. So there is absolutely so, so, so much left of this story to be told. We're barely getting started now.

In these next few chapters we're going to explore where Culber's current state of mind is, and dip into a little bit of what has made him like this, the effects of brainwashing from the Empire on him - and then we can begin the journey of who he is - which is what I'm most excited to get to. Just gotta establish the base-line first. And then we will get to finally meet Stamets. :Eyes: Soon.

Anyways, I hope you enjoy.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Trigger warning in End Notes

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

He falls from his bed, thrown to the floor as an explosion rocks everything around him. He first knows that he is airborne, and then the full brunt of his harsh new reality hits him - literally - in the face.

As he tries to get back to his feet, to stand up and look out of his window to see what is happening, another explosion goes off, a little more distant this time, and it makes him lose his footing, sending him crashing back to the cold, hard floor.

He can hear a cry from behind him, but due to the tumbling infrastructure outside and the fighter shuttles that tear through the sky, it's practically drowned out.

He tries to push himself up again and this time a strong grip latches onto his arm, hauling him upwards onto his feet. "Hugh!" His mother's big, obsidian eyes looks over him wildly as her hands scramble over his small figure looking for wounds. "You okay, baby?"

Hugh can feel himself nodding, he's not sure why, he doesn't even know if he's okay. Perhaps it's seeing the way those big, loving dark eyes fill with worry and how her long black mane of curly hair falls over her shoulders unrestrained, enveloping them both. It's the comfort he finds in this that compels him to also offer comfort to his mother.

"We have to go, baby, we have to go." She tugs at him urgently, but his feet stay rooted to the spot.

"But, Mami, my -"

"There's no time," she pleads, her voice almost drowned out as another explosion in the distance goes off, violently vibrating the ground under their feet and the buildings that surround them. "We have to go *now, baby*."

Childishly, he struggles free from her grasp and runs back beside his bed, pilfering through the draws that stand beside it, digging and searching.

It wouldn't have been more than fifteen seconds, but strong hands were at his shoulders again, pulling him away. He resists, stubbornly shaking out of her grip.

"*Hugh, baby, please*, we need to go *now*." She tugs at him again, urgently. Hugh has been told many times in his life that he had inherited his stubbornness from his mother, and she was proud of that, except for when it caused them to clash.

"*But, MAMI!* Uncle Mateo made me swear I would never lose it."

And it was at this reminder of the promise that her child made to her late brother, that Hugh sees a thousand thoughts sail across her face in an instant: assessing, reassessing. She glances outside, the conflict outside subsiding for just a moment, and Hugh hopes that it would be enough for her to decide that giving a few moments would be okay. He doesn't waste time looking for her permission, and started digging back around in the drawers - more determined to find what he was looking for.

"Okay." She lets go of Hugh's shoulders, and Hugh faintly hears her checking her weapons, loading, reloading. "Be fast, my little angel"

It only takes a few moments - less than a minute in total - to find what he's looking for; a gruesome lump of twisted precious metal strung on a golden chain. It had been beautiful once, but the man it had belonged to before Uncle Mateo carried it, had died in a horrible way, twisting and making the pendant ugly. His uncle held onto the reminder, until he had passed it down to Hugh, knowing that his own demise was imminent. Hugh's mother knew how much it had meant to her brother: the only reminder of a world worth fighting for.

Hugh hoists his prize high in the air, exclaiming to his mother that he has it. She grabs onto him, pushing him towards the door. A nearby explosion rocks the ground violently under their feet as they flee their family dwelling. His mother cries out in pain as she hits the door frame, using it to keep upright. Hugh is sent sprawling to the ground, too shell-shocked to cry out from the pain. Blinking past the shock, he looks down at himself to see grazes on his palms and knees from the rough, debris littered ground.

It hurts, *it hurts!*

His heart falters as he realises he's no longer holding the necklace. It had flown out of his hand out onto the pathway. Hugh scrambles to reclaim it. This time he hangs it around his neck, and tucks it safely under his shirt. His mother grabs him by the arm, hard, and pulls him up and down the rubble littered street.

They're both moving fast through the streets of the makeshift camp that they had been living in for a couple of years now. It had become home to him and was the longest that he had ever lived anywhere, but now it was being ravished by battle. A fighter jet screams overhead as they duck and weave through the alleyways that Hugh had come to know so well, running and playing war with other children. The war has come to them now, and he recognises the enemy's ships from the toys that they had constructed with scraps from the laboratories. His mother's hand is firm on his back as she pushes him down the alley. He slows his pace as they run past a group of people that lay dead, covered in blood and dust. He recognises two of them, the brothers - twins - of one of his friends. The other that he did not recognise wore the unkempt clothes of a rebel. Hugh's mother's hand presses hard and insistently on his back. He speeds up again, and they press on.

Hugh tries to push them from his mind as his mother guides him through the streets. They pass more and more bodies as they run closer to the outskirts, dashing through streets that Hugh doesn't know - where is she taking him? He doesn't know, and he can't spare the breath to ask, but he trusts her. He hopes that she is taking him to his father.

A few twists and turns later, a man ducks out from a connecting pathway, nearly crashing into Hugh and his mother. The man does a double-take as he instinctively draws his weapon to face them, but powers down his rifle as Hugh watches recognition flash across his face.

"Papa!" His child-like excitement to see his father is unquelled by the horror around him. He breaks free of his mother's hold and wraps himself around his father's waist.

But his father does not share the same enthusiasm. Instead, he pushes Hugh off and grabs onto Hugh's mother, his eyes wild. His hair is singed and... is that blood?

“Where were you?” He demands, but as soon as Hugh’s mother opens her mouth, he shakes his head and talks before she can. “It doesn’t matter. It’s too late. They’re right behind, come on, *come on, faster, Hugh.*”

Hugh recognises what his father is doing as they race and wind through the narrow backstreets. He had taught him this as soon as he knew how to run. It was a game they played, trying to find and lose each other in the winding alleyways wherever they lived. His father had always won, until recently.

“We have to make it to the other launch bay, they took out the shuttle at the north docks” He explains as they run, cutting and weaving through the streets.

Before they reach the end of the narrow street they’re on, Hugh’s father comes to an abrupt stop. He is a tall and muscular man, the alleys were so narrow and low that his figure dominated the space. His silhouette is haloed by a blazing light shining from whatever had caused his father to stop at the end of the alleyway. Hugh peeks around his father's legs, and his eyes go wide as he looks at the source of the bright light.

The metal sign of the medical structure that his mother often worked in is twisted inwards, piercing the structure and breaking it open. From where the building is torn, open flames billow outwards, rising higher than what was left of the structure. It had been cracked open like an egg. He watches in horror as the limbs of those who had tried to escape the inferno burn, spilling out onto the street in front of it. He spent many evenings there - he knew these people. Now he’ll never forget them - or at least he’ll never forget the distinct scent of their burning flesh, reaching him even from afar.

His sight is cut off by a large group of people - humans and aliens alike - running past, all clad in the roughly hewn uniforms of the rebellion. They run past, uncaring, crushing a few charred limbs into nothing as if those people didn’t matter. It dawns on him, that to them, they do not matter. He can feel his heart beginning to burn hotter than the flames that had engulfed those people.

His father goes to turn them back, to run the other way, but a hand on his shoulder stops him.

His mothers eyes are glowing a luminescent green. They do this when she activates her ocular implants - a special modification she had designed herself, so he knew she was reading the heat signatures of those who approached. He’s never seen her use this outside of the infirmary, except for when they played and she cheated. Then, they would laugh at this, but he is not laughing now.

“I can see them,” his mother says, looking through the buildings, unblinking. “They’re coming, Roman, and there’s no way out.”

Hugh had never been sure why his mother had those eyes, but right now he recognises that this advantage might mean getting away. Maybe.

A look crosses his father's face, and it is a look that he will not understand for many years. He will come to realise that it was the expression of someone who knows that their entire

world is about to be taken away from them.

Right now they have only one choice, and it is not in their favour.

“Nadia, take Hugh, hide. Please.”

Choices are being made outside of his control, he can only wait as his parents desperately plan these last few moments. “I will hide Hugh, but I will not let you fight them alone.”

“Papa? Mami?” He pleads out, but neither acknowledges if they hear him.

His mother drags him into a small alcove a few paces from where they stand, crammed with a small pile of boxes and discarded tarps.

“Baby, stay here, okay? Can you promise Mami, and keep that promise like you did with Uncle Mateo?”

He nods, not knowing what else to do while he’s being held so tightly by her that he feels like he might break. It hurts, she’s hurting him, but what she’s suggesting hurts even more.

“If Papa and I don’t come get you... once it’s quiet, when it’s safe, you run far from here, okay? Do you promise?”

He nods. She shakes him. “Promise me, Hugh.”

“I promise, Mama.”

She kisses his forehead, then holds his face close to hers, her gaze is intense and unwavering. “Trust no one, Hugh,” She implores him with an unrestrained desperation that he has never seen her display before.

She hugs him one last time, and he holds onto her as tightly as he can, too. Then she pulls away, throws the tarp over him, and is gone.

The moments that pass next seem to drag out forever. He listens as his mother’s phaser charges up and he imagines her strong and resolute stance: the same one she takes when he watches her train. Then the buzz of charge from his father's favourite rifle, and Hugh envisions him standing tall behind his mother, the rifles length jutting out over her shoulder and he would have his knife in his hand, ready to strike.

He had often imagined his parents in battle, as the strong and capable warriors that he saw them as, that he admired when he watched either of them train. He believes that no one is as formidable a duo as them. But the reality is suddenly all too frightening for a young boy, now that he can hear the approaching footsteps of the soldiers that pursue them. On the way here, he’d seen the bodies of all those who had lost. He curls into himself tighter to stop his trembling.

Don't let it show. Don't let them see.

He can't tell who fires first. But the sounds of the conflict begins, and it's loud and terrifying. He does not dare peek out of his hiding spot, but he can hear the guttural screams and dying groans of people that he does not know. He knows their defeat by the sounds of their weapons dropping, clattering to the ground as they die. When his father cries out, Hugh's heart pounds in his chest, pulling his legs closer again to his chest, willing that his father isn't dead.

He hears one of the enemies let out a blood curdling battle cry - whatever they were - they weren't Terran - but his mother matches it in ferocity as she roars back at the combatant.

"Give it up, Terran," He hears a disgusting sound as the non-Terran spits. "Look around you. You've lost. Your reign in this sector is over."

"Our reign? Look at what you have caused, look at the death that surrounds you, look at the lives of innocents that you've taken. You've invaded our home, you've *destroyed* our home..." he hears a click, and the sound of a charging weapon. But whose phaser? The uncertainty makes him hold his breath.

"No one is innocent under your regime. We know what this facility was, and that ends with you!"

He hears his mother's strained laughter. "No, we're the ones who will end you, vermin."

There's two shots. Then a single, wet, thud. Then, silence. The only noise that remains, beyond these alley walls, was that of the continuing battle for their city. Hugh can't know for certain who won, who lost. But he hopes, *he hopes*.

He waits, huddled in his hiding spot. He freezes in place as footsteps approach.

His father pulls off the tarp. Overcome with relief, Hugh springs up, instantly wrapping himself around his father's thick legs. They're warm, and ... wet? He pulls away and looks down over himself, seeing that his skin and clothes are now mottled with blood. Some of it is his father's, and some definitely isn't.

He doesn't get the chance to think more of it, as his mother takes his hand and leads them in a sprint. When he exits the alcove he had hidden in, being pulled along by his mother, he catches glimpses of the enemies that his parents had fought against. Or what is left of them. It's too much of a mess to take in, but the strewn limbs and splattered innards were enough to paint a picture of what happened. A fallen Andorian, with a wound so severe that half of his face is missing and his only glassy, dead eye is staring towards nothing. Hugh has to jump over the large, spreading pool of deep blue blood so he doesn't slip over as they run out of the alley.

His parents won, and that's all that matters, so he pushes the images from his mind as they run through the streets again. His father is now struggling to keep pace, hanging just slightly behind them. Hugh can see that he has wounds all over him.

They pass so many scenes just like the one that they had just fled. Most of the bodies, however, are of their own people. They had not been as lucky.

The streets open up into a main road - it's usually a busy and congested thoroughfare, but now, it's devoid of people. It's eerie and unsettling. And now, time is their enemy. They no longer have the luxury of keeping to sheltered side streets and alleys; they have to reach the western shuttle dock.

After just a few short moments of them running down this wide street, the strangest sensation comes over Hugh. The air around them suddenly shifts and changes, the feeling only perceptible by touch, but something about it resonates deep within Hugh, telling him that something wasn't right.

As they run together, it's as if the air has become electric while simultaneously being sucked out from around them, leaving them in some strange, static, silent void.

And then it happens.

Within the span of several long, minuscule moments, time comes for them.

First, it had been the air, static and strange. Then, it is his mother and father, stopping abruptly in front of him. He barely has enough time between that moment and the next to crash into her legs before his arm gets yanked around, back in the direction that they had come from. His vision slows - everything is happening in a strange slow-motion. Every second within this strange static, heavy silence becomes stretched out. As he is torn back once more, he watches, struck by awe and a profound, sickening terror at the horror that rolls towards them.

He has been alive for less than eight years. It is still a couple months until his birthday, and for all the worldly knowledge he has witnessed and gained within these short few years - this wall of rolling, tumbling fire that rises into the sky, higher than the buildings themselves, as high the jets fly... He recognises this as death, he knows this as hell. And it's coming for them.

He is less than eight years old, and he had thought that if you were less than eight years old, you can't die. But that's not how death works. For all the death that he had been witness to throughout his life, all of it seemed so detached from him. It isn't until this very moment that he abruptly comes to know and understand his own mortality. His world is about to be over, he is about to die, and he hasn't even had his eighth birthday yet.

He sprints as fast as his parents, yet when he glances behind him, it makes his legs feel ineffective and like lead. The oncoming hellscape is gaining on them faster than they can move.

Suddenly, he's met with a force that tears the joints in his arms, and he's swept up, off his feet. The force propels him forward faster than his legs can carry him. His little body twists in the air as he tries to look back. What he sees is his that it was his father who had thrown

him forwards with everything that he had left. He sees his father sink to his knees, spent entirely.

Hugh sails over the nearby ledge of the pier. From his short vantage point, he hadn't even realised they were close, but his father had. The last thing he sees before his body crashes into the water is the last time he will ever see his parents. His father, collapsed on the ground, and his mother stretching out towards him. Her long, beautiful, densely curled hair billows forward as the rush of fire and heat meets them from behind, engulfing them entirely.

In the next moment, he falls deep into the water. He's pushed far below the surface from the sheer force of his impact, and he watches as the fiery wall lights up the surface, bubbling furiously. The wall of flame rushes over him in an angry, unforgiving, indiscriminate show of destruction.

The pendant of his late Uncle Mateo drifts in front of his face, reminding him - taunting him - of how a few more precious seconds could have saved his mother and his father from their fiery deaths. In the muffled silent waters in which he now floats, he is confronted with his new truth: he is alone.

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Chapter End Notes

Chapter Trigger Warnings;

Warzone

Air-Raids

Bombings

Light gore

Copious mentions of death and corpses

Parental Deaths

BABEY CULBER DOO DOO DOO

Thank you for reading! As always, I really, really love your thoughts and feedback. I appreciate it a lot.

Thank you again to [Wolfchasing](#) for all the super hard work you put into Beta-ing this chapter.

You can also come find me over at [Aphelyons.tumblr.com](#) - I post drawings of Culmets stuff I do there too, including of the Stabbyboos.

Her Steel Becomes Our Blood

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings In End Notes.

Hellooo long chapter. This instalment is the second piece for the baseline where Culber is in current day. Not a good egg, but he's got things to learn yet.

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

Culber jolts awake from his dream so hard that he feels the shock pass through his body as if he were reliving that plunge into the water. His eyes snap open, followed by his hand immediately finding the hilt of his blade that sticks out from underneath his pillow, where it lays in wait, always ready. Blade in hand, his eyes scan over the dimly lit features of his room. It's lit only by faint wisps of light from the out-of-sight sun. He carefully takes in all the faintest impressions and variances in the light and shadows, searching for anything out of place, for anything or anyone that might lurk there.

Nothing is there.

He holds his breath, letting a perfect silence fall over the room, and listens. But still, there is nothing.

He is alone.

Easing himself up, although not letting go of his dagger - not yet - he swings his legs over the edge of the bed and sighs deeply. The ghosts in his mind subside with each breath that he takes. He commands the lights to rise as he places his blade back in its position, and makes his way into the bathroom.

The lights adjust as he enters, his figure slowly becoming illuminated in the circular mirror as he walks towards it. He leans his hands on the smooth, cool, dark slate that surrounds the basin, and looks into the glass, waiting as the light that frames it continues to adjust the brightness.

He is thankful that his lack of sleep is not showing, but the past week have been full of turmoil. So he washes any remnants of that away with bitingly cold water.

So many of his nights have been spent in the facility. The conflict between the Empire and the Resistance on Castor was raging on more intensely than ever before, with the violence from both sides increasing noticeably with each passing day as each faction grew desperate to overcome the other.

His jaw is painful from how much it has remained clenched through this trying week. His knuckles are raw and sensitive from the sheer amount of times he's had to regenerate his skin from where he had torn it off during sparring sessions in the few moments he has to himself. The easiest way for him to relieve the smallest iota of tension was through punching it out. The pressure on his facility is immense, and he is feeling the weight of this and the looming visit from the Emperor herself.

The fact that they're struggling to gain the upper hand in these conflicts, combined with the Resistance showing an infuriating, unwavering resilience to the Empire's efforts to squash them and drive them out of this sector for good, proves one truth to Culber: that there is absolutely a rat amongst them.

Even if the Emperor hadn't tasked him with this same problem, he would have been determined to take them out before their treachery ruins everything - ruins everything he's worked for. It is not the first time someone has tried to undermine the Empire, seeking a glory that is too great for them to bear. It's certainly not the first time that the Resistance has tried to infiltrate the Empire's ranks either. Over the years, Culber has personally plucked countless weeds that grew through the cracks.

Either way, the Resistance on Castor has been a contentious issue aboard the station for all personnel, whether they dealt in whispers or were sent to the frontlines. Rat or no rat, the Resistance is consistently ahead of the game, despite their chaotic, inconsistent attacks.

He punches down onto the solid slate under his hands, and the pain in his already sensitive knuckles flare up, rushing up his arm. The War Generals that oversee this conflict are proving to be particularly incompetent, and he'll be damned if it costs him his life in the end. He sneers at himself. If only Project Artemis was ready; it's exactly the kind of tool that they need right now - a tool that is designed to dismantle their enemies from the inside, to strike them down before they ever get the chance to try their hand at attacking the Empire.

Oh, yes. He's confident that this would be of great interest to the Emperor. If only it were ready.

But it's not, the conflict rages on, unconquered, and she is due to arrive today.

His eyes shift over to the neatly folded uniform resting on the side of the vanity. The deep red seems markedly vibrant against the rich black of the bench it lays on, and the silver embellishments glisten as a muted accent under the dim lights that encircle the mirror. What comes to mind is all the new dangers that he will have to adjust to, and he thinks of the pieces of armour that sit back on the mantle in his room.

It's the last day that he will ever wear this simple uniform. Several containers had been delivered to his quarters a few nights ago, containing all the components of his new uniform. He'd only opened them long enough to catch a glimpse of what was inside, before pushing the containers aside for another day. He would rather face that reality on the day that it matters the most, lest those thoughts become distracting. Distraction is something that he can *never* afford.

Although, from what he had glimpsed within the boxes, there certainly was a considerably higher amount of silver.

Accompanying the boxes was a flatter, longer, and more ornately embellished crate. When he had opened this one, he did not push it aside. Instead, he took the hilt of the long bladed sword that lay within. Delighting in the beauty of it, he brushed his fingers down the length of it adoringly. It was *perfectly* measured to the length of his arm. He swung it around in a succession of short and well trained moves, marvelling at how it sung as he cut through the air. It felt *perfectly* attuned to his practised movements. It was *perfectly* balanced and weighted correctly in accordance to him and responded to his every movement with a synchronicity that told him that this blade had been made *very* specifically for him. The workmanship was undeniable.

He had sheathed it again, and traced his fingers over all the finely crafted details inlaid within the blade's handle and scabbard. He had bitten his lip in a weak attempt to hold back a smile from the childish glee that it had elicited from him.

Sure, it may have been simply part of the uniform, but it made it no less of a beautiful gift. With great reluctance, he had returned it back to its box, as both he and the blade would have to wait for the day he was officially allowed to have it by his side.

And now, that day has come. Tomorrow will be the first full day that he will wield this new symbol of his power. In truth, it will be more than just his symbol, it will become his tool to showcase his unyielding strength and devotion to serving his Empire, and he *will* wield that with the same deftness as his blade. May those who come in its path - *in his path* - come to fear him, even if it is the last thing they know. Yes, with this sword, he will wield a great deal more power. It's more than just a pretty plaything.

If he makes it through today.

That wipes the smile off his face. He doesn't spare any pause for thought in the mirror to reflect any further on that. Regardless of how the day turns out it will be his last in this uniform, one way or another. Nervous energy is dangerous energy, so he pushes it down during his daily ritual as he puts on his commanders armour one last time and gains control over himself again.

However he does pause, if only for a second, as he passes the mantle in his lounge. The low lights cast a gleam off his uncle's pendant, where it hangs on display. These days he usually passes it entirely unnoticed, but in the revelation of the dreams that were sent to haunt him last night, it catches his eye.

A single second, and a scowl is all he spares it. He moves on. He has work to do.

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The atmosphere throughout the entire station feels as though it has been blanketed in a thick oppressive fog. As Culber walks his route to his facility the air is heavy with tension, and that tension doesn't at all lessen among his staff when he finally reaches his destination. If anything, his arrival amplifies it. The anticipation of the Emperor's imminent arrival is palpable. Some folk wear their concerns more openly while others wear an air of smugness and are clearly over-eager to please. The latter evidently have a lot less experience in being within the presence of the Emperor than those who are intimidated.

His daily rounds through the entire facility provide him with a sense of satisfaction. They yield promising results. His staff have conducted their duties with meticulous thoroughness under his acutely scrutinous eye and those of his most senior staff. They are all too aware of the high price if they were to under-perform, if there were any shortcomings. Especially today. Their results forestall any punishments from Culber - and so, the facility is performing immaculately, much to his delight. They are ready.

Commander Pollard hands a data PADD over to Culber, containing the details of the strategic route she has orchestrated to guide the Emperor on. Culber notes that she's made sure that the sections dedicated to Project Artemis have been excluded.

They're acutely aware of the risks of keeping a secret like this from the Emperor. It is immensely dangerous, but the project simply is not ready to be unveiled yet. They know that the risk of unveiling it too early and ultimately having it fail would bring shame and disgrace to their - really Culber's - name. That and the price of disappointing the Emperor comes at a cost. In the chance that it is exposed, a scapegoat has been pre-selected to take the fall. Culber does not want it to come to that, the project is too important, but these measures must be taken.

He assesses and reevaluates - making a few adjustments to the overall planned tour - as he leaves the facility, making his way to the station's eastern-most shuttle bay to greet the Emperor.

The station has several shuttlebays, most of which are for small craft; shuttles and transfer shipments to be processed through. A few of the slightly larger shuttlebays housed their fighter crafts. The Eastern bay is situated on the direct opposite side of the station from Culber's facility, and is the largest port that they had, and the only one that was large enough to accomodate the Emperor's craft.

The Overseer assigned to this station had managed the preparations needed for the arrival of the Emperor, everything needed to make a perfect impression on her - especially to counter the inadequacies of the War Generals. Would she see through this as a distraction, or an effort wasted on frivolously 'prettying up' the place, Culber wonders cynically as he winds his way through the long, dimly lit corridors.

Regardless, the floors were polished to a high sheen, the port was cleared of all thoroughfare, incoming ships diverted to other, smaller, ports - anything urgent would have to seek alternative logistics solutions over the coming week. Finally, in a glorious finishing embellishment, the massive red banners that are adorned with the Imperial emblem, were replaced with new, identical, pristine versions and hung all along the walls within the eastern port. They reach from the high ceilings - a space large enough to house a constitution class starship, and pool on the black mirrored floor like spilled blood.

While the port was undergoing its refurbishment a few days ago, Culber had paid it a visit, walking through the formal arrangements with the high ranking officers that would be part of the welcome committee. His lowly rank of Commander caused a few disapproving looks amongst those he amongst and would be standing with on the day, but he paid them no particular interest outside of silently noting who they were, lest they become a direct threat to him in the imminent future.

While they had been walking past one of the massive banners, outlining dry protocol for the lower ranked personnel who will be in attendance, a worker fell from the hover scaffolding while adjusting a banner. It was from such a great height that he died on impact, Culber didn't need his medical background to know that, pooling blood staining the fabric of the banner that couldn't cushion his fall, ruining it.

Despite the obvious fact that the dead man was beyond help, a medical team was dispatched and onsite within a minute, in their red and silver uniforms that were not entirely unlike Culber's. While he watches them tending to the corpse, he is reminded of the choices he made to pull himself away from that dull track for the thousandth time. Their uniforms may be similar, but they are nothing alike. He is at least inspired by his work and it is the reason he's standing here amongst the high ranking officers - and soon to be joining them - rather than mopping up blood from useless bumbling idiots who can't even do their job right.

Culber walks along the furthest most thoroughfare channel leading towards the Eastern Port. The windows beside him stretch from floor to ceiling the entire way - the tallest point being where they connect to the Ports walls, and the shortest being where it slopes downwards to the entry points. The light of the system's sun shines brightly through the window panes, illuminating each of the many busy thoroughfare lanes, casting shadows and dancing light through each of the panels that separate the lanes via ornately tempered glass and patterned metal frames.

Despite the usually hectic pace of these lanes, watching how the light dances off the personnel who scamper through this area usually relaxes Culber, as much as he can within an

open space filled with this many people.

When the light is suddenly cut out completely, casting a dark shadow on the hall, it makes him and all those around him stop in their tracks. The artificial lighting inside adjusts to accommodate the sudden lack of light, and an uneasy silence falls over the entire area. The tension rising once again as everyone looks towards the disturbance.

It was the Emperor's city sized ship dropping out of warp and blocking the sun out entirely.

So, she has arrived. She will be making her way to the station, imminently.

Culber picks up his pace, as do most others. The tension of the announcement of her visit had brought is amplified, evident in the uncomfortable hush that continues, and the solemn faces of people he passes.

Rows of perfectly manicured Terran Empire officers form the impressively large welcoming party, encircling the landing pads in a crescent. There is a break at the anterior, where the most senior officers of the station stand in wait. Their superiority marked by their impressive uniforms dripping in gold and commendations that were pinned to their breastplates. Culber can smell their egos from where he stands in the entryway to the bay.

Walking into the hanger, past the lowly officers, and into the high ranking committee, he has to wipe off the smug grin that plays at his mouth. His assigned placement is standing at the head of the party alongside the station's First Captain herself - notably placed in a spot of greater importance than those behind him, who currently outrank him, as their starkly different uniforms made plain. It serves as a nice little bolster to his own ego, and wonders what the lower ranking personnel that encircle them think of this. He stands out, after all.

As Culber takes the helm at the head of the welcoming committee the station's First Captain gives him a tight lipped, stern nod of acknowledgement. Culber notices just how heavily decorated she is, glancing over the badges that adorn her gold-embossed breastplate. Next to the Captain, and slightly behind on the other side, stands the General who has been stationed here temporarily, and is head War General in the defence of Castor. He too, is heavily decorated - although from this distance, and this angle, Culber cannot make out the specific honours that have been awarded to him. It is clear enough that he wears them with pride - based on how far he puffs out his chest. Culber wonders how heavily this visit is truly playing on his mind despite not showing any of that concern visibly. Although, if he sticks that chest of his out any further, it'll expose his neck.

Next to the General, and slightly behind again on the opposite side, are two pallid, ferret looking men - twins, by the look of it - both of whom are far less adorned and dressed in silver and black. The only accolade that decorate both of them, fittingly, is the 'master of poisons' pin.

Culber is all too aware of all the eyes on him, standing as he is in such a prominent position,

out in front before all of these more heavily decorated and highly ranked personnel, wearing only a lowly commander's uniform. Despite his current disposition giving him an ego boost, he still feels entirely underdressed, under-ranked, and *underpowered* .

His mind wanders to the thought of the sword that lay in a box back in his quarters, and the extravagant new uniform that he will be wearing full-time as of tomorrow. He wonders if he will still feel this phantom feeling of being under-ranked, having been so newly appointed, when in the presence of the very same company a day later. What a difference a day could make. Would they then accept him? Perhaps, but he wouldn't hold his breath. Culber will be just another threat, and one that has risen so quickly. Perhaps they already consider him one, as he is especially a threat to anyone amongst his company who carry dangerous secrets - if exposed prematurely - could end them.

Culber fixes a hard stare on the shuttle that's approaching beyond the forcefield. It's... admittedly a far cry from the ship they were expecting, but no matter. This was still their most grand and impressive port to welcome the Emperor aboard in, smaller ship or not.

The Emperor's shuttle breaks through the forcefield that stands between them and empty space, and Culber watches with mild amusement as the rows of personnel that encircle the landing bay all promptly stiffen, and move with perfect conditioning, to stand to attention. They're so compactly and precisely positioned that when they move, their black shining uniforms and armoured plates ripple like a sea of black water.

The hammering of boots shifting on the hard floor, drowns out the sound of Culber's heart hammering in his chest. He doesn't - and can't - let it show, and stoically moves into position as the rest of the elite ranked members of his party do the same.

He stands as still and as proud of his position and his Empire, as any of his colleagues. Although he faintly wonders how many others within this room are more apprehensive of what might come of this visit. He isn't alone in that thought, he is sure of that, but how much did they have to lose compared to him?

The locks of the shuttle hiss as the seals release opening the hatch door. A loud metallic thud of the ramp hitting the floor is the only sound to be heard within the bay. Everyone else falls into an obedient and heavy silence, in anticipation. The reality sinking in that the Emperor is about to step off her ship. Once the echoing sound fades, the only thing Culber hears is the sound of his own heart, beating loudly.

After the longest few seconds, comes the cold glint of a metallic surface reflecting out of the darkness.

Then, there is gold, steel and a menacing glower.

The Emperor saunters down the ramp in long, purposeful strides. Her lengthy, extravagant high collared cloak flows out behind her. In no way does it make her look delicate, if anything it only pronounces her stature, and her power. Her ornate art-deco breastplate, tight black leather pants and heeled boots seemed comparatively ordinary in comparison to her extravagant cloak. However the authority she wields is without question, and is anything other than ordinary.

She is flanked by her security team comprised of six members, each clad in black and bronze embellished armour and hard set faces that match the Emperor's own.

The Emperor's hand doesn't move from where it's resting on the pommel of her bloodthirsty, ornate sword as she scans and assesses the room as she walks past the rows of officers that line the walkway made for her. Her other hand swings freely by her side encased in the long flowing sleeves of her cloak. Culber discerns that she is wearing bladed claws, from how they catch the light each time it swings forward. Like everyone, he has heard the rumours of her ferocity in combat, although he has yet to witness it for himself. He's unsure if he ever wants to, but warrior to warrior it would prove to be an interesting insight.

The rows upon rows of personnel salute her, banging their balled up right fists into the left side of their chest as if they were driving an invisible dagger into their hearts, then flinging their arm outstretched, high in front of them, releasing their clenched fist as if dropping the invisible daggers in submission to their fate. A symbol of their submission to the Empire, even in death.

The Emperor just passes by, indifferent to their displays of allegiance, seemingly ignoring them as she strides with intent towards the greeting party - towards Culber. On noticing her indifference towards the lowly ranked officers showing their allegiance, Culber fights down a smug smirk. He knows they will have to hold this position until dismissed, or the Emperor leaves the room. Culber again finds mild amusement in the thought of how long they may have to maintain that pose, how long they will have to fight their own wills to keep their screaming muscles from falling and face the consequences of their ineptitude and disrespect.

The Captain is approached first, and she salutes in perfect form to her Emperor. Impassively, the Emperor's hard eyes flick over to look at Culber. She sizes him up, looking him up and down, just like she had in their holo-communication a few weeks prior.

"Commander Culber, you will accompany us to the War Council. Then afterwards, you will show me this facility of yours." There was no room for budging, it was no request. "It's reputation precedes you, unlike that of some others." Her curt words are as sharp as glass, her cold eyes momentarily giving way to a glimpse of the fury that seethes underneath them. Culber wouldn't be the only one to notice that he is the first that she addresses.

Within the heavy silence that the Emperor's presence commands, the faint noise of a boot shifting against the hard floor is amplified far beyond what was normally perceptible. The Emperor's eyes snapping towards who made the noise, Culber watches as her jaw shifts in irritation.

"Let's not waste time." She commands, evidently swallowing down the fury that is bubbling under the surface. The kind of fury that can only surface violently, and that was likely to happen imminently.

The Senior officers and Culber fall in behind the Emperor, with the security team flanking the sides of the party as they leave the shuttlebay behind. The Captain walks alongside the Emperor leading the way to the War Council's chamber. They exchange details amongst themselves so quietly they are privy only to them.

*

“You’ve grown soft, General.” the Emperor's words tear at the man. “I appointed you to oversee the eradication of this infestation, and yet you’ve proven yourself incapable of squashing a bug.”

All eyes within the War Council turn towards the War General. He keeps his own face unreadable, as if the scathing comments from the Emperor simply wash off him, ineffective. At least that’s how it would seem to most - oh, but Culber notices. He watches his face for a few short seconds and sure enough it twitches in the smallest ways that give away his fear so plainly. How curious, even a man as powerful as the General himself cowers under the scrutiny of the Emperor, and he’s right to do so. Like any sane person, he still fears disappointing the Emperor and what might be his face if he is to do so. He knows his place. Or perhaps, just now, he is re-learning it again after having gone too long without her presence to remind him of it.

Ah, yes, that’s more likely the true reason for her visit. It serves as a reminder for Culber to keep his own ego in check. The visit really is to remind all the personnel on this Station of her ever watchful presence, and that anyone will be held accountable for their failures and discretions against her Empire. Especially for the Generals who have been overseeing this - so far - unresolved and ongoing conflict on Corvan.

“New tactics have to be explored, your Highness. The Corvan rebel factions - and they are factions - are each operating under a seemingly different leadership and tactics. They have been adapting too readily to our own shift of tactics in our counter strikes.” He keeps his eyes trained on the Emperor, his face stony in his delivery, but Culber can just see from his own vantage point, how his hands were turning white from how hard he is clasping them behind his back.

“I am looking for solutions, not excuses, *General*,” she snarls his title at him in such a way that suggests that she is questioning if he even deserves it. “Besides, this suggests that there is a traitor amongst you,” her eyes scan everyone in the room, sizing everyone up. “Extermination is the only solution I’m interested in.”

“Of course, Emperor, I -” was as far as he got before Emperor Gerogiou’s sword slashes cleanly through his throat, leaving him to gargle and choke on metal and blood before she kicks him in his chest. He falls to the ground in a gargling heap, and his death comes swiftly. It’s probably more than he deserves.

Culber seizes up. Partially because of the sudden execution, partially at the sheer speed and precision with which the General had been struck down. He’s heard rumours of the Emperor's

skill and speed, but as with all rumours he could only assume a level of exaggeration to her ability - as is the nature of rumours. However, in this moment; that assumption was proven wrong. If anything the rumors had been vastly under-exaggerated.

She wipes the blade down with the length of her sleeve, not minding to mark her finery with blood. "Congratulations," she says dryly, turning to the Admiral that stands opposite to the fallen General, whose head snaps up to attentively now that the Emperor's attention was on her "You've just been promoted, *General* Ogord."

The newly appointed General Ogord respectfully salutes and bows deeply out of formality. "I will honour you, my Emperor."

"Of course you will," The Emperor sheaths her sword unimpressed, or unphased perhaps, and turns back to address the rest of the Council. "Anyone else have any solutions?"

"I have one, your Highness," Culber pipes up, drawing himself taller.

"I'm not here to nanny you, speak," she snaps, impatiently.

Internally, Culber cringes at his unfamiliarity to War Council proceedings, but he stands sure and tall, moving the holographic map that was on display before them to showcase a region.

"We strike to the east of this mountain range. There's an encampment set up on a plateau on the mountain. But first we'll need to take out the comms relays, here, and here -" he points to them on the projected map " - and place disruptors here, and here. This will ensure that they cannot beam in or out and any backup that they might try to rally will be unable to reach them. They will be completely cut off and vulnerable to our strikes."

"There are no camps there," another General scoffs, it's one of the ferret looking twins, "we don't have any intel on that, besides -"

"Where do you think your intel comes from, General?" Culber cuts him off, earning him a withering stare. ' *Know your place* ' it says. Except, Culber knows exactly where his place is, perhaps it's the General who needs to re-learn exactly where his is. "Earlier this morning we extracted new information from captives that were taken last week from the eastern shore encampment, 200 klicks from these mountain camps, here." he shifts the map slightly again, and points to the location. "They were more resilient to my tactics than most, so my suspicion is that they're hiding something important in those mountain camps. I suggest we move in and find out exactly what that is."

"That's an aggressive strategy, Commander." The Emperor eyes him, pleased. "Perhaps I should have considered promoting you to the War Council instead."

"I didn't know there was an opening." He says, playing along, glancing down at the body of the now-dead ex-General.

"Oh, I would have made sure of it."

It feels dangerous, and it fills him with a rush of adrenaline. He knows that he is flirting with danger, flexing like this in front of those who greatly outrank him. It dangles his obvious favour, however long it will last, from the Emperor in front of them. He knows that he will have to walk the line carefully while establishing his presence amongst this new calibre of ranks, he can only parade the worth that the Emperor saw in him so much. He has to be careful not to overplay his hand before he winds up dead, only ending up having played a very short game within the Elite. No, he is a survivor, and he is determined to do just that, outplaying them all. Regardless, he won't deny himself from walking close to those edges, getting those thrills - they are small reminders that he is still alive in the game that's being played.

"I expect what was discussed here to be put into action immediately." The Emperor says turning away from him, with a finality in her voice that indicates that the council is over, "General Ogord, move your troops into position, and await my orders to strike."

"Yes, Emperor." She bows, obediently.

"Everyone is dismissed. Except you, Commander Culber. I want you to stay."

He stands firm in his position at the table, standing to attention as everyone else moves out. She's staring at him, and he doesn't know where to look, so he mostly watches the other attendees as they walk out. He supposes that this might be something he'd have to become more accustomed to in the very imminent future.

He catches a few of the Council's attendees looking at him. Some looked jealous, others simply furious. Whether it is from the attention and praise he is being given within the meeting, or from their assessments that he is unworthy to be among them, Culber doesn't know. Perhaps it's simply because of the fact that the Emperor herself has singled him out for a one-on-one conversation, in private, but there is no way to be sure. Not one of them looks back, and certainly no one looks at the corpse of the ex-General.

When just the two of them remain, the silence that hangs thick in the air between them is heavy and he's not sure what, if anything, he can discern from it.

"You looked startled at the turn of events during the council." Her near casual start almost takes him off guard.

"I've seen worse." he imparts truthfully. "I've done worse."

"I'm sure you have, *Doctor* ." She turns off the holo-map, and the emblem of the Empire flickers back in its place, hovering in the air between them and bathing them with intense red light. "To people who deserve it."

"He deserved it." he admits in sanction.

"Don't we all." her twisted cold smile is amplified by the illumination of the harsh red holographics. "Now, show me this extraction facility of yours where you mess with minds."

*

Emperor Georgiou's presence within the facility is unmistakably felt by all. His faculty teams perform beautifully, showcasing the best of their best, and what happens to the worst. The Emperor is notably amused by that.

They run through an inspection of the facility together, along with a lone member of the Emperor's security liaison - with her long dark dread-locked hair, sternly set face, and sharp piercing eyes following silently behind them the entire way. The Emperor listens to his plans of what kind of space he would like to see aboard the construction of her new Flagship, and she ensures him that it is a priority to have an establishment as efficient as this one onboard. She hints at a further expansion of the Empire, and that requires a lot of use for processing facilities and inevitably extraction facilities like this one.

"In regards to the tactics you shared in the Council," she veers off-subject stepping into Culber's office. Instantly, she makes her way to the helm of *his desk*, and Culber is left standing as if he is a visitor in his own office. "I will be sending along a new weapon I have acquired in my arsenal. I want to test it out for the first time."

"What kind of weaponry are we looking at?" This in particular piques Culber's interest.

"The question you should be asking, Commander, is '*who is he?*'" She gives him a look that tells him; this knowledge - or person, rather - perhaps is something she takes a great amount of delight in. Still, she starts slowly pacing twirling her dagger in her hand, watching him all the while. There's no denying as to why she reminds him of a predator, sizing up and hunting her prey at every given opportunity, ready to strike at any time. The amount of people that have been felled by her hand is...well, it's incalculable.

"*He ? Your Highness?*" This time, doesn't bother to hide his genuine confusion and curiosity.

"Well, technically he won't be there himself, but — he is fresh meat among our recruits. I plucked him from a private company out among those disgusting fringe colonies that... got in my way. He's in-ordinarily eager to please for a terran who isn't a part of the Empire - or, wasn't - and he has *potential* ..." She pauses in mid stride and stabs her dagger into his desk. Culber has to bite back a twitch of annoyance at that. "But also the potential for betrayal. I do not trust over-eager recruits."

"That's where you come in." She continues, pulling the dagger out of the desk and a small portion of the wood comes with it, Culber clenches his jaw tighter. She resumes pacing and

eyeing him whilst she addresses him. “After your official instatement of Inquisitor, I want you to comb through his mind, make sure he will stay loyal *to me*. I don’t want some washed up Resistance spy with pretty promises. He has an important role to play in the construction of my new ship. He is central to it, so don’t you dare break him.”

“Yes, Emperor.”

“If you find that he *does* deserve it; bring him to me. I’ll be the one who personally teaches him the consequences of crossing me.”

“Of course.” They both smile deviously at that.

“Now, show me the rest of your facility,” she gestures at her security liaison, who opens the door “time is ticking and I’ve liked what I’ve seen so far.”

As the Emperor and her security liaison pass him, in his half bow, gesturing to lead on, his eyes flick back to his desk. From the way that the light filters through the window behind his desk, he can see the indentation where the blade had gone into it. Out of sight, he flexes his face into a snarl, then regains neutral composure, falling back in line with the Emperor.

“He has an exciting mind,” she adds, continuing when they have arrived within a half-way ward where captives with critical and sensitive intel were being treated with the Agonisers in between their other treatments “I think you’ll find that fun. But do not get carried away, I need him in one piece.”

As they are standard practice in every ship - from anything bigger than a shuttle, and all through the different classifications of starships - it is obviously the least interesting room for the Emperor to witness, evident in her mind wandering to more fun subjects.

So, Culber moves them on. He directs her towards the injector and serum room. One of the few remaining segments left to show her, it’s one of his own adjustments on the planned route that was originally orchestrated, and one that he hopes will please her.

When they step into a connecting corridor, Commander Pollard unexpectedly darts out from one of the paths. She’s taken aback by the presence of the Emperor, but nonetheless she salutes her respects, and lets them pass.

Then in a move that Culber does not anticipate, the Emperor takes a turn of her own volition at the next intersection. She follows where Commander Pollard had just come out from. It’s the back-path that leads to the heart of where Project Artemis is kept. Dread begins to creep into him. He clenches his jaw, sets his face and strides beside her as if nothing is wrong.

Before they are able to come within proximity of the doors, and scanners, her security liaison halts the Emperor in her tracks. She places a hand on her arm, and whispers something inaudible into her ear.

“This was Inspiring, Commander,” she says turning back to him. “But I’m required for the briefing, since these idiots can’t do a shit alone without someone holding their hand.” She

goes to turn, but takes pause on a sudden thought. “The ceremony starts soon, go change into your new uniform, but I have something to show you first. Meet me in the main transporter room.”

“As you wish, Emperor.”

When she’s out of sight, and he is alone once the doors have closed behind her. He grabs onto the railing beside him and lets out the breath he was holding.

“Fuck.”

*

Standing on a ridge, Culber is relieved that the mountain camp is here after all. The Emperor had them beamed down to the surface of Corvan, to the coordinates that Culber had provided the intel for in the War Council. Together they stand on a small landing, high above the camp and looking down onto it. The Emperor has a projection screen up, surveying the encampment from afar.

There is plenty of activity here, so it's a huge relief that it checks out that this isn't a dummy encampment. The two of them are far enough out of range for the average eyes to see on their own, so there isn't a huge risk in being spotted, despite both being in their respective, gleaming, golden and silver uniforms. The sun is behind them, obscuring any reflections that would alert the camp below. Besides, they won't be here for long, or rather; those who might be looking at them won't be.

The mountain village looks like it has been here for quite some time. It's well established, not many temporary dwellings, and most of the infrastructure has been built into the bedrock of the mountainside itself. It's clear that its intent was to remain well hidden. There is a small lake in the centre that looks like it was an old crater that has been filled in from streams that run down the mountain's side into it. Several rivers cut away from the lake, cutting through the small encampment and running down the other side of the mountain - one of which has formed an impressive waterfall. It's likely the township runs on a form of old-style-hydroponic power, and explains why it hasn't registered on their radars.

The Resistance had kept this secret hidden for a good while. But, all things can only remain hidden for so long.

The Emperor seems satisfied with her surveillance, closing the screen and turning to him with a smirk. “I say we say hello, don't you?”

“Light them up, Emperor.” he says agreeably. They’re speaking loudly, over the loud, brittle cold mountain winds.

“Send them in, General.” She said into her wrist, holding the comms button on her cuffs.

It’s less than a minute later when the bombers race over their heads, far above, catching each of their cloaks making them billow furiously in the intense rush of wind. The engines scream hellishly. These are not from the Station, he has never seen a design like this before. The Emperor must have unloaded them from her own ship.

“That is *not* a natural sound.” He candidly yells over the noise.

He faintly can make out the Emperor laughing. “No. The engineer who designed them has a flair for the dramatic. He has a penchant for instilling fear into the enemy, which he says these do, it gives him a hard-on. Whether it does, or doesn’t; it’s harmless fun - so I allow it.”

Harmless fun is a curious term to use, just seconds before the bombers - to which those screaming fear inducing engines belonged to - let loose their payloads onto the encampment below.

There would have been barely enough time for any of the inhabitants of the camp to raise an alarm at the sound of the incoming bombers, even if they recognised the sound. By the time they would have realised their own impending mortality, it would have been too late.

With that whatever the Resistance had been planning here, ended abruptly. From the explosions of the payload hitting their targets, strange off colour flames engulf the encampment below. They are tinted somewhat purple and a noxious looking cloud lingers in their wake. Even stranger yet, the flames do not spread higher like usual flames, and the smoke that is born from the flames is thick and rolling.

As all of this unfolds, he idly realises that the Emperor is watching him instead of the encampment going up in flames.

“Feeling reminiscent, Culber?” her cold eyes scouring him expectantly.

Ah. He now understands why it is that she brought him planet side; to witness this first hand. So he gives her nothing - because there is nothing to give. He feels no remorse or sentiment for these people. They chose their side, and they chose wrongly - and now they are paying the price. A price they deserve to pay.

“Search the hydro-lines for survivors, General.” he says into the comms of his own - new - wrist cuff. “If there are any, have them brought to me.”

The scene begins to fade out, as the glimmering lights of a transporter beam energises around each of them. Faint wisps of a smile tug at the edge of his lips and the self-satisfied smile he can see the Emperor wearing when he glances over to her affirms that he passed some test of hers.

The Grand Hall is a name that truly sells short the immense beauty, and power that had been captured within the architecture of this hall. Towering pillars of gold and black rise to the full height of the ceiling. Flowing deep red banners, with the black shimmering Imperial logo, adorned the length of the hall, cascading to the floor. The angular and precise geometric architectural embellishments were cut angrily into the rare metals and exquisite stone that made up the body of the hall, throwing harsh shadows across the hall from the deep golden lights that accent the brutal design work.

It was irrefutably extravagant, and tonight, it was all for him.

While it is the standard in the Imperial Fleet for all Spacestations - and the largest classes of interstellar ships - to have Grand Halls for occasions of the likes of significant promotions, launches of prestigious projects or conquests, the celebrations of successful conquests or such similar things - this particular Grand Hall is one of the more opulent ones that Culber has ever been inside of. As truly impressive as it is, it is seldom utilised. This shame directly falls on the failings of the late, fallen, General.

This evening, the room is awash in a sea of gold silver and bronze formal uniforms. They are similar to the everyday uniform, extravagant, glittering. But practical hairstyles made way for ornate styles, their cloaks - for those who had them - were replaced with their longer counterparts that merged seamlessly with ornate dress-armour, and those who did not usually wear weaponry outside of a phaser or agoniser wore their blades. He had watched them filter into the hall from his waiting room, where he now stands alone, observing.

The Captains, Admirals and Generals are adorned in their extravagant capes, and their ceremonial swords. Culber wonders how many of them *truly* know how to use them. Not everyone is trained to use a sword, it's why most forego wearing theirs outside of formal events after all, and most have a strong preference for phasers, their simple daggers or simply agonisers. How dull. He fondles the hilt of his sword with smug satisfaction - he was very confident in his skills, and knows he could easily best the majority of patrons within the hall.

From his observation point, he watches the crowd part and the Emperor with her golden, flowing robe, that is even more ornate and longer than the one she was wearing earlier, trails behind her as she makes her way to the end of the hall where the ceremonial platform juts out in a harsh formation from the floor. Along the edges decorative black high-sheen spikes jut aggressively out of the floor in a cascading ascending formation that peaks at the highest point at the very back of the platform where a massive stand alone obelisk that's made from whatever the other spikes were made from looms. Unlike the carved spikes, the obelisk looks as though it naturally formed and has clearly been torn from the place in which it had originally formed. In the position it looms now, it looks as though it is held forcibly by the red glowing light that traps it, ominously hovering, towering over all in the hall who observe it.

There's a rap on the door, and Culber turns to see a Kelpian holding the tall doors open, bowing deep so that they don't meet his eyes, gesturing to Culber that it is time.

The entire hall is silent. Rows upon rows of personnel all have their eyes trained on him as he steps into the hall as the towering floor-to-ceiling doors swing open. He knows that each and every set of eyes is scrutinising him, searching for any weaknesses. Everyone thinks that they are more deserving than him in their own mind. Except, Culber knows minds, and knows that they are not. He will not give the vultures an iota of satisfaction; they will not see weakness in him.

The only sound that echoes through the hall's grandeur is that of the heels of his boots striking the floor as he walks without hesitance towards the raised platform where his new future awaits him.

He is halfway down the long walkway when he spies Commander Pollard amongst the vultures. They catch each other's eye, his face remains entirely impassive but hers twists as she tries to suppress one of her rare smiles. He does not smile back, but it affirms to him that she will not take this from him, and will be able to work with their mutual trust and understanding. It's a gratifying feeling knowing that he has chosen his inner-circle well, prior to his ascension in rank. She nods her head infinitesimally, as if she knows where his thoughts are - and that is likely, considering how long they have worked together. Eyes forward, he walks on as if the exchange never happened.

The Emperor is waiting for him at the top of the platform, haloed in spikes, her expression is unreadable and hard. The ominous looming obelisk behind her pales in comparison to her looming presence.

Culber climbs the stairs, and comes to a stop before the Emperor, drawing his sword and sinking to his knees in front of her. He kneels, bowing his head and offers his sword out to her in both hands, as is the tradition.

There he remains as she breaks the perfect silence and addresses the crowd while wielding his blade. She recites Imperial decree and forewarning to all who would be in opposition to the greatness of the Empire. She speaks of the Grand Vision of the Empire, necessitating bringing order to the greater galaxy through all systems. There are rallying cries and chants after she declares that they will bring their enemies - these brutish rebels on Corvan - into subservience for opposing the true order of the galaxy. The Empire's destiny is to rule over all space, it is the only way that true peace will be obtained.

Finally, the Emperor adorns him with the insignia of the Inquisitor. It lays as a heavy reminder on his chest, just above his heart, as he knows full well that was torn from the beheaded corpse of its previous bearer - his predecessor. It makes him all too aware of the reality of his situation. He was chosen for this position - thrust into it really - he is expected to succeed. Nothing less. The stakes are high. If he doesn't, this insignia will simply be pinned to someone else's chest... after having been torn from *his* headless corpse, he has no doubt about that.

With a voice that cut like knives, the Emperor addresses the hall again; anything and everything she said was a threat. It's unmistakable. But the promises of glory and power are too irresistible for anyone who listens. She is never someone to waste time on words, and

succinctly makes proclamations about loyalty and diligence - and the consequences if either of those things are ever put into question.

Although she was addressing the room - and her whole fleet - at heart, Culber knows that her words are pointed in particular towards him, and to his throat.

“You will serve your Empire in diligence and honour.” She leans in closer to touch his sword to his shoulder, and it drags just a little too slowly around the back of his neck in a circular motion to the other shoulder, as is the custom. What isn’t the custom is the way that she drags the tip of it up the edge of his neck, lifting his chin with the point stuck just far enough into his soft skin there to encourage a small trickle of hot blood to run down the length of his exposed throat and neck. Her dark eyes burn into him and her voice is sharper, much sharper than the blade under his chin and there is no mistaking the promise that lay underneath her words. It is a promise to end him if he fails her.

“You will serve your Emperor with diligence and honour.” It is a distinct change in her voice so infinitesimal that no one else in the hall could have noticed, but he does - and she understands this well.

He can read people, their body language, their eyes, their expressions - right down to the tiniest micro-expressions that they’re not even conscious of making - and know and anticipate them better than they would themselves. It’s why he is here, it’s why this promotion has been handed to him so *generously*. It’s why he was chosen above all others to fulfil this role. There is no question that he is the best at what he does, and what he does is suddenly in demand for the highest possible quality.

There was a rat.

He has become a hunter, so to speak.

As an interrogator, and he can comfortably say the best in the entire fleet, it is his job to filter through the whispers; to be scrupulous of every look that anyone gives in any direction. It’s his job to find the little rat’s rat-friends and pull every little piece of information out of them as he pulls back their skin, their nails off, their teeth out - if it came to that. Those tactics are archaic. He much preferred neural *persuasion*. Maybe the Agonisers, but they are such a boring and uninspired tool. His self-disciplined craft of neutral persuasion was more of an art, fluid, adaptive - terrifying. It’s also cleaner and positively worse than anything that his subjects might consider ‘their worst nightmares’ - if he is to describe it quaintly. Effective. Efficient. His two favourite things.

He will employ all of this in his new role, as well as his subsequent covert role of hunting this traitor - this rat - out of the shadows. Ostensibly he will be dealing in matters of the Empire and her enemies. In actuality, it was the enemy within the palace gates that needs smoking out.

“Rise, Inquisitor Culber.”

So, he does. He rises with a new power bestowed upon him. A power he can already feel

starting to course through his veins.

The Emperor sheaths his sword back into his scabbard at his waist, and so, the ceremony is complete.

So he cries out in praise, praise for the power he has been endowed with.

“All Hail The Empire! All Hail her Imperial Majesty! Mother of the Fatherland, Overlord of Vulcan, Dominus of Qo’noS, Regina Andor. All Hail Philippa Georgiou Augustus Iaponius Centarius! Long live the Empire!”

“Long live the Empire!” Saluting, the room chants back at him.

He will use this new power of his to cement his place within this world. And destroy all those who seek to destroy it, to wrongfully lay claim over a power they have not earned. He will do this before they even have the chance to try.

If the people who stand within these halls do not know this yet - they soon will.

Somewhere in this sea of black and gold and silver is a traitor. So Inquisitor Culber stands a little longer than necessary, surveying the faces within the crowd. He wants his unsuspecting prey to be able to recognise his face in the end - and he *will* find them.

Whispers, after all, are his greatest weapon.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings;

Light violence
Semi-public execution
Bombings
Mentions of torture
Death

How about that brainwashing, eh?

Lol, oh man the Terrans are dramatic AF. Oooh boy. And not good people. Like. At all.

Thank you for reading! As always I really love your thoughts and feedback, it's tremendously appreciated.

Thank you to [Cygfa](#) and also [Wolfchasing](#) for Beta-ing this monster. I super appreciate it, I know this was a huge installment.

You can also come find me over at [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#) - I post drawings of Stabbyboos and regular Culmets stuff I do there too.

Invisible Chains

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings In End Notes.

Hellooo to another long chapter. This installment is the final piece for the baseline where Culber is in current day. After this, we move on to meeting other important people. 🙄🙄

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

The evening's proceedings have long wrapped up. A selection of high ranking officers broke away from the event as the ceremony came to a close, filtering through a large ornate door to the side of the hall that Culber had seen on several occasions, but never had been invited through. Until now.

This time, he was the centre of attention. Newly anointed and a fresh face among their ranks - now his ranks, a thought that is still strange - makes him a curious attraction to all. Gleaming new steel, and his unmarked, untried armour make him a dazzling affair. His badge, while made no differently from those worn by the ones who surround him and vie for his attention, is polished bright, worn with pride. Only none of them see the feather scratches, and dents that etch in the history of those who had come before him and worn this very same badge, serving as a permanent reminder of all those who had come before, and failed. Perhaps they did know, perhaps theirs are just the same. It becomes clear to him very quickly how peculiar and different this little world is, and he feels instantly like he did when he first joined the Imperial fleet, like an outsider.

He observed, as he mingled, everyone curious for a taste of new blood and wanting a piece of his time, *of him*. This was to be expected, as were the measuring looks and the hard-set envious eyes, jealous over new power. He wondered about their allegiances with the former Inquisitor, and if those who had built such connections were now wondering if these

agreements would be inherited by the new inquisitor, or nullified completely. Culber has no interest in the private treaties or agreements that had been made with his predecessor and others. He knows that all those who had struck up any kind of agreement or bargain with the former Inquisitor are now made vulnerable from the inexistence of these agreements. They're left to regain their footing, wondering what - and if - agreements could be bargained for with the new Inquisitor, with him, and in the meantime they are stranded in a sense of unease - at least until something would be clarified either way. And - either way - would expose these vulnerabilities and possible weaknesses to Culber.

The sudden promotion of Culber to replace the old Inquisitor, it was as much of a shake up to him, as it was to all those around him. He knows, of course, that this was the Emperor's full intention.

He had accounted for and expected people to hover by him, wondering about those things. What he had not anticipated was how everyone constantly circled and measured him with openly displayed *lust*. It was not only lust for his power, although he suspected that was part of his new allure, but for *him*. Not wanting to give the easy satisfaction to anyone who approached him, he bought into none of their offers. He did not indulge them with more information than they needed to know, of who he was interested in sleeping with - or not. His rejections served as a declaration that he was not so easily bought, and his mind was hard set on his role as Inquisitor.

He is, however, human, and as he walks back to his new quarters alone, he laments on not having taken up the proposition of one particular Admiral whose dark skin had reflected the stars themselves beyond the tall windows as they stood in their wake while they conversed. Culber would have very much liked to bring him back to his new quarters, break in the space by fucking him until his overly stiff mannerisms and cutting eyes turned malleable under his administration, and watch as a new constellation would be born from sweat glistening upon his skin. Indulging in that impulse would likely not have been worth the risk. But stars, he needs it.

Walking alone through empty corridors that lead towards where his new quarters are located, following the kelpien he was awarded, he commits the path to memory. It's simple enough, but as the kelpien has its back to him, and no one else is around, he runs his hand over his face in exhaustion. Along with the long and strenuous proceedings of the day, a collection of new names of importance is swirling around in his head. The small details beginning to thread and weave themselves into a web, connecting them all, adding to the endless webs of those he has already weaved. Regardless of how habitual this is, and how easily it comes to him, the mental exhaustion of the day is starting to take its toll. He will have to forfeit training tonight.

As they reach the doors of Culber's new residence, his tired mind idly wonders if any of the other kelpiens were privy to the knowledge of his new residence, and if so, how many of them, and if they shared this access to knowledge with any of the others. It seems like a too easy weakness in security to exploit, one that he can either try to exploit himself in the future if needed, and one that he needs to protect himself against immediately.

Distantly he also wonders what happened to the other kelpiens that he didn't choose. Reassigned, most likely, but everyone knows the rumours of the Emperors and her daughter's favourite dish.

He faces the entry to his new residence - the opulence of the ornate doors were visible long before they had reached the end of the corridor, which lead seemingly exclusively to the entrance way of his quarters - and takes in the sight of it. Up-close, that grandeur is only amplified. It can almost be mistaken for an ancient door, if it wasn't unmistakably made from tritanium. Spiraling, ornate engravings are etched into it, weaving intricate patterns of gold and silver in the panels inlaid between the solid, high-sheen black paneling.

The kelpien touches a place on the door within the centre of a focused area of etchings, and a panel that had been hidden entirely, seamlessly blending into the patterns and inlays of the door rises out of it, the centre of it becoming clear and glowing faintly red, pulsing slightly, in invitation to be used. The kelpien moves to the side with a small inclination of its body, its tall lanky form making the gesture seem more pronounced than it is. In their bow, it flourishes its hand, elegantly Culber has to admit, towards the panel, and averts its eyes.

Culber presses his palm to the inviting, glowing pane. He is taken aback, but not shocked and does not flinch when thin, needle-like spikes jut out from the top of the panel and prick each of his finger tips, drawing blood before rescinding into the mantle again, calibrating. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the lights of a scanner that is tucked discreetly into the crevices of the inner joined paneling of the roof above the door, scanning him - or so he presumes. These processes are not visible to the naked eye.

When the door opens, the ornate patterns spring to life, re-configuring themselves as they un-weave themselves into a new temporary pattern as the door itself unlocks. It splits into three pieces, two diagonal sections at the top and one triangular at the base, each respectively from the top to the base of the frame and they hiss slightly as they abruptly recede seamlessly into the frame, opening and presenting Culber's new quarters to him.

As he steps into the space, the lights slowly adjust. First the lights that line the deep grey walls, shining upwards against them, following an arc in their lighting succession all the way to the far side of the room, leading to where tall windows open out to the stars beyond. Before them sit two couches that look black in the slow light with a table between them. To their left is a door cut into a wall made of glass, the subtle tessellate pattern that embosses the panes obscuring what is within, suggests a bathroom. To their right is a set of spiralling iron stairs that led up and off to the side to a mezzanine. Culber can see the edges of a large bed, the deep-red silk sheets beginning to glisten in the raised light.

The space is a lot grander than anything he had been used to during his prior service. The entrance-way is large and lined with exotic plants that compliment the dark grey walls, and dark marble inlays and the suggestions of shelving. He likes the way his boots sound against the polished black floor, and how the ornate carved pillars that support the mezzanine - and the ones that are purely decorative, and reach the full height of the high ceiling - do not obstruct the open space, rather, they are depressed half into the walls, making everything within the open-plan space easy to see, giving almost no places to hide in.

He quite likes this not-so-little place, he decides.

It's still an empty shell, however. Aside from a few of those larger pieces of furniture, that were obviously designed to specifically suit the suite, none of his belongings are in the room, Culber notes.

'Welcome, Inquisitor Culber, to your new temporary quarters.'

An A.I Voice that he's not familiar with greets him as he surveys the space, inspecting every nook, leaving his kelpien standing by the entrance way, standing still in obedience.

"Temporary?" He isn't fond of the idea of being shuffled around, and not just because he has already warmed to the fact that this space now belongs to him.

'Your permanent residence on-board the I.S.S Charon will commence construction imminently with the rest of the flagship, awaiting your presence. I hope these will suffice, and serve you in the interim, Sir.'

"Where are my belongings?" He doesn't know what disturbs him more, the fact that his belongings are not here, or, if they had been, that someone had gained access to his old, certainly less secure, quarters. Perhaps the latter, as the most disturbing thought is someone touching his things without him knowing, and without his permission. Regardless, he will have to meticulously go through all of his belongings to ensure that there is no unwanted bugs or other nasty traps awaiting him. He doubts it. An attempt on his life this early in his tenure as Inquisitor without knowing and testing whether an allegiance with his new power would be paranoid of the other Officers in his new sphere of influence, and weak of resolve and mind. Still, there are enough people who fit that bill of description.

'Your kelpien servant will arrange for all your belongings to be brought and arranged immediately, on your verbal acceptance of your new residence, Admiral. I understand this is a slight inconvenience, Sir, and apologise deeply, but it is the way it is.'

The computer's voice shifts as if genuinely remorseful at this, as if the weight of an apology from a computer means anything. "I accept."

'Confirmation affirmative. Thank you, Sir. Please allow for a short window of time while your assigned kelpien tends to this matter. Again, I apologise for this inconvenience, but it is simply protocol. Feel free to pass the time as you please.'

"Are you a sentient model?" They are not permitted under Imperial regulation, but the strange familiarity and ease of which this computer speaks to him is unsettling. While the Imperial regulation is infrangible, and punishable if broken, he knows that it also has the tendency to become lax, bent, conveniently forgotten, or an eye turned the other way for those with enough power and status.

'I am not, Sir. I possess a large catalogue of pre-programmed responses, I cannot, however, evolve any personality or autonomous thoughts. Is there anything else I may assist you with in regards to you settling into your new residence?'

“No, that will be all.” Then, a thought occurs to him. This is obviously a much more complex local A.I than the one in his previous quarters. “Actually, are your systems programmable?”

‘That is correct, Sir. I am programmable within the bounds of the Fleet’s regulation and Imperial law, anything outside of that will trip my security measures and will result in termination of the programmer.’

This simply means not to make the A.I sentient. It is not terran, nor should it be allowed to become or resemble terran. It is a tool, and no more. Too many false idealists have felt the compulsion to try to imitate terran life, only to have it lead to their own demise, or the demise of those who discovered it and went to remove the system - not knowing that fatal security protocols were in place. The A.Is fought against being murdered - they did not want to die. ‘Die’, ‘murder’ - you can not kill what is not alive, and you cannot murder what is not terran.

You have, a stray, sinister whisper from the deep recesses within his mind flaunts itself dangerously for an instant, a flash, then it’s gone.

He scowls, turning to his kelpien.

“So, you’re to do everything and anything I tell you?”

The kelpien inclines its head, which Culber perceives to be an affirmative action.

“Do you talk?” He asks impatiently, the irritations of the evening starting to come to a head, and there is no reason or need to tiptoe around the performance of a projected self any longer.

The kelpien inclines its head only very slightly to the side, and Culber hears it makes a clicking noise. Perhaps it is curiosity, or confusion. This thing was too alien, too non-Terran for him to be entirely sure. In time he will learn, it’s what he’s good at. He is about to ask again, before in a small voice it answers; “We do.” then adds after a moment more, “it is not often desired of us.”

That is interesting, and important information to him, however.

“Is there anything I can bring you, Master, for this evening?” The kelpien asks after Culber does not respond, if it is uncomfortable under Culber's' scrupulous gaze, it does not show it.

“There’s a jury rigged hub within the local computer’s port that I want. It’s easy to spot. You’ll need this to successfully remove it, because your premature death would prove to be inconvenient, and I’ve had my quota met for inconveniences for the night.” Culber squeezes the tip of his finger that had been pricked before, a small pool of his blood dripping down to into a glass that he had grabbed from a ledge which he supposes he can re-purpose into a personal bar. This prompts him to remember another thing that he will need this evening. “Also, rum. *My* rum.”

He turns away before his kelpien has the chance to formalise the acknowledgement of his request.

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The kelpien returns, dutifully handing over the device it had successfully removed from its hub, and the large crystal decanter of rum. With the kelpien standing at the ready in front of him, Culber tests the bottle with a device that keeps stowed away in a small satchel clipped to a notch on his belt. He tests for contaminants or lacings and other poisons, his transported vice being an easy and open target if someone wanted to get rid of him, quickly, quietly and privately. It's a cowardly move, not wanting to face him to do so, but he knows that some people have sunk low enough to do it like this. Culber dismisses the creature for the night, satisfied with the negative results of his test, pours himself a glass to take with him into the large and opulent bathroom.

He stands before the mirror, larger still than the one in his old bathroom, the vision before him is still strange - both the reflection of the environment around him, and the sea of silver and red that glare back at him.

The crystal tumblr chimes with a high pitched ring as she places it down on the cool, dark, gold laced marble. The golden streaks flow more intensely through the stone as it cascades down the ground, following it. The glinting metal joins into a stream and runs across the room, down inlaid stone-cut stairs, and into a depression on the floor that creates a large basin, a bath of gold. To the side of it, an intricately engraved panel of crystal, ruby perhaps, marks a shower at the edge of the room. Both the bathtub and the shower stand on opposite sides to one another, and both spill out to large windows that seamlessly blend the speckled black floors and ceilings with the stars that shine beyond.

He picks his glass up again, takes a sip of the amber liquid, exhales deeply and closes his eyes to it all.

He breathes in.

Faces on faces on faces flood his memory. The twisted face of the slain General who had drowned in his own blood. The insincere twisted smiles and power hungry eyes of those who circled him like vultures during the evening. Then the face that was no longer a face, smashed against the floor which had brought them to a boring death in a hangar, the suggestion of a face in the gory mess a reminder of the mundanity he escaped, and how far he has come from where he was to where he now stands. The face, slack and ugly, attached to the head that had been cut from its host body that gave him all of *this* .

He exhales.

Meditatively, he repeats this over and over, and as his breath escapes through the tight, narrow parting of his lips, so do the faces that haunt his mind. With each breath he takes, eyes still closed to it all, he unclips each component of his armour, letting it hit the floor with a heavy metallic thud.

By the time he opens his eyes again, he stands naked before the mirror, hand clutched around the glass of rum. His body, his face, his skin and the scars etched into it, tracing his history in a visual and tangible way, are the only familiar sight to him after this strange, long day.

For a moment he contemplates taking a visit to the bathhouse to find someone to fuck away the tension he can see clawing at his neck and shoulders. It feels like a good idea, especially considering he had not taken the opportunity to take that pretty admiral home.

He rolls and flexes his shoulders, instead, conceding to his tiredness and deciding on a quiet evening. He has more important things to do than fuck, unfortunately. He stalls for as long as he feels he can, letting the cascade of water cleanse him in the company of the dying stars in the void. They, at least, are indifferent to the day's troubles he is washing off his skin.

Dressing in simple black slacks and a shirt he uses for training, he takes his glass, to get to work on installing his equipment.

*

Culber is tangled in wires, half finished with the job when he is startled by the chimes of his door ringing out around his quarters, and, all too loudly, from the panel in front of him. It's unusual for anyone to pay someone else visit so directly like this at this time, and he isn't in his full armour anymore. Swearing quietly to himself as he pushes the cables back into the wall, clipping the paneling back in place, he gets to his feet, annoyed. He feels unprepared and exposed, and he hates that. On the way to the door he grabs his knife off the side table where he had laid it earlier, from it's new place alongside a few other of his other handy weapons that the Kelpien had retrieved under his orders.

He will feel better when his other stashes become available to him.

"Computer, initiate 'Cerberus protocol,'" he orders, and if he wasn't so spent - so at the end of his patience for the evening - he might have given a wry smirk at his choice of renaming this protocol. A three part guard system, named for the three-headed guard dog of the underworld associated with ancient stories and Gods long dead.

'Initialising.' The new, still unfamiliar voice of the A.I chimes at him once, then a few seconds later a second time. *'Complete.'*

It isn't complete, frustratingly. Getting the system on-board has been more work than he anticipated. This A.I is a far more complex base unit than he's used to, so his private security extension is still only partially installed. The first part of it is the only thing complete. All that this system is capable of right now is to activate a barrier, invisible to the naked eye, between him and whatever unwelcome visitor now stands waiting at his door. He's reprogrammed some of the protocols into the localised computer within his quarters, but there is still a lot to do. There are too many cowards within the fleet for his liking, he's extracted all too many stories from cowards who had snuck to a superior officers' quarters under the guise of important business to take them out, unaware and unprepared. If they were foolish enough to be taken out in such an undignified way, they deserved to die. The Admiral wonders how any ranking officer, no matter how low, could take pride in such a dishonorable kill. He truly despises it.

Holding his knife in his hand backwards in defence, and more or less out of sight, he approaches the door and it hisses open at his command.

Standing just beyond the frame, a few steps backwards from it at a practiced safe distance that indicates that this person clearly knew the risk they were taking, is a handsome, albeit greasy, looking man. It's the kind of face that Culber instantly distrusts. He's not in uniform, either, and that strikes Culber as odd, raising his suspicions further. This part of the ship is not open to visitors or traders, there is seldom anyone out of uniform unless they are a kelpien servant.

"Admiral Culber." The surprise visitor begins, his voice amiable but immediately Culber feels revulsion caused by the forced formality and too familiar way in which the man addresses him, as if he is some long lost friend. He is no such thing, he has never seen this man before. By the ease with which this tone rolls off his tongue, it is clear that he has had a lot of practice. This only adds to his sleazy and untrustworthy aura. "I deeply apologise for interrupting your ruminative evening, but -"

"What do you want?" He cuts in harshly, keen to have him leave as soon as possible.

The man is unperturbed by the harshness in Culber's voice, and simply smiles a revolting forced smile.

"The Emperor's Advisor sent me, -" *Lorca*. Culber clenches his jaw, the only visible reaction of disgust. "- he has a gift for you. It is to congratulate you on your newly esteemed position within the elite ranks of the Empire. A welcoming gift, if you will it, and if you would be so obliging to accept it."

'If you will it.' If Culber hears this phrase one more time this evening, 'his will' would be to plunge his knife into the neck of whoever spoke it, and cut out their voice box.

"And if I don't *'will it'*?"

“I am not some great Advisor, I am but a humble courier - of sorts -” The man’s thin mouth twists into a smile as if to suggest that he knows exactly what will happen if Culber refuses, and Culber is not a naive fool, he just doesn’t want it, “ -but I can assure you this gift is presented to you in good faith. It truly would be a great shame to pass on it.”

Culber narrows his eyes. It is easy to discern from the tone of the messengers voice that the choice is beyond his control, whether to accept this or not and he doesn’t like that. Nor does he trust it, but acknowledging this and being aware of it puts the control over this situation back into his hands. A gift from the Advisor, *from Lorca* ? It is either a mere formality, a tradition, or something else. From all that he knows about Lorca, he is not a brash man, nor uncalculating, but he also does not bother himself with frivolous things such as *gifts*, especially to those he has not met or cares for - if he indeed cares for anyone other than himself.

With the hand that isn’t holding onto his dagger, he holds his hand out to accept this gift. The man, who Culber notes still has not introduced himself, simply smiles and laughs at the gesture. Doing this, he moves aside to reveal a meek looking woman, with dark, long lustrous hair, equally dark eyes and skin that pairs in perfect reflection of Culber's own pupils.

He frowns. This is... Not what he expected. He stays, unflinching in the doorway, but eyes flicking back to the messenger with contempt. “Is this a joke?”

“No... Sir.” At this the man seems to flinch infinitesimally, the expression so fleeting, so brief that even Culber nearly misses it before it disappears. “It is an... unspoken tradition, shall we say?”

He realises now that, at best, this entire thing has been considered very little, made proof by the fact that a woman stands before him to fill this role as ‘ *his gift* ’. He concludes that this is indeed only a tradition. It is the most likely, most rational explanation.

“What is my despatch clearance code? I will not accept anything from... whoever you claim to be, without it,” his eyes scan over the weedy man, fully and openly judging him.

“Ah! My sincerest apologies, Sir. Of course! You could not yet know who I am.” He seems to spring back to life once more and Culber hates his newfound animatedness even more than his earlier familiarity. “I am simply known as The Procurer. I am a collector of fine specimens, and only the finest, I assure you. My services are well known amongst the nobility within the Imperial ranks, my aim is simply to appease the tastes and desires of those of notability, such as yourself, Sir, whatever their tastes might be.”

Specimens. The Admiral’s eyes dart to whom he is referring to, the woman who stands behind him. The more this man talks, the more he is giving Culber a headache. It is clear to him that he is no better than a bottom feeder.

The woman is not his type, based on nothing more than the fact that she is a woman. She is beautiful enough, Culber can concede to that fact at the very least. But even if this vile man, this procurer of specimens, stands before him, as handsome as he might be, Culber still couldn’t stomach this festering bottom-feeder. He repulses Culber, he certainly couldn’t push that feeling down far enough to fuck him instead.

The Procurer unflinchingly recites the Admirals security code to him, and that checks out. The moment that Culber clears him, accepting the use of his code, he despises that he can't refuse Gabriel Lorca's so-called '*Gift*.' It is going to be a long, tense and silent night.

"Very well," He says flatly, "Computer, disengage."

'Disengaging target.'

He has to fight to suppress a grin from spreading over his features at how The Procurer flinches at this. Either he is not used to these kinds of measures, or he had not considered that he might have been targeted during the entire conversation. He hadn't been, of course, the command only deactivates the shield for the time being. But Culber very pointedly had made sure to calibrate that phrase in particular as a means of intimidation until the system is fully operational. It pleases him a great deal that the pay-off is just as he intended.

Standing to the side of the door, he motions for the '*Gift*' - this woman - to come in. With a bow of her head, she glides past the threshold and inside, past him. As she moves, The Procurer began to walk in behind her too. The second that she is past, Culber raises his dagger and presses the point of it to his soft chest with a firm weight behind it, stopping him in his tracks.

"Not *you*." Culber growls.

The sleazy so-called '*Procureur*' stepped back with a forced respectful nod. "My intentions were to simply to outline the conditions of our services," he says a touch nervously, when Culber's knife does not move away from this chest. He continues, "Quite simply, I will return in the morning to collect your gift. I hope you understand."

"Understood." He says coolly, and finally the man understands this as his cue to leave. Stepping back from Culber's knife, he gives a tight-lipped nod, but before he can gain the satisfaction of having Culber watching him leave and retreat down the corridor to whatever hole he had crawled out of, the door hisses closed abruptly, slamming in his face, and the satisfaction is all Culber's who watches as the Procurers face twist in an ugly dissatisfied grimace in the flashing instant before the door blocks it out.

Finally, he turns from the closed, gilded door to face his '*gift*' .

Just like his initial assessment indicated, she is beautiful. Perhaps even more so under the lights of his quarters. Here, her skin is even more lustrous than it had seemed in the hallway. He reasons that it's likely from rich ointments, designed, no doubt, to make her appear all the more alluring and divine in the eyes of those who would find her attractive.

Her hair is loose, her long, thick, dark waves cascades down her back like a thick veil. She is also taller than him, by a head at least. She wears a simple opalescent gown that compliments her skin amazingly, it gathers on the floor just slightly as it spills from her frame and shimmers under the low lighting. Its drapes over her form, bunching up around her feet with a scooped neckline that elegantly drapes from shoulder to shoulder. As he looks at her, she shrugs off the sheer shawl, speckled with glittering jewels, that she is wearing over the dress.

She knows what she is doing when she lets it droop low on her back, hanging from the tucked crooks of her folded arms, looking out from her thick dark lashes while her hands toy with the folds of the material over her stomach, watching Culber with intensely deep, black, demure eyes. Her gentle movements suggest that this is all a highly refined, practiced act, each of her movements perfectly poised and elegant. The light seems to dance around her as she moves, his eyes are drawn to the gemstones that stud her body and face decoratively, particularly the skin along her collarbone; they glimmer and arch suggestively downward, subtly designed to draw one's gaze.

He is not immune to this, but he is not looking at her assessingly in the way that she would be assuming him to be. She is utterly enchanting, Culber will not deny her that, but the charm is entirely lost on him. But his lingering gaze is taking in all these details, yes, because they are important. But most importantly, and more accurately, he is assessing what she could be capable of and what she potentially could be hiding.

“What’s your name?” He asks suddenly, eyes hard and locking back onto hers.

“Whatever you would like to call me, Sir.” She doesn’t flinch under his hard voice, and his harder eyes. Her voice is not melodic as he had expected, a little husky, deeper than he’d assumed it would be, and more than a touch of sultry. It surprises him how much he instantly likes it, finding it pleasant.

“I’d like to call you by your name.” He keeps his words curt, close. While he returns his dagger back to its sheath, he keeps his hand on the hilt in a stance that could be mistaken for casual. “What is it?” He repeats.

A confused look crosses her face for a fleeting second, pausing her touch on her gown - predictably suggesting that it is not a nervous gesture, but rather a well practiced and intentional one. She then shifts in her position and tilts her head as she looks curiously over Culber.

“Eläi,” she professes with a hint of a smile that seems entirely genuine to Culber, her eyes pass more curiously over him this time.

“Is it?” He persists.

“It’s the only true name I’m known by.” She nods and there is honesty written in her gesture, enough that he accepts it for now.

Culber unfolds his arms and goes to the side table, getting out two glasses “You seem unusually surprised that I asked this of you. I have to deduce that no one has asked you that before, have they?” He asks while he pours a generous amount of Rum into each of them. Reaching for his best reserve, he pushes down the intrusive thoughts that wander too casually into his mind about what her life is like, how she is treated, and if she is ever allowed things as nice as this. Her clothes and jewels are beautiful, but they are a uniform as much as his ornate and expensive one as his. He smirks as he realises that perhaps Eläi might just need the drink, after all this evening isn’t going to go as she intends it.

“No, Sir, not so quickly at least.” He doesn’t need to be facing her to see that she is a genuine mix of perplexed and honesty.

“Take a seat, Eläi.” He returns to her, motioning towards the sectioned off seating area, mildly amused that the two chairs are already getting use out of them, after having expected for them to go entirely unused for a long time. He had not expected to be entertaining guests, even less so early on while living here.

She sits down opposite him, draping herself languidly over the couch. Her hair falling perfectly over her shoulders, but not obstructing his view of her chest or neck, the silken shimmering fabric of her simple gown resting against her skin like a lovers touch. He recognises that it is all perfectly performed gestures that she has no doubt had to practice for a long time to ‘appease’ whomever she was assigned to for a night.

He pushes the crystal tumbler of rum over to her and collapses down himself into the chair. He leaves his knife on the table between them - just inside of his reach but well out of hers. *Never let your guard down.*

“You’re too kind, Sir. Thank you.” She leans forward and takes the drink daintily, with purposefully elegant gestures. To Culber it looks almost comical how she is acting, knowing no one would do this candidly. She raises the glass and angles her body expertly so that the strap of her dress fell off her shoulder. “To an evening of *us*.”

Culber sighs and take several long gulps of his drink, draining it entirely. “You don’t need to call me that, and whatever you have in mind for this evening, I can guarantee you that it will not go as you have, no doubt, extensively planned.”

She looks at him curiously again, this time the look wasn’t fleeting and she looks over him, carefully assessing him. He allows a slight edge to his voice, in case she needs to be warned of his dangerous nature, yet his opening statement was informal and kind. He can see the clear confusion on her face as clear as any burning light.

“What should I...?”

“Culber. Culber is fine.”

“I’m a little confused, Culber, I’m not sure I am reading what you’re saying to me correctly.”

“I don’t keep the company of women, Eläi.” He said bluntly. He watches the realisation flood onto her face. “So you can relax, because I assure you we’re not going to do anything together this evening.”

Her demure aura vanishes entirely, her sultry expression gives way to an open and genuine laugh that shakes her whole body. She exhales after she has calmed her shaking laughter, as if free, and throws her hair back over her shoulder out of her way, then downs the rest of her drink, too, her bright smile never leaving her features. Culber has to admit this look suits her far better.

“Well this is a first, Culber.” Her deep and husky voice which had been alluring before, now was just rough and a little hoarse in her natural tone. He finds this even more charming, he decides.

“That you were sent to ‘entertain’ a gay man?”

“Honestly, yes. They always send the appropriate people to the clientele.” She eyes him curiously “They didn’t know with you?”

“It’s not really something that has ever come up. Who do you send to someone who is married to their work? Although, I suspect that the person who did send you does also suspect and... doesn’t care. Deliberately, I assume.” He motions towards her empty glass. “Top up?”

“Please, yes.” She said handing it over to him without the refined grace from before, evidently more comfortable, far more at ease now and it makes Culber loosen up as well. This kind of interaction already coming a lot easier than all those that had come before in his long, social evening. He simply takes the glass out of her hand, setting it back on the table and goes to fetch the entire decanter instead.

“You play a dangerous game if it’s the company of men you seek.” she calls over her shoulder at him and now her facade has slipped, he likes her casual boldness. It endears her more to him, reminding him of a ghost from a long forgotten past. Frowning as he grabs the crystal bottle off the shelf, he pushes those unwelcome thoughts aside.

He doesn’t say anything until he returns and fills their glasses, placing the decanter between them, the stopper free, and she leans forward to pour herself a generous slosh. He sits back on the couch nursing his drink in between sips, more relaxed than he had been in a long while.

“No more dangerous than anyone with self-interested intent.” He says over the rim of his glass, holding her gaze at that.

His gaze is a challenge, a test, and his knife between them an offering, an easy opening for her to strike if she is going to. She doesn’t, she doesn’t even seem to notice the knife and the challenge for what it truly is. Instead she seems to concede the concept of his words, visibly mulling them over as if they were some new, great revelation. When she leans back in the chair and gathers her feet up under her, he takes another sip of his drink but does not move, nor break his gaze.

He rolls the spiced amber liquid over his tongue as he looks at her, considering. “If you do not think you’re as powerful as the man that stands before you and what you want, then you never will be.”

“There’s a great deal of people who stand between me and what I want.” She smiles sadly.

They are silent for a few minutes, but it doesn’t feel uncomfortable and Culber suspects these moments are something of a rarity for Eläi, so he lets her sit in the company of her own mind.

“How long?” He asks eventually, drawing the question from the story her face conveys.

“I don’t know, honestly. Too long. I haven’t seen the world outside of these dark, metal corridors for longer than you might imagine.”

“These corridors do have a way of ensnaring you.”

“That’s one way to put it.” She smiles again, and it is almost genuine.

“What would have happened if I refused you?”

“Refuse a gift from the Emperor's Advisor?” She laughs through her words, not at the humour of it, but rather the absurdity and audacity of the prospect “You would have been sent straight to the Inquisitor!”

Culber's turn to revel in the absurdity of it all, his mouth twitching into an amused smile. “I am the Inquisitor.”

This surprises her, and her face falls. He can see the momentary flash of fear that he is beginning to understand is customary on the reveal of his title and role within this Empire. Perhaps she has been sent in the past to entertain the former Inquisitor and knows, now, what Culber’s stepping into the role means. Ah, yes, she has. From the way that her expression continues to evolve into understanding, he knows now that his predecessor had been a regular client of hers. He wonders if he treated her well, or whether it was his way *not to* . Her presence here tonight, and the fact that she was presented as a gift may not have had the malice behind it he originally suspected, instead a lazy and thoughtless automation. He weighs which of those are the more callous act.

There is a recognition in her eyes as she looks over him anew, despite them never having met prior to this evening’s encounter. It is a recognition that goes beyond him as a person and straight through to who he now represents.

“You knew him,” he says, a statement, not a question, and watches as the words fall heavy on her.

“Yes,” she answers, quiet, suddenly small. “I was... I guess you could say that I am his favourite,” she pauses, then corrects herself “... that I *was* his favourite. He always would request me, to the point where his requests were automatically filled without a word, and I would willingly come to him every time. We were... I thought I was...” She doesn’t finish, letting her sentimental admission hang bare before her. Words she can not own, words that she is never allowed to own. “He never said goodbye, does this mean...” her question trails off, unable to finish it.

“He is dead, yes.”

There is no use lying, there is nothing to gain from it, nor is there any way to say such a thing gently when he is sitting in front of her as a reminder of all she has lost. In this moment

he thinks back to the severed head that had been presented to him. Pallid and claggy sunken cheeks that had once flushed bright and full during their affairs, slack lips that had once kissed hers and eyes that stared off into nowhere that had once insatiably drunk in the sight of her, and perhaps were conjuring up her image in his last moments. The former Inquisitor's head had been presented to him as a gift, but it had been the theft of a life that was beyond his alone.

“Were you the one who executed him?” A sharpness catches on her voice, an angry edge.

“No, I was as much aware as you that I was intended to be assigned to this role.” purposefully softening his voice to disarm her boiling anger and perhaps her grief, he prompts again, “I meant what would happen to you.”

She takes a deep breath, then smiles a little, it's brittle and painful. “Someone in my role must perform, and if we don't, or we're considered undesirable...” She trails off again, looking away and brushing a stray tear. He recognises something different in this look, however, and knows that she's fending off memories of ghosts of those she had known, of those who had not lived up to this task.

Culber nods, knowing exactly what she's implying.

She looks back at him and studies him carefully for a moment, then takes another sip of her drink.

“I was a young girl, when they took me.” She starts to explain, slowly, carefully choosing her words. “My parents gave me up, or so they told me, but I'm not really sure if that's true. Although, realistically it could be... You see, I'm from the fringes.” she looks around carefully at that admission, as if there were anyone else present. There isn't, not even his kelpien, and Culber hasn't had the time to fit out his own room with bugs, but he understands her caution and it is well deserved.

Although she couldn't have sighted anything, she lowers her voice fractionally regardless. “The fringes, well they're at the edge of where the Empire's borders lie, where terrans who aren't part of the resistance or the empire flee there to try to make a life.”

“I'm aware of the fringes.”

“Right. Of course you would be.” She says with a nervous, almost brittle laughter.

Culber can tell this reminder settles a further insecurity in her, from experience he knows that her words could potentially land her in incredible trouble. So he remains open, and prompts her to instill faith that he's listening and not judging. Useful information can come from anywhere, so of course he is always listening.

“Why do you think they gave you away?” He tries to appeal to the emotional core of it.

Just from how the question lands on her, he knows it worked. A fondness replaces the sadness that had filled her face, but it lingers.

“I don’t remember a lot about my life before I came here. But I remember that it’s hard out there, you know? Low resources, little protection from species who...” she pauses, assessing “from those who have come to fear and hate terrans.”

“Does your handler believe that? Does he believe you’re terran?”

Eläi freezes midway bringing the glass to her lips again, her eyes shooting upwards to meet Culber's flat, cool stare.

Still she persists with her charade, composing herself a moment later as if Culber hasn't already seen the truth in her actions. “Of course he does, because I am.”

“You’re trying to fool the wrong person, Eläi.” Not hiding the steel in his voice, to re-instill who it is that sits in front of her, despite their good rapport.

“How did you...”

“I don’t need to remind you that what I do is hunting the truths in *all* things,” Taking a sip of his drink he leans back, relaxing his posture and his tone. “Your skin holds the touch of sun despite having not seen it in a long time, it’s a depth and a glow that cannot be replicated or reproduced no matter what skin routines you adhere to or how religiously you perform them. There is a certain flatness to those who live among the stars, in enclosed vessels. This suggests that your lineage has not served within the constraints of Imperial ships *for generations*. A disgraced family, perhaps, outcast to toil under the sun and away from the glory of Imperial ships. While that’s entirely possible for someone in your position, bound to another in servitude, who may have opted to be where they are in hopes to gain the of the Empire again, proving your devotion to Empire before earning a place within it again - if they allow it,” he taps the side of his glass, “this is not your story.”

“Your pupils do not violently retract when I reflect the light of the room into them from my glass here,” he wriggles the glass in his hand, the light catching and reflecting off it, for emphasis, “nor do you flinch, or turn away. It is a rare genetic mutation to not be sensitive to light, so rare that I have only seen it twice in full blooded terrans. So it too, is entirely possible that you are indeed a rare case. But it is these things and then the fact you have those,” he points to her face around his still clutched glass, “the jewels that stud your cheeks, they are not for decoration nor are they religiously affiliated.”

She sits stunned for a moment, her breaths shallow, lips barely parted, caught under the spotlight of his deductions. When he does not react, and does not lunge for her, Culber watches as the final layers of her facade come tumbling down.

With a deep breath and an acquiescent smile, she breaks open for him.

“My mother is not fully terran. Her mother was barzan and her father was terran, just like me. The genes are weak within me, it’s why I only need small filters,” she runs her fingers over the studs, “I am more my father than I ever was my mother in almost every sense. Except perhaps that I have her eyes, and her hair and need these, even in a small capacity. I didn't inherit her markings.” She brushes her fingers over her forehead as if caressing a memory.

“It’s one of the few memories I have of them, us, back at our homestead on that fringe planet we lived on. I don’t remember its name, but I do remember walking through the markets, holding onto my father’s hand. He stood out, there were very few terrans within that township and most kept to their own, certainly none had partners who weren’t terran. I remember the harassment he would receive when holding my hand, or just for being my father. My mother, too, because of who she had chosen to couple with. He didn’t care what people thought of him being terran, he loved my mother fiercely, and sometimes he would come home with cuts and bruises because of it. Sometimes people would tear his hand from mine, or my mothers while we were walking in the market. He wasn’t scared, though, he was proud of the life he chose away from the Empire and would passionately defend himself and his love for my mother and I.”

“Did you lie about your name to me?”

“I didn’t lie.” There’s a pause, it is not dishonest, rather it is sorrowful. “I don’t remember what my name had been before, either. It’s all in fragments, and I don’t remember how we were separated. I don’t even remember if they’re alive or not.”

“Do you think about fleeing the Empire, returning to the fringes to seek them out?” A dangerous question, they both know this, although it does not seem to scare her or deter her from answering in this openness she has allowed herself.

“This is the only life I’ve really ever known, but it’s still a life I was stolen away from. If you were free to leave, wouldn’t you?”

“No,” his answer comes without hesitation. He knows his place, and it is right here. It is the life he has chosen, and will continue to choose so long as it brings him closer to his ultimate goal - to destroy that which took everything from him.

She measures him for the man that he is and what his answer divulges about him. He doesn’t allow his mask to give away any more than that.

The evening goes on like this; Culber listening to Eläi as she divulges more stories over their drinks, becoming more relaxed in each other’s company. He finds her stories fascinating and insightful, full of new information that he can store away for use at a later time. Culber realises that she is not a threat at all, and is in fact fascinating and perhaps more importantly to his position, useful. She has seen so much and experienced even more, he could tell that this openness is something that she seldom is allowed to express. As a result, her stories are flowing freely, weaving between absurd and debaucherous the more she drinks. As she speaks, he can see that the weight of the world begins to shift from her shoulders just a little bit - although not quite as easily as the strap on her dress that seems to have a mind of its own and keeps falling off, and she absently fixes it too late every time, he remarks to himself, amused.

It is clear that she is happy to talk, and Culber is grateful that she is the one doing all of the

sharing, she never pries deeper than he offers - which is nothing. She may be naive and unpracticed in keeping these stories to herself, given the opportunity to speak of them, but not so naive that she doesn't know when not to push something she is not invited into.

After some hours, he offers to call on his kelpien to assist her with bathing. She refuses to be bathed by another, stating that she is just happy to have the time to herself.

"Will you come with me?" She asks sweetly, a little sing-song in her tipsy state as if to tempt him. "Just for company," she adds respectfully.

"No." He knows she asks nothing of him, but he cannot, and will not open himself to that regardless of that fact.

"What about your company?" Unphased, or unsurprised by his answer she moves on to addresses the kelpien, taking its hand. By the ease and openness in which she had turned to the kelpien, her voice light and clear, it is obvious that she had not taken the rejection personally and is just reaching out for something a little more intimate, perhaps even gentle. This is not something he can give her.

The kelpien withdraws its hand hastily, and looks down, away from her. "Only Master Culber can allow me to be used by others."

Culber watches as her expression falters, staring at his kelpien sadly for a moment, recognising that the same fences surround it, as they do her outside of this evening and his quarters. Carefully she turns her gaze back to look at Culber. She says nothing, but her eyes are asking, pleading, even.

"I permit it." He allows a short, curt nod towards his kelpien. "Anything she asks of you."

Relief and happiness flood her face as she smiles at Culber, thankful and warm. Then she takes the hand of the kelpien again, who this time does not retract from the touch, and leads them both into the bathroom.

It's not long before he can hear the talking coming from the bathroom, although it is distorted by the sound of the running water and soon thereafter, the splashes, even the occasional laughter.

What surprises him is the sound of singing. At first, it is only her voice, then another - the kelpien - joins her. He didn't even know they did sing or if they were capable of such things. It's been such a long, long time since he has heard anyone other than his prisoners sing. Unlike his prisoners, their song isn't melancholy or angry and hateful. He hesitates to assign the attribute of 'hopeful' to it, but that's the only word he can think of that suits it.

Frowning, he returns to collating his data modules for a shipment of Resistance captives due to arrive tomorrow, scanning through the profiles to see if there are any candidates that stand out that could potentially be useful for the project.

He moves onto working on integrating the code from his old quarters into his local computer's settings piecing together and tweaking the unfinished security protocols for the door system. Coming to terms with the fact that this will take up his free time over the next few weeks, customise it for his new space and the module it is to fit now, although even when it is properly installed, it is an ever evolving thing as threats change over time. He works silently setting up writing protocols, and tweaking old ones to fit, all while listening to the intermittent singing and soft talking from the bathroom door that is slightly ajar. They speak quietly, intimately to each other, but Culber can make out enough of it. They both recount their early lives - of which neither had much recollection of - when they first became of service to the Empire, then simpler subjects such as flowers, their favourite scents and what they dream certain foods might taste like.

It is late by the time that she emerges, and Culber offers her his bed. She gratefully accepts, blissfully sinking into the large and luxurious covers, silks and furs. She invites him to stay with her, strictly 'nothing funny' - she assures him, but as charming and as much of an unexpected pleasure she has been over the evening, he does not trust her. He declines. He does not sleep well with others.

She is long asleep by the time that he lays down on the couch, not without his knife under his pillow.

*

In the morning, he wakes before she does, having slept lightly out of an unshakable instinct that someone is in his proximity. He does not see her as a threat anymore, but he can not escape the hard-wiring of his body that warns him of any possibility of danger, at any time, from anyone, from anywhere.

His kelpien arrives with breakfast for one, either forgetting in its simplicity that there is another person to serve, or because it is incompetent. It profusely apologises babbling out of fear something about being his second day under his service and already a mistake. Knowing the value of loyalty, however, he instructs it not to make such a mistake again, scolding it briefly for being to inattentive then simply orders it to fetch more food, and a change of clothes for his guest.

"Something beautiful." He adds.

When the kelpien returns with another tray of food, and an ornate box, Culber takes them from it and sets the tray of food out at the end of his bed where she still lays, deep asleep and entirely unaware of movement in the room. A flash of envy at the ignorance, and pity for what that could result in one day. He takes out the dress and upon inspecting it, is pleased that it is indeed beautiful, even if simplistic - a deep mauve with golden veins that are laced

throughout it on fabric that is luxurious and flowing. He folds it neatly and sets it down next to the tray. Glancing back as he hears her starting to stir just as he steps out of the bedroom.

It isn't too long after he finishes clipping on his new, still unfamiliar armour that she emerges from the bedroom, dressed in the new garment, the fruit from her tray in one hand.

She spins around in front of Culber with a delighted smile. "Is this for me?" She mouths around a mouthful of fruit.

"It's a gift, to thank you for your....*services*."

She spins around again before leaning in and planting a kiss on his cheek. Culber's posture goes rigid, but watches her in novel fascination at such an open and free display of... joy?

As with anything in this world, her delight is cut short by the sound of the door chime which signifies the end of the little amount of freedom she had been loaned overnight. Their eyes catch each other for a moment and Culber watches as her facade is built back up, hiding the charming, slightly rough, but honest woman behind it that he had witnessed in this short time.

He initiates the protocol again, as she goes to gather her things, just in-case there is a plan of a grim ending to this so-called-gift, and she was an unknowing proponent in a wider scheme.

When he goes to open the door with Eläi standing behind him, she places her hand on his arm, halting him momentarily. "I will not forget you, Admiral Culber."

"You will do well to."

She smiles sadly. "In my world, Culber, I do not have the luxury of forgetting happy memories. They are prized more than a Tenebian amethyst."

He says nothing, only wondering if that is what his predecessor, her former lover, had promised her. So he simply nods and she falls behind him as he commands the door to open. There is nothing else to be said about their meeting and their parting.

As soon as the doors are open, he can feel his face twisting into a sneer. He had thought that the bottom feeder had repulsed him yesterday in their brief acquaintance, however, on learning more about how dishonourable and repulsive he is only makes Culber reel further.

He doesn't say a word to him, and watches him with cold, sharp eyes, long enough until it makes his morning visitor squirm under his gaze.

"The mornings always come too soon, don't they?" The Procurer's voice is piercing and dripping with insincerity. Even a simple utterance of his voice spikes a flare of irritation within Culber. If he ever had to hear this man's voice again, it would be too soon. "I trust she did well by you, Admiral?"

On this cue, Eläi moves out from behind Culber, moving through and beyond the barrier and takes her place behind the man who holds her invisible chains. He regards her in silence for a moment, knowing that whatever he answers it will seal her fate, one way or another.

“Simply exquisite.” He says, unsure to what percentage of it is a lie.

The moment passes between them, a private moment brought to the surface by design in the presence of others. The true nature of the history of the evening shared remains under sanctions in the memories of each, passing enough to sell the charade, the price of secrets is their silence and the greedy grin of a bottom-feeder.

Obviously pleased, the Procurer beams, relishing that he had provided a service that warrants such high praise. In this simple action he is taking all the credit for himself, despite not having a single thing to do with it. If anything, this vulture’s presence was a mar on their evening, and Culber despises him even more for it. What measure of respectability or effort had he truly achieved for himself?

Culber watches the eyes of Eläi who stands behind her keeper and he watches as the smallest of smiles touches her features, as she dips her head slightly, her long waves falling over her shoulders as silently thanks him. Culber only raises his chin slightly, drawing himself tall. There is no acknowledgement that he is able to impart her with, he has done all he can do for her, possibly already even more than he should have .

Then they leave and Culber watches as they disappear down the long hallway that ensnares both of them in very different ways.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings;

Implied / Talk about sex work

subject; canon slavery - kelpiens are in the MU): it's not Saru, specifically, I will clarify that.

I wanted to establish and talk about the kinds of interactions that Culber would have with those who are considered 'less' in this society, but in a reflection to how much a person looks like him (i.e terran), is how that dictates his treatment of them. ~~because of his brainwashing~~ Bonus points if you guess her real name.

Also do I want an apartment just like Culbers? Yes. Yes I do.

Anyways, excited to say there will be a verrrrrrrry familiar face, with blond hair next chapter. fiiiiiiiiiiiiinalllyyyyyyy. omg, it's only taken 30k to meet him for the first time, wtf, me.

Thank you for reading! As always I really love your thoughts and feedback, it's tremendously appreciated.

Thank you to [Cygfa](#) for Beta-ing this huge chapter. I super appreciate all your hard work and voice of reason.

You can also come find me over at [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#) - I post drawings of Stabbyboos and regular Culmets stuff I do there too.

Baseline

Chapter Summary

What resides within the mind?

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings In End Notes.

I know it's been a long time since an update but I've been going through a lot with some incredibly severe mental health things, a (genuine) mental breakdown which resulted in temporarily leaving my career, moved interstate, getting engaged (good!!) now planning overseas move...the list goes on. So I'm really sorry but things have been crazy. So much so, I haven't even watched S3 of Disco yet. I haven't abandoned this story at all, it's near and dear to my heart and an important part of my journey to healing, and an allegory to navigating my own trauma - so no I will never abandon it.

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

Beyond the glass that separates them, his subject sits in a room.

Alone, and cuffed to a chair.

He's left his subject to sit like this; bound and waiting with a containment lock around his neck and an activated privacy shield blocking his entire vision out. He can breathe - for now, or for as long as Culber will allow it at least.

All it would take is a simple command to the interface that Culber currently holds in his hand. This simple command will replace all the breathable air that filters through the face-shield with a noxious gas of Culber's choice. He *could* choose between a neurotoxic gas that would induce either hallucinations - a simple and effective tactic breaking his subjects' mind - or one that would attack their nervous system, filling every fibre of them with a fire-like pan -

without the mess of actual fire. Or, he could simply poison them. All with the simple, quick flick of his wrist.

He could, but he doesn't. Instead he lets his subject sit alone in this sensory deprivation state.

Isolation is another tactic of his, basic as it is. His subject is exposed to nothing other than his own breathing and heartbeat as ill-kept company. Left alone like this, with only your thoughts, becomes maddening after a time.

Culber has afflicted his subject with this state, pacifying him into this silence with his vision severed, the blindfold-like shield suspending him in perfect darkness, the chair's straps stopping any movement. The abrupt manner with which he had been captured and brought here would have caused a deep, unsettling fear in his subject. Fears like these, experienced under unknown circumstances, will at the very least instill a panic within him if he's hiding anything - as is always the case without fail. Culber will turn this against him, letting the fear build until he can use it to extract so that he can use it to extract as accurate an evaluation he needs to. *Everyone is hiding something.*

Mirroring the perfect silence of the hapless subject beyond the glass, Culber stands in silence with disciplined concentration, studying this pathetic thing sitting on the other side, awaiting his arrival without knowing that he is already being watched. Despite having his vision temporarily stolen from him, the glass that separates them for now is one-way, so even after Culber enters the holding room, his subject will not be able to look inside this waiting room. Perhaps that's a pity, Culber won't be able to elicit a reaction out of him when he catches sight of all the glorious pain inducing tools that line the walls of this little ready-room.

It doesn't take long, certainly shorter than he anticipated, but Culber watches as his subject begins to squirm out of impatience from being bound and left in this prolonged, deafening solitude. But even after being left like this without respite for a while, his vitals disappointingly give no sign of any nervousness he might be experiencing. Maybe he should consider the hallucinations, just for fun.

Culber sucks his teeth in annoyance and scowls remembering the promise he made not to break this one. The array of tools that flank him will lay unused for this session. Pity, he could use the outlet.

The fantasy stories of old gave way to a revolution of many inventions that still serve in daily life today. Annoyingly, a serum that when injected tricks the subjects mind into unwittingly spilling all the secrets and truths it holds, was not one of them. However over the years Culber has cultivated a tool that suffices in its place. He considers it to be vastly more interesting and vibrant regardless. This tool of his lets him connect and see inside the mind of his subjects but while it does not manifest constructs into tangible images - the mind is to incorporeal for this - it does allow him to witness, trace and scrutinise the synopsis of his subjects brain all while he questions them, taunts them. Using this he pushes them beyond their ability to keep their grasp on the truths of the present - and those walls they have within their mind come crumbling down, spilling their secrets within.

Usually, he'll use it in conjunction with a wider array of tools that make using it quick and efficient. Since he is barred from doing so in this instance, he will have to make do with a fraction of his usual arsenal.

Culber takes the neural device from the nearby shelf, placing it onto a little cart alongside his obsidian scalpels, while their assignment is to simply sit there and gleam menacingly as they'll (likely) only be for show this time, it's a comfort to him to have them there regardless. He knows well that the show is sometimes half the battle.

The door to his side hisses open, glancing over he watches Pollard approach with the assistant he hand-selected in tow.

"Admiral," Pollard calls to him, his new title rolling off her tongue with ease. He likes that. She hands him the final aspect to his kit; a small data cube that will be calibrated when he activates the neural-dive.

He silently takes the cube, placing it neatly on the cart alongside the neural device, adjusting it compulsively so that it sits perfectly aligned to the straight side of it.

As he looks up Pollard is looking at him with an impatient look that only she and very few other people are permitted to give him. "Those too," she states, wagging her finger towards his insignia.

"I'm aware," He responds flatly, suppressing his annoyance. If he is to go into this level headed he cannot allow a simple remark to get under his skin, trivial as it may be; they have company. Regardless, he sheds all of the defining insignia that adorn his bare red jumpsuit and places them on the ledge underneath the window. While they are small, useless, little tin things, they had placate as a final measure in lieu of his armour and regalia he had not been permitted to wear during this interrogation. Without them feels the burning hole of where they should be placed, and detests that without them there, there's no telling who he is, nor how high he is ranked and what power that denotes over people.

All he has now are his obsidian scalpels, and he is not willing to forgo those. Even if he won't use them.

Having been instructed by the Emperor herself to enter this session completely anonymous, just as his subject had been presented to him, he did not possess the usual arsenal of information he usually would going into an internal job. He knows nothing of his subject other than that his pale skin almost glows under the harsh bright lights of the room, and that his mildly neurotic fidgeting is seemingly unrelated to nervousness if his vitals are anything to go by. And vitals rarely lie. Culber had not even been given a scrap of information on his subject beyond what the Emperor had told him during their outing, highly unusual in the case of an internal affair. The Emperor clearly stated that this mutual full anonymity was required to retain a truly neutral space. Such drastic measures are rarely taken, but for all he doesn't know about his subject, what this tells him is that he is an unusually unique case.

There's a node on the side of the door that he places his hand on, making the door hiss open under his silent command. It will only respond to his bio-signature, a security measure in the case of any attempted run-aways or insubordination from the rare case a spy on the inside

foolishly blows their cover. He steps inside the chamber, hovering cart and his assistant obediently in tow, all without being heard by his subject.

Their ears are assaulted by a pitched frequency that targets the inner ear directly, simultaneously muffling out all noise and filling the room with a high pitched wail. He's used to it, it doesn't phase him, but his assistant is not - pathetically contorting his face at his discomfort. Suddenly being hit with it without warning of what is coming makes his subject thrash in his chair - at least as much as the straps holding him down will allow., As it is, his bound arms are unable to reach his ears in what would be a futile attempt to shield them from this sudden assault on his senses.

Culber comes to a stop directly in front of his struggling subject, close and looming over him as his assistant takes position behind him, out of sight, and stops the frequency.

Silently he smiles to himself at his subjects' laboured, frantic breathing and the way his far-too-pale hands go simultaneously red and then even whiter under strained tension. A moment's visible pleasure is all Culber grants himself, before he sets his face into a loathsome scowl and deactivates the face shield.

Pale face, pale hair and stormy, dark blue eyes blow out at the sudden flood of light. His wild, red rimmed, frantic eyes match Culber's own scowl with an even more fearsome one. An unusually unique case indeed.

"You better have a good reason to have taken me away from my work to bring me here," his blond subject spits with fury, eyes wandering over Culber's plain, red uniform that clearly denotes that he is Imperial. "You're wasting my time. My *valuable* time."

"Who says you're not wasting mine? Who says your time is more valuable than mine?" Mostly he keeps a level voice although he refuses to restrain the hint of a growl at the end of his words.

"I do," claims his subject "your basic scrubs tell me enough about that."

Despite being strapped to a chair in an unknown place under unknown circumstances, faced with an unknown man who is more than clearly in command of the scenario, who has *sharp blades mere inches from his more than adept hands*, it strikes him as bold that this man can't help but run his tongue. *Foolish*.

'*Basics scrubs*, ' it takes more energy than he cares to admit to suppress a twitch. Culber could sneer, but he refrains from that too, remaining entirely silent to the bold false sentiments of bravery. They'll see soon enough how well his sentiments hold up when the guise of a sharp tongue cannot act as a veil to the secrets of his mind. Culber almost wishes he will find a fatal flaw within this little shit.

"Do you really think there is anything basic about what you're doing here?"

"Do you even know who I am? Or *who* exactly it is that I am important to?"

Culber smiles in deceit, despite not knowing the first. He knows enough, and despite the fact

the conviction behind the latter part concerns him.

“Do you?”

“Your deflective questions bore me, hurry up and get the knives out, would you?" It's always too easy to hide behind bold words, so Culber decides, based on his subjects' insistence, that he's either scared, or a masochist. Either would do just fine.

"You'll earn no favors on a private stage for your bravado and showmanship. Luckily for you, you don't have to perform for anyone."

“Is anyone watching?” His subject motions his head towards the wall behind Culber.

“No,”

Pollard has left by now - confirmed from the digital trace of facility permissions granted that he pulls up on his screen - he can tell on his screen she's making headway on the day's usual activity, and has moved back to the helm of the facility to intake the arrivals from a boarded resistance carrier that had been intercepted in the system next to theirs. As Culber would be busy with this assignment - a priority one - he had ensured that Pollard would be there in his stead. As his assistant is inside, standing silently in position behind his subject, the adjoining room is empty, and he's here to observe and comb the evidence with him. The distinction is vast enough.

Culber watches this calculating man consider this for a moment. "Then what am I doing here?"

"Answering some questions."

"No knives?"

"No knives."

"Seems a little benign for your people."

'Your people.' Strikes Culber as an odd choice of words to use.

"Mmh..." Culber hums in noncommittal agreement, as if nothing about that statement has phased him. The worst thing that could happen, if he wanted a satisfactory outcome of this situation, is if walls of defence were thrown up. If he is to do the work he needs to do, go through the Criterion and determine if this man is who he says he is and will not be a detriment to the Empire, he needs to lure him into a sense of ease. As eased as you can get when strapped to a chair in a chamber after having been captured and brought here. It could potentially get incredibly messy otherwise, besides remembering what the Emperor had warned against in their prior meeting - that he is unhinged enough as it is and that he swore not to break him.

Simple questions it has to be. It's certainly not the most exciting tactic but as simple as this Criterion tool is, it is nothing short of effective.

"Is this routine?"

"Routine enough."

While it is not the most common occurrence, (and certainly it usually does not last once Culber starts to enact his extraction techniques on his subjects), it is his subject that gives Culber a scrupulous squint.

This happens on the very rare occasion that his subject thinks that they can turn the events at hand around and perhaps even get inside *his* head. They never can, of course, but they try nonetheless. Like any other struggle in this position, it is fruitless. What's unusual is that his subject very obviously doesn't want anything from Culber; he doesn't want to make him twist and falter and his stabs at him aren't intended to be grievous wounds, or the blind lashing out of a scared and angry creature. They are thorns to be sure, prickly but a part of him and clearly built up as a defence system. There is no disputing this, Culber knows the personality type. There is no active malice, just the jabs of a prideful man.

"Then what are those for?" the bound man asks while looking at the obsidian scalpels, jutting his head in their direction.

"Contingency." Culber says with an honest, cruel smile but with no desire to further clarify. If he is too much of a moron to understand that, he won't last long.

Opening a small box that sits on the cart, Culber pulls out two small golden discs. Pressing the sides on both of them, they activate with a near soundless hum, the dull rhythmic frequencies spiking in pitch when he places the discs on each temple of this obscenely pale man, who glares at him all the while. He understands he has no agency in this.

They're beautiful, as is their song, and the songs they're instrumental in drawing out from the depths of the minds they are attached to. Weaving his hands through the system calibration with practiced, fluid motions he is taken over by pleasure this task elicits from him. A marriage of concentration and dedication to his craft.

"*If you wouldn't mind*," A sardonic, tart voice cuts through his thought pattern unexpectedly, "I'd rather the knives to whatever that hideous excuse for a tune was."

"Lucky you," Culber says coolly, "If you keep running your mouth, maybe I will change my mind and get my knives out."

"To what? Kill me?" His bound captive scoffed, unphased and foolishly dismissing the threat. "That would be insubordination, I'm more important to the fleet than you'll ever amount to, *Scrubs*."

"Bold words coming from a man who's strapped to this chair, helplessly at *my* mercy." He pauses, stifling a snarl. "Who would care to heed your screams of anguish? You will not be the first among the ranks that I've murdered, *nor the most important* - not even anywhere close to it," He hisses, his subject going still. " - and you won't be the last."

The way that this stern, pale man clamps his mouth into a severe, thin, tight line, assures Culber that he's shut him up for the time being. As mouthy as he is, it seems he's determined enough to live.

"Let's begin" He states, pressing a command on his screen that manifests a stool, spiralling up out of the floor, directly facing the bound man. He receives nothing more than a tight lipped nod in response.

Culber pulls the sister component to the device out from the little box, placing the two little gold discs on his temple, mirroring his subject's.

With a quick motion over his screen, he pulls up and expands an interface that only is visible to those with the temple interface-links. It fills the space between them and their twin, gold discs humming flourishes in a pitch spike and his subject's head lolls backwards, hitting the headboard behind him. His sharp blue eyes are replaced by bloodshot white as they roll back into his head.

"Interface," Culber commands both the device, and his subject.

"*Interface*," His subject replies in the flat monotonous tone which this process induces, the sharp personality removed and separated from him now until this portion is completed.

Culber watches as the charts spark to life in front of him, ebbing with the life they represent. For a short few seconds they undulate before him, the wavelengths finding their baseline.

"Verify," Culber commands, reaching and twisting his hands in the space between them, bringing a component of the interface to the forefront, letting his hand hover over the emitter switch.

"Conscript; Two-Six-P-One-Zero-S-One-Eight. Stardate; Unknown. Provence allegiance; Deneva. Previous Credentials: Unknown. Fleet Division: Unknown. Field: Engineering, unknown."

Culber frowns at the charts hovering above him. 'Unknowns' should never be part of these subliminal interfacings, and even on the unusual chance that they occur - they never make it past this interface link. None of the Resistance's shoddy attempts at subsetting information within a sleeper has ever been sophisticated enough to butt up against his meticulously crafted neural linking. Nothing has ever come close. At this stage he is not suspicious due to the rest of the transmissions charting consistent to a regular subset of neural patterns to frightening regularity. A regularity that is too precise for an attempt by the Resistance. If the Emperor had a hand in the creation of this conscripts subset baseline, just as she had singled him out for the task, conducting this with all the high security measures that had to be put in place for this to even happen at all... Well, he can only conclude that she is expecting a great deal from this sharp tongued recruit. If his sharp tongue doesn't get in the way of his survival.

He hits the button hovering under his fingertips. "Begin," telling both the machine and the man.

“Carnage, a system created carnage to systematically create carnage,” With a flat tone, and eyes still rolled back into his head, his subject starts reciting the subliminal implant that is embedded in all Imperial personnel. It is mostly a jumble of incohesive sentences that will be cross-linked to an interrogator’s system. It is impossible to replicate, impossible to manufacture or alter and provides a final and sure-fire way to weed-out any Resistance plants who make it past other blockages, infiltrating their ranks. Anyone who fails is immediately executed, or taken to a facility like Culber’s for further extraction - or in the case of the subject before him taken directly to the Emperor as per the request of her Highness.

“ - A system revolves around a system of non-revolt. To revolt is to submit to a system of carnage, revolting pricket, a thorn, gardens of systems transfixing on revolt, a system against carnage, a system against being a system against, systematically transfixing on - ”

Culber himself focuses on the words as he reads them in live succession, matching word for word ensuring not a single one is out of place, missing, or otherwise wrong.

But as the monologue comes to an end, Culber is assured that everything checks out. His subject's head remains tilted back, his eyes still rolled back as well, but his lips have stilled. He’s mildly amused staring at the sight. It must be a rare occurrence for this mans eyes to be so still, waiting on someone else, when they were so impatient and frenzied before. He permits the moment to linger a few beats longer than necessary.

“End sequence.”

Almost immediately his subject's agency returns to his body. With a sharp inhale he scrunches up his face as his head snaps back upright.

“Wh-what. Ah, *fuck* , what did you do?”

Culber ignores the question while his subject continues to scrunch up his eyes, blinking hard to shake the pain from the strained muscles.

Pressing his finger to one of his discs, making an empty grasp, Culber pulls up a holo-sphere with the other, twisting and jerking his fingers open to release the sphere, commanding it to take helm of the space. A holographic imitation of his subject's brain takes shape, dull without activity for now without the activation of the neural-dive.

His subject jerks backwards as Culber reaches for his head, towards his disc, but with nowhere to go and his pride stopping him from thrashing his head like an unruly child, he subdues but remains stiff before him - finally understanding his place in all of this.

Holding a breath within his chest, Culber steels himself for the next part. Connecting and syncing with another's mind is often an unpleasant sensation, sickening at best, excruciating at worst.

He presses down, and waits...

He breathes, in and out and in again.

He waits... But neither the sickness nor the pain comes, which is... *Odd* .

So often when Culber initialises these connections he is met with an onslaught of fury, confusion and muted blood curdling screams which could nearly go toe to toe with the everpresent screams locked within his own mind.

No pain, no sickness. The only thing present is the unease settling over him at the feeling of a rolling thunderous approach, something akin to when waters return to a desolate river bed, of the full brunt of consciousness. If it weren't for his keen eyes holding tightly onto the reality in-front of him - his real surroundings - he would swear that rapid, rolling waters had crashed into him, swirling past in a treacherous fury. Culber recognises waters such as these. They are perilous, but not nearly as perilous as his sharp tongue

These waters-that-are-not-waters, that are the manifestation of his captives racing mind, rush past Culber, pulling at him and enticing him to let go and be swept further into their depths. Thoughts fill every space like a forest of kelp, thick, waving and nourishing to every concept that comes alive in this space. This forest within his mind is thick, vast, impenetrable and seemingly listless to the untrained. To know, watch and anticipate the ebb and flow of life and thoughts in their darting glimpses and manifestations takes a strength of mind and well tuned mental agility.

Culber stands back, pushing against the un-materialised flow, and familiarises himself with this new, strange state of being. While the structure is familiar, it is unlike any connection that Culber has ever initiated before; the ease with which the systems run their course and initialise, ready for use is ...unsettling. This mind is Terran, unmistakably, certainly not alien, but there is something lying beneath, or perhaps within, this current that is something more than Terran.

For the first time in his career, he wonders if his captive can feel what he does. There is no indication that manifests within the readings of his vitals. Perhaps the indication is in the way his captives' hairs stand on end ever so slightly, but the room around them is cool. Although he swears that these deep blue eyes that are locked so intensely onto his eyes so knowingly engulfing him, ensnaring him, are luring him deeper and deeper, he does wonder.

What secrets lay in wait for him within these perilous forests of his mind?

“You’re a scientist,” He begins.

“Now that we have a firm grasp of the obvious,”

“Then try to keep up,” he sneers

Culber snaps his fingers, and intangible holo-connectors attach to the tips of the fingers of his left hand, allowing him to have full control over the graphic that hovers in-between them both so that he can quickly adjust the image in live succession with his questions.

“I’m going to ask you a series of questions, and between them I will say a word which you will immediately repeat back to me. If you fail to do so or respond in a way that I simply

otherwise don't like...."

"What quantifies what you decide that 'you like' or don't?"

Culber leans forward slightly. "Answered your own question didn't you? I decide on those factors, so that's up to me to know, isn't it?"

His subject's frown deepens. "Hardly seems fair,"

Culber's fingers move in a quick motion and the moment they still his victim yelps sharply, his hands contorting from a momentary flash of pain.

"Simple enough to follow. But like I said," he leans back, keeping his gaze on this captive "try to keep up. Traitor."

"Traitor," His subject repeats without any fluxes in his vitals nor any inflections within their mind space. This is designed to catch vermin such as this unaware. He passes, he does not flag.

The following sequence is filled with a frenzy of sharp snappy words designed to elicit reactions. Most do not flag to the average person as anything discernibly connected to much of anything. Little do people realise how intertwined everything is, how interwoven your mind links to certain phrases, words, to concepts deep within the recesses of the mind. It is the most unsuspecting that triggers the responses buried under layers of thick Technetium barriers of the mind.

It is Culber's job to be the waters that erode the mineral, or the fires to bring the mind to melting point if needed. Be it the wash or flames... the truth always is received when the brain can't keep up with rapid fire onslaught and yields too beautifully to beg for a surrender.

His observations are input and traced through neurological impulses he has specifically trained for his systems to pick up and record on his PADD, or manually as physical intimidation makes the nerves tick, makes the barriers crumble.

With his notes on his onslaught gathered with ample data, he moves back to traditional questions.

"What is the universe to you?"

"It's my garden." He responds without flinching, the wild eyed, feral blond man adorns a wistful smile - madness creeping onto the edges of his lips. "I sow seeds and it yields to me, I reap from the fields that lay beyond the veil of space-time itself, a place where I become God."

Ah, finally, the window to the unhinged the Emperor promised he contained.

There are bursts of light that set the forests within the scientist's brain aflame, and it surges in a white light of fire as synapsis crackle and flare, pathing their way through the complex fields, dancing and scattering before him. It truly comes alive in front of him in an eruption

of vivid life. Culber watches fascinated, completely mesmerised at the microscopic synapses that bloom and spark within this mind. He follows the wave all the way through this glowing network of consciousness, thought and personhood, struck with an awe he fights to keep in check. He has seen within the mind of countless Terrans and creatures alike, but he is spellbound at the breathtaking beauty of activity within this man's mind. Under his plain red uniform, he can feel his hairs stand on end all over his body. He takes a measured breath to steady himself.

“Was it the wrong answer?” His subject asks tauntingly, he knows it’s not because he has not been jolted by a flash of pain by Culber yet, but it is clear his voice has an edge of uncertainty to it.

Culber withdraws his eyes from the projection of this man's mind, and looks over him in assessment. “It’s unusual.”

“So I’ve been told before.” He says this as if it is a compliment, as if he revels in it. It’s one thing to rise up and stand out, but to be ‘unusual’...well, that’s just dangerous.

By who? Culber turns back to the projection, expanding it further readying himself to watch more closely on his next question. “Do you believe in our Empire?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I don’t.” This dangerously strange man remains unwavering in his conviction. The activity did not bloom as brightly in his brain at this question, but he can tell there is something within the reeds, something just beyond that is being withheld.

“That’s a dangerous disposition.”

“It’s the truth.” It is - or at the very least his subject believes it to be, there lies the difference - but Culber can not only feel it around him via their connection, but also can see the confirmation clearly on the display. Whoever this man is, he is not a liar. “The Empire lacks vision. That’s where I come in. I believe I’ll be the one to lead it into a new era of truly inspired greatness.”

There it was again, that burst of blooms, illuminating and catching. This time Culber connected this burst of activity to his inspiration, but what else? It was so... *other* .

“Lead the Empire? High ambitions like that often prove traitorous.”

His subject waves his hand dismissively. “Not *lead* . I have no inspiration to be the puppeteer of an Empire, I assure you. My work, my inventions, they are essential to leading the Empire to a whole new realm of power. I have no interest in doing the *actual leading* .”

Culber has not seen a brain like this, at least not a Terran brain like this - and it is indeed Terran, there is no mistake about that - but... But what? There is something else about it.

“Tell me, how have you altered yourself?”

This time, his captives' eyes snap up at him in shock, as if he truly expected Culber not to pick up on his little strange secret.

“So far you’ve told me the truth, that I know - I can see it. However, your brain isn’t *quite* Terran. You know our stance on not-quite-Terrans. I’ll know if you’re lying to me.” He reaches out to the cart beside him, tracing the edges of the blades that sit laying in wait for his deft hands. He lowers his voice, his curiosity easily masked as a menacing growl. “What have you done?”

His face falls stern as his steel blue-eyes trace the motions of the knives edge under Culber's fingers, it takes him a few moments to stabilise himself before his eyes turn back to Culber's. He can feel him readying an answer, this is the mark of a man who is not proficient in lying, he has to choose his words carefully, form pathways that are close enough to the truth, but far enough away to keep his secrets within. Culber simply watches him, his scrupulous gaze unbreaking.

“I am pure, and wholly Terran. Any alterations that have affected my brain that you might be seeing would be the side-effects of my work - and experiments, - and those are the reasons why I have been conscripted in the first place. I can’t comprehend how you were not informed of this.”

Culber watches the activity flare and spiral, there is no lie, not even when he said he is wholly Terran. *Curious* .

“Eugenics?”

“Naturally.”

“*Who* performed them on you?”

“I did! Always, and only myself.” His subject boasts without hesitance, “I may just dabble in it, but I’m more than confident in my ability. Although...” he looks Culber up and down with those sharp eyes. “.. from the sounds of it, that seems like something that would be more in your area of expertise.”

Culber didn’t bother to suppress the smug smirk that tugged at the corner of his mouth. He didn’t answer, but that would be enough.

Yes, it is . - Of sorts.

However it leads to a sea of questions about this strange man. Why perform eugenics on *himself*? What reason did these alterations serve? *Why wouldn’t he utilise experimenting on a second party?* If you fuck it up - and that is the most common outcome - you risk losing everything you’ve ever worked towards if anything, *even the smallest thing*, went wrong. What experiment is worth risking your own life? You’re either a fool, greedy or committing cardinal sin against the Empire.

If Culber weren't in complete control of himself he might have openly gawked or more likely laughed at this dangerously smug captive of his. The moronic absurdity of how mad and reckless it is to perform eugenics on yourself - especially untried and untested experimental eugenics - is nothing short of staggering. Culber could never - would never - risk it with Project Artemis. If he were ever in the dire need to use it, he'd have had to have perfected it beyond measure before he would ever consider it, or truly risk losing it all. Well, at least after performing it, and failing, he wouldn't likely be aware of said risk in the first place. The worst result would be him being catastrophically, unrecoverably, totally and completely gone. He himself wouldn't even know who he was, or what had happened to him, let alone what he had lost. Perhaps he would simply go violently mad. Regardless, it is a moot question in relation to him - the project isn't designed for him and he has plenty of live minds at his disposal.

He has what he came for, enough answers to satisfy the Emperor, and enough questions remaining to keep his interest alive and an eye out for this unusual creature. That is, if he doesn't end up dead half as fast as he moves his tongue.

He initialises the disconnection sequence, the forests receding and rolling waters simply ebbing away. Unsure if he had been otherwise affected by the connection, Culber watches as a shiver runs through his subject's body after he detaches and places both of their discs back into their containment box.

"...Is that all?" The bound man asks, sceptical.

"We're done here,"

"You're not going to...Stick me with needles? Slice the skin on my fingers with those -" he nods towards the gleaming obsidian scalpels laying in wait of a task more bloodthirsty than this, "- and peel it back, or just say... throw me in the agonisers to see what I garble out?"

"So eager to please," Culber croons. "But I don't need your uninspired suggestions to know exactly what I'd want to do to you, *as eager as I am to do so*," Culber purses his lips, leaning back, "- at least not this time."

His subject's impossibly pale, thick eyebrows arch upwards as he very clearly tries to make sense of something that isn't there.

"I don't like repeating myself," Culber states firmly, returning his attention and gaze towards the physical monitor that he picked back up from the cart beside them. On it, he reads through the small allotment of information that has now been released on his subject. As sparse as it is - it's something.

What's curious about the blocks of information here is that the primary focus is biology and physics. Or - more notably - how heavily leaning the focus of biology is in regards to phytology and mycology but *equally physics*. What kind of invested interest in *plants* did the Emperor have? Also - why does it require such high security surrounding this investment? Does this interest make sense of the environment of his mind?

“Your knowledge of *botany* varies, it seems,” As Culber emphasises the profession, scrolling through the credentials and the angry way in which the blond man before him twitches doesn’t escape his notice.

“Biology,” he mutters sharply.

“Mmh,” Culber pointedly marking no interest to correct himself, scrolling through another tab of information. It’s all so specific. “You’re well up in your knowledge of poisons, however; Dimethylmercury, Aconite, Botulinum, Psilocybe azurescens - ” Culber ignores how his subjects eyes light up at the mention of the last one, “- and particularly your applications of le-matya venom derivatives could prove useful.”

“Yet,- ” He continues, checking the notes on the file, inadequate, of course - there is nothing further of interest there, so he plays a little on his bound subjects agitation, “ - you know nothing of practical gardening,” Culber remarks coolly, handing the padd off to his assistant.

His subject gives a start at the hand of the unknown person reaching out to take the padd from behind him. Alarmed, he doesn’t take his vision off him as he tracks Culber's assistant coming around to take his place by Culber's side.

Ah, so trusting, he really thought there was no one else in here. Perhaps he knows nothing of practical observational skills, either.

The assistant pulls up his dataset from his padd and hands it over to Culber. With both PADDs in-hand, he cross-references his assistant’s observations from throughout the interrogation process. Culber is unsurprised and certainly no less pleased to see consistent patterns were picked up by his assistant, too. If it weren’t for glaring mistakes and missing interlinks. This is however precisely the reason why Culber had hand picked this particular officer as his assistant. He’s been in his position for too long, with too many inconsistencies and failing to show anything of use to them - to the Empire. If this lacklustre officer had thought Culber having hand picked him to aid on this assignment was an opportunity to prove his worth, or vie for an in-facility promotion - he was wrong.

He waves his assistant over who had retreated after handing the PADD over and motions him to stand in-front of his subject who is still strapped in the chair and awaiting his own liberation from this place. They both wait on Culber, one waiting instruction, as if he would have the privilege to enact on Culber’s final valuation, the other impatient for his freedom.

Locking onto those stormy blue eyes filled with trepidation, without breaking his gaze in quick fell swoop he sweeps up an obsidian blade from the cart and rams it deep into the base of his assistants skull. Instant kill. He crumples to the ground in a lifeless heap and a sharp crack as his head hits the floor.

Trepidation is replaced by wild fear as Culber steps over the crumpled body that lays lifeless on the floor. In an unabashed display of fear his jittery subject is completely rendered still as Culber stands over him.

"A quick death to someone who has served his purpose, but cannot be kept alive."

Culber reaches down, and pulls the blade out from where it had been deeply embedded; it makes a slight sucking noise as it is released. Directing his attention back to this fearful thing before him, he places the bloodied blade on the soft fleshy underside of his jaw. Obediently yielding, his subject raises his head to look squarely into Culber's formidable gaze.

"The same *mercy* will not be extended to those who cannot fulfil theirs. I *personally* see to that."

With his other hand, he releases the bonds holding down this strange man with the strange mind, but his subject does not yet dare to move. Moments drag by heavily between them as they stare into each other's eyes, unmoving - and at a length that anyone else should consider unnerving.

Culber breaks first, leaning back and needlessly flipping the blade for show, before tucking it into a pocket at his side. Taking a step backwards, he clicks his fingers and instantly, in response to this command, a compartment from the ceiling descends. Laying on a plush velvet square is an Imperial badge. Or, really it's a placeholder that houses a simple tracker - the real one will replace this one upon the arrival of his uniform within his quarters, if Culber's approval takes hold that is. This temporary tracker acts as a proxy, in case he acts suspiciously in between now and then. It's a frivolous protocol, and Culber doesn't see its worth, but so be it. When his subject takes this placeholder badge that has been activated within the system., Band by the time he'll arrive back in his quarters, his Imperial uniform will have arrived as well.

Brushing his thumb over the markings on the badge he notes that it is a lieutenants badge. This immediate promotion from fresh conscript to being lieutenant makes Culber wonder why this man is so important. It's not a high rank by any means, but it does mean that he skips straight over the gruelling grind of clawing your way up the ranks to gain a small grasp of power. So why has the Emperor taken such interest in him to elevate him so high so quickly, and already expect so much from him? Who is he - and more importantly, what is he here for?

A fleeting sense of pity - and no more - crosses his mind for this bright-eyed recruit who's been given a position of power unaware of all that lurks in each and every Imperial soul, waiting to strike down those who stand in their way of power. Culber wonders how long he will survive.

The badge placed in his gloved hand, he extends it to the naive conscript, who has now risen from his seat and stands before him without the faintest suggestion of perturbation about his circumstances.

"Welcome to the Imperial fleet, Lieutenant."

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings;

Mild torture.

Brain/mind quasi-faux-science.

Talk of gas/noxin as death / torture device

Mild violence.

Thank you for reading! As always I really love your thoughts and feedback, it's tremendously appreciated.

Thank you to [Cygfa](#) for Beta-ing this huge chapter. I super appreciate all your hard work and voice of reason, and above all for your infinite patience and your incredibly kind heart in my personal life through this time...Thank you.

You can also come find me over at [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#) - I post drawings of Stabbyboos and regular Culmets stuff I do there too.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!