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STAR TREK™

CORPS OF ENGINEERS:

Signs from Heaven

Phaedra M. Weldon

Based upon *Star Trek*™ and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*™

Created by Gene Roddenberry,

and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*™

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POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney

An Original Publication of POCKET BOOKS



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1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

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ISBN-10: 1-4165-4979-X

ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-4979-6

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Chapter

1

Captain's Log, Stardate 54683.2.

We've arrived in orbit around one of the Federation's oldest member planets, Ardana. Our mission is to prevent Stratos—Ardana's infamous floating city—from crashing down on the populace below. Our first order of business is to stabilize the city's descent before any work can be done on repairing the anti-gravity engines. Chief Engineer Conlon is working on using the da Vinci's tractor beam as a safety net to test last-minute safeguards.

"Captain." The newly promoted Lieutenant Songmin Wong spoke up. "We're being hailed from Ardana—it's Captain Scott."

Captain David Gold pulled his lips into a thin line as he saved his log. "On screen."

The familiar and easygoing supervisor of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers filled the screen. He smiled broadly beneath his bushy, salt-and-pepper mustache. "Ah, David. We've got to stop meeting like this."

Gold chuckled. "Seems like only last month we were chasing Rod Portlyn around the galaxy."

"Aye—I still haven't made it back to Earth since then. Not when this came up. You lot made record

time.”

“Because I have the best crew in the Corps, Scotty. I only hope you and those other engineers haven’t mucked things up.”

“No, no. The Edison left yesterday once we knew you were available.”

“How is Commander Alverson?”

Captain Gold had received Captain Scott’s change of assignment orders three days ago, along with a couriered package, diverting he and the *Vinci* from a mining colony on *K’Iny* to the floating city of *Ardana*. The Edison’s first officer had taken a dagger in the chest while exploring *Stratos*, releasing a trap set by a group of revolutionaries known as the *Disruptors*, more than a century ago.

“Dr. Balboa said it was close—the dagger nicked the heart bad enough that they headed for Starbase 375 and their surgical specialists at warp nine.”

Gold frowned. He wasn’t pleased about the possibility of other traps laying in wait throughout the abandoned city. *Stratos* had remained empty until an abrupt drop during one of the planet’s recent holidays. “No way to know where those traps are, is there?”

Scott shook his head. “Unfortunately you know when you step in it. I’ve had six engineers combing the engine room and central control. Nothing untoward happening there.”

“Reading these reports I see we only have three days left to stabilize *Stratos* or land it before it descends. Rapidly.”

Gold suppressed a smile as he recalled *Domenica Corsi*’s suggestion to simply blow it out of the sky. As the engines failed the planet’s own gravitational pull would work against it, using its weight to bring it down. If they couldn’t fix the problem or land it, a tractor beam might prove to be their only solution.

If not—as *Corsi* said—there were always phasers. The *U.S.S. Bataan* was on her way to lend the power needed in case neither of their solutions worked.

“But first, about those baubles you sent us—”

“Aye.” Captain Scott nodded. “They’re part of a private collection of the only artifacts taken from *Stratos* when the war escalated.”

Gold nodded. “Well—one of these artifacts appears to have attacked one of my crew.”

Scott’s eyes widened. “Bloody hell. What happened? Who?”

“Stevens. Gomez had assigned him to scan the artifacts for their molecular structure. Stevens was found unconscious on the lab floor.”

“That’s terrible.” Scott glanced to his right, off the viewer. Gold frowned. “Who else was there? How bad was he injured?”

“I’m still waiting on a preliminary report from sickbay, though *Corsi* tells me he’s complaining of a headache.”

“So he’s awake?”

“As of twenty minutes ago.”

Abruptly a thin face appeared next to Scott’s. Humanoid, much like a human male, with pale skin and long dark hair. His dark eyes were expressive and he nodded to Gold. “Forgive me, Captain. My name is Vanov —I’m the Elected Advisor’s Historian. I’m afraid this is my fault—we know so little about the artifacts—so much of our history and technology before the Disruption was lost. I always thought of them as beautiful boxes.”

Gold nodded. That was pretty much what Dr. Bartholomew Faulwell had called them. “I understand, Vanov. You wouldn’t have any idea what was inside of the box?”

“I’m afraid not.” His expression darkened. “Captain, which one of them opened?”

He looked at the padd in his lap. Gomez had uploaded the report. “The cylindrical one. Dark color.”

Vanov clearly looked worried.

“Historian, do you know something?”

Vanov shook his head. “No...no. So very few things were taken from Stratos. We’ve kept them on public display in our capitol’s museum until recently.”

“Oh?” Gold arched a gray eyebrow. “Why did you remove them?”

“Since news of Stratos’s imminent descent, various groups of disturbed individuals have begun vandalizing anything that had to do with Stratos, including the tourist centers that drive shuttles by the city.”

“I take it those particular groups don’t want Stratos to fall?”

“No—they want Stratos destroyed. And they see the arrival of the Federation as interference in the city’s natural and rightful destruction.”

“Historian, don’t they realize if that city falls it will land directly on top of your most populated metropolis? It’ll kill millions.”

“They don’t care, Captain. I’m afraid you and your crew could be in danger.”

There was danger from little boxes, danger from Disruptor traps, danger from a falling city, and danger from the very people they were trying to save.

Yep—just another day with the Corps. Oy gevalt .

“David,” Scott said in a soft voice. “There are a few things I’d like to discuss with you and your crew — have you finished your briefing?”

“Not yet. I’ll inform the transporter room and assemble the team.”

“Aye.” Scott gave him a worried look. “Your team’s got their job cut out for them.” With that he disconnected.

Gold informed Transporter Chief Laura Poynter that Captain Scott was beaming up and then sat back in his chair. When he’d first received the mission intel from Scott he’d been somewhat excited about the prospect of seeing the infamous floating city, but after reading the planet’s history brief he was a little more than apprehensive—especially with the morning’s excitement with Stevens.

He was getting that niggling feeling again, the one his wife, Rachel, always asked him about. That feeling that something was going to go horribly wrong. And no matter what, he knew Historian Vanov was lying.

* * *

“It’s just a headache.”

“You can’t assume it’s just a headache.”

“When a patient complains of bilateral temporal tenderness and pain, with no obvious signs of trauma, and his CSF shows low serotonin, indicating lack of sufficient sleep, and all this compounded by injected conjunctivae... I call this aheadache . And I call itsleep deprivation .”

Fabian Stevens, tactical systems specialist on board the U.S.S. da Vinci, lay quietly on the main examination table in the center of the ship’s sickbay, the neutral zone between two warring doctors.

He clutched the sides of the table and imagined himself the size of a mouse. No—scratch that—most women he knew chased mice. He had a clear image of Domenica Corsi cornering a poor defenseless rodent who dared to invade her abode.

Maybe I’ll just slide off the bed and creep out the door—they’ll never miss me. Oh, why didn’t I just have Tony do the scans?

He and Anthony Shabalala had worked straight through two shifts chasing a harmonic ghost in the ship’s shields. Conlon was determined to have the shield’s harmonics perfectly tuned before attempting any tractor beam on Stratos—only he and Tony hadn’t been able to pinpoint the anomaly. Fabian had made a point of teasing him every time he fingered the new pip on his uniform, evidence of his recent promotion to full lieutenant.

On his way to his cabin Commander Sonya Gomez had hailed him, requesting a full scan of the artifacts couriered to them by Captain Scott. Putting off sleep once again, Fabian had detoured to the lab, and as Makk Vinx would say, badda-boom, badda-bing—here he was.

He hoped Tony was having a better time at catching sleep than he was.

“Doctors,” Gomez called out from where she sat at the examination workstation. She had routed the logs into sickbay so that everyone, including Fabian, could see what happened. Gold and Corsi stood looking over her shoulder, their expressions grim. “I’m going to venture a guess that what Fabian has is more than a headache.”

Fabian raised his eyebrows. Oh?

Gomez moved the monitor to where everyone could see as Fabian propped himself up on his elbows.

He winced again, wishing whoever was using the sonic drill between his ears would stop.

Gold moved to the examination table and took up a position to Lense's right, near Fabian's head.

Gomez ran her fingers over the light panels and the screen showed Fabian holding a tricorder and setting dials.

"I was calibrating," he said in a low voice.

Next he opened the box containing the artifacts and set each of them out on the workbench. Each one stood an average of five inches high. Gold had called them tchotchkes. Shelf dusters.

"Everyone watch the cylinder," Gomez said.

To Fabian's amazement the top of the cylinder opened as if an invisible hand pulled it back. As he turned back to grab the closest box he stopped. Literally stopped in mid-movement.

"He stands like that for a full minute before—"

Abruptly he lurched back and collapsed on the floor.

Gomez touched a panel. "Time log shows he was there for a good fifteen minutes before Soloman found him."

"It's like time just stopped," Corsi said.

Everyone straightened and turned almost as one to look at Fabian. His eyes widened as he gave them his best confused expression. "What?"

"Stevens." Captain Gold narrowed his eyes at him. "Do you remember anything about what just happened?"

"No, sir." He shook his head. "I woke up and told Sarj I had a headache."

Lense spoke up. "I've given him a cursory examination—and I can't find anything physically wrong with him."

"Except for the headache," Gomez said, her expression reflecting concern.

Fabian looked at her and smiled, once again hoping to reassure the commander that he didn't feel uncomfortable around her.

He only wished he could say the same for Gomez. She quickly looked back at the screen. If only he could erase the kiss she'd given him a few months ago. He glanced at Corsi who turned a frown toward the first officer.

Gold turned and touched Gomez's shoulder. "Make sure the artifacts are locked up and in stasis. Have Faulwell and Abramowitz dig a bit deeper into Starfleet records on Stratos—and have them concentrate on anything relative to geometrically shaped glass boxes."

Gold then straightened and looked at Lense, and then Sarjenka. "I need you two to work together." He

gave a dramatic pause with only a hint of a smile as he looked from one to the other. “And give Stevens a full examination—report anything you find to me immediately. Captain Scott’s beaming aboard—we’ll be briefing in two hours.” He looked at Fabian. “I’m going to have to confine you to sickbay for a little while, Stevens—at least until I know more of what happened.”

Fabian nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Gold reached out and squeezed Fabian’s shoulder briefly before leaving sickbay. Gomez was right behind him without a backward glance. Fabian touched his shoulder. “Was there a meaning attached to that gesture—squeezing my shoulder? Like, ‘Good job and I’m glad you’re in trouble and not me’? ‘Happy you took the bullet and not the rest of my group’?” He frowned. “‘Borg—very dangerous, you go first’—kind of thing?”

Corsi gave him a lopsided grin. “Maybe it means, ‘Fabe’s done it again’?”

“I’ll say.” A sharp pain flared behind his eyes. “Only this time—” He closed his eyes and winced. “I think I got it stuck to my boot.” Fabian pushed himself up with the intention of sitting. Sickbay moved and shifted in front of him and he blinked several times to clear his vision.

“Fabe?” Corsi stepped closer, her hand on his arm.

“Wrong move...” With a slight groan he lay back down. Pain ebbed and flowed from behind his eyes to the base of his skull.

Lense had her tricorder out and gently moved Corsi a step back. Her expression bothered him. “Doc?”

“Is it another headache?” Sarjenka asked to his left. He turned to look up at her. It was like looking through a bowl of water at first, but then gradually her image cleared. “Fabian?”

A soft yellow hue superimposed itself on her face when she said his name. “Do—do that again.”

“Do what again?”

She did, and again there was a surge of yellow—but with a smattering of finely woven red. “Wow.”

When he spoke, the colors shifted, melded with one another, and created a soft orange.

“Elizabeth,” Corsi said, “what’s wrong with him?”

With Corsi’s voice the colors shifted again to a brilliant indigo. He looked at her. “Say something.”

Again as he spoke the indigo ordered itself, no longer a thing of mist.

“What’s wrong, Fabian? You’re—you’re not looking at me.”

He refocused his eyes. The more she spoke, the more the misty tendrils of color appeared in the air. “I—I’m seeing colors.”

Lense moved in to look at him. “You’re seeing colors?”

“Yeah.” He swallowed. He was also very thirsty. “When different people talk I get impressions of

colors. Sarjenka's is yellow, primarily. And Dom's is indigo. And yours—" He frowned. "You're kind of gray."

"When we talk you see colors."

Fabian nodded. "Now there's a red bleeding into the gray."

Lense's left eyebrow arched. "Sarjenka, get Mr. Stevens ready for a full and thorough examination. Full scans. There's something strange happening inside that head of his, and we need to find out what."

Fabian looked from the now obviously pregnant Elizabeth Lense in her Starfleet Medical lab coat to the more diminutive Dr. Sarjenka with her shy smile.

Stevens closed his eyes. Full examination. Great. This is Elizabeth's chance to get back at me for all those fat jokes.

Chapter

2

Bart Faulwell looked at the faces of the command staff as they gathered in the observation lounge. What he saw was a mixture of excitement and worry. Excitement he credited to the presence of Captain Scott—always a welcome sight.

Gomez sat to Gold's right. Bart sat on her right, then Carol Abramowitz, the da Vinci's cultural specialist, then Sarjenka. P8 Blue, the ship's Nasat Structural Systems specialist, sat comfortably in her chair, specially designed to accommodate her many legs, opposite Gold. To her right sat Lense; Specialist Soloman, a single Bynar; Chief Engineer Nancy Conlon; Second Officer Tev; and Captain Scott, directly on Gold's left.

Noticeably absent were Fabian Stevens and Domenica Corsi.

Lense looked uncomfortable in the chair. Her brows were pinched together over her small nose. Corsi slipped inside the room at that moment and took the seat between Conlon and Tev, her expression unreadable.

Amid the many padds scattered over the conference table sat the five artifacts received from the Ardanan Historian. There was a red and a yellow pyramid, a red and a yellow cube, and a green octagon. The black cylinder was still open, but Conlon and Tev's examination of it found nothing but the base elements of glass.

Gold clasped his hands together on the table. "In less than three days, Stratos will fall, and I don't have to tell any of you how devastating that would be. There are more than three billion Ardanans living in First City. If one life is lost it would be a tragedy." He nodded to the cultural specialist. "Abramowitz."

She stood and approached the wall monitor. A touch of the padd in her hand revealed Stratos and Bart made a slow smile. It resembled something out of an old Earth fairy tale. The image looked as if it had been taken by a passing shuttle—which followed what he'd read on the city's tourist trade. A city of spirals, skyscrapers, and torrents, all nestled together on a bed of clouds. He knew the clouds were only

an illusion and little more than the emissions from the graviton engines.

“Stratos was built with one thing in mind—the arts. An Ardanan named Moran Busk conceived of the idea of a floating city, and according to what we know of the past, his son Soske Busk built the first engines to actually lift and maintain the city’s anti-gravity engines.”

She flipped pictures to a barren, rocky landscape, with orange skies and burnt sand. “During the years of Stratos City Dwellers, the culture split itself into two peoples. The Stratos Dwellers reaped the luxuries the city had to offer in art, music, and food. Those less fortunate were left on the surface of Ardana to mine zenite—one of the earliest minerals used in preventing bacterial plagues on several worlds. They were called Troglytes.”

Carol flipped the screen again to show several workers in drab suits of gray and blue, with silver eye-wear partially hiding their faces. “Neither people were aware of the dangerous gas emitted from the mining of zenite or its effects on the people breathing it. Decreased mental aptitude and tendencies toward violent behavior were the first signs—prolonged use caused retardation in learning capability. In other words, the Troglytes were in a sensedumbed down from mining the only source of export and trade the planet had.”

Captain Scott spoke up. “I served on board theEnterprise when Captain Kirk was directed there to pick up a shipment of zenite. He, as well as the planet’s High Advisor Plasus, were exposed to the gas as a way of proving to the Cloud Dwellers as well as the Troglytes that it did exist.”

“If I recall my history lesson”—Gold frowned at Scott—“Kirk gave you an order toput Plasus directly into the mines.”

Scott tilted his head to his left to give Gold a withering glance. “I did no such thing.” He straightened up. “I simply put him in his place.”

Carol cleared her throat. “Following what happened to Fabian, Bart and I did some extensive research on what was known about Stratos culture. What we found was somewhat...enlightening.”

Bart knew his cue but deferred from visuals. Everyone’s attention turned to him. He leaned forward on the conference table and clasped his hands. “Most, if not all, of Stratos’s scientific as well as cultural achievements were based on art. The flow of the city’s architecture right down to the construction of the technology that runs the anti-gravity engines.

“How this was achieved was by accident in their own scientific laboratories during their experiments with genetic engineering. They were trying to create the perfect artisan, but instead created a parasite that would enhance their artistic abilities—supercharge them with that creative energy—and that parasite was what inspired Soske Busk to make his father’s dream a reality.” He checked the padd in front of him. “If I recall, he was the first one to welcome the parasite.”

Gomez shook her head. “They enhanced themselves—creatively—withparasites ?”

Bart nodded. He wasn’t finished yet.And wait till they hear what Elizabeth had found. “The technology grew around the abilities of the parasites. So much so that much of the workings inside of Stratos were only accessible if you had them. We suspect the City Dwellers were in the process of weeding out the need for Troglyte workers in the city. But even that became a chore, and a group of watchers—or Sentinels—were engineered to have these parasites and basically run the city.”

“So they had the Troglytes mining on the surface, and Sentinels running the city for them.” Scott gave a short chuckle. “I’m not surprised it all fell apart.”

Carol continued from there. “What followed next was a cascade of social events. The Federation promised to work with the Troglytes in providing the masks necessary to mine the ore. The High Advisor took his complaints about Captain Kirk to the Appeals Board at Starfleet Command. When his case was dismissed—Kirk’s actions deemed necessary to facilitate the protection of a subjugated peoples—Plasus withdrew Ardana from the Federation and forbade any Federation representatives to come to Stratos.”

Scott shifted in his seat. “That man was pure evil.”

“The Troglytes—no longer under the gas’s influence—established their own central government on the planet and turned their efforts—with some help from the S.C.E. of the time—toward terraforming the planet.”

Gomez sighed. “Let me guess—that’s when the war started. The one they call the Great Disruption.”

Carol nodded. “And it was a disruption. The Troglytes were in the midst of creating their own culture planet-side when the Ardanans attacked. Used their transmat technology for surprise attacks. Assassinated the Troglytes’ elected High Advisor.”

Bart shook his head and sighed. He’d read the historicals as well. Remembered the bloodshed inflicted upon the Troglytes as families were murdered in their sleep, the Ardanan army appearing in their bedrooms and then leaving just as quietly.

He was glad Carol hadn’t mentioned that little piece of Ardana’s history.

“The Troglytes were nearly destroyed—until a new leader emerged. A descendant of Soske Busk, he led the revolt against Stratos by stealing the transmat technology—as well as a little of the Federation’s own beaming capabilities. They used it to invade Stratos.” She stopped, her lips pulled thin in a grim expression. “Let’s just say the body count rose significantly. The Troglytes only needed an occasional knife or stick to corral thousands of Ardanans in a corner and push them over the side.”

Everyone’s positions shifted uncomfortably at the very thought of mass murder on such a scale or in such a fashion.

Carol pointed to the monitor again. A new picture replaced the rocky terrain with that of a street, busy with hovercar activities, bustling people in all sorts of costumes, even a few Starfleet uniforms. To the side was a market full of fresh fruit, and what Bart thought was a café, complete with wrought iron chairs. “This is the Ardana of today—a culture and technology similar to Earth’s in the late twenty-second century. There are three main cities. First City, Lejico, and Droxana. Droxana is the capital, but because of its location to Stratos’s position, First City is the main tourist center.”

Scotty spoke up. “From what I’ve gathered since arriving, the Ardana of today in no way resembles what existed a century ago. They’re still rebuilding, and taking their time.” He stood and began a slow pace in front of the monitor. “They cut themselves off completely from Stratos after the rebuilding and reformation. Now it stands as a monument to what happened in the past. They use shuttles to take visitors by the city, flying in close range. As for the transmat system, it deactivated from non-use several decades ago.”

“So when you stepped on board,” Conlon began, “you and the Edison team were the first in more than a

hundred years?”

He stopped and gave her a slow smile. “Aye, lass. And what an honor that was. But”—he looked at everyone—“all of you know what happened to poor Commander Alverson. During the years leading up to the Enterprise’s arrival, the Troglytes’ resistance force—the Disruptors—used terrorist tactics on Stratos, setting traps everywhere to hurt or maim, even kill the City Dwellers. They defaced works of art as well. As I told Captain Gold, the areas of main engineering and the control center have been examined. Alverson was investigating one of the larger buildings”—he glanced at Gold—“searching for something we’re going to need to find.”

Pattie raised two of her arms. “I can assume you’re referring to the engine schematics?”

All eyes turned to her. If a Nasat could blush, Pattie achieved it. “I figured when my request for the city’s blueprints went unanswered it was something like that.”

Tev turned a shocked expression to Scotty. “You don’t have the schematics for the engines?”

“There’s no central computer?” Soloman asked.

“No, lad.” Scotty shook his head as he looked at the Bynar. “Nothing at all resembling what you or I would call a computer.” He pursed his lips, his mustache bristling. “Everything’s running, or at least the main engines are. Some things came on as we investigated further. The lights, and heating—it’s freezing at that altitude. We were able to identify the engines—simple makeup really. Massive graviton generators, similar to the ones we use in starships.”

Bart noticed Sarjenka shift in the back, her hand up. “Excuse me, but can I ask a question?”

Scotty gave the new recruit a smile. “Anything, lass.”

“How—” She shook her head. “Exactly how does that work?” She gestured with a nod to the monitor, indicating the picture of Stratos floating in the distance above the city street. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Scott appeared pleased to answer her question, only it was Tev who spoke up first. “A graviton generator forms the core of artificial gravity on a starship, akin to a cyclotron superconductor that generates the gravitons by spinning at a particular rate. When damaged, they slow down and the field weakens. Inertial dampeners are used to simulate ‘up’ and ‘down,’ even though those terms are functionally meaningless in space.”

“But in this instance, the direction of the gravitons define where down is,” Scotty interjected. All eyes turned to him. “We were able to establish that Stratos’s underside creates anti-gravitons which create a negative gravity beneath the city. This in essence pushes the city off the ground.”

Conlon nodded slowly, then frowned. “But without any sort of central computer, how is this thing directed? How are diagnostics run? How do you pinpoint what’s wrong?”

Scotty sighed again. “Now, lass, you see our delays. Those were the questions plaguing us when Alverson was injured. We can see the engines, we can understand what it is they’re doing, only we don’t know which buttons to push. We can’t even find the buttons. And we don’t know what’s powering it. We do know the anti-gravitons are weakening—my educated guess is the engines are producing fewer of them.”

“Is the generator still spinning at the prescribed rate?” Tev asked.

Scotty’s face split with the grin he gave the engineer. “Lad—if you can figure out exactly what the prescribed rate is, we’ll be a quarter of the way to solving the problem.” He sighed. “It’s spinning. We don’t know how or why.”

“So you’re no closer to finding out if the city even has landing capabilities,” Gold said.

“None that we could find.” He gave a short sigh. “And you know how the people of Ardana are handling that idea. The whole concept of landing the city has several groups of people in an uproar. If it touches Ardanan soil intact, a whole lot of people are threatening another war.”

“And it starts all over again,” Gold said.

“Aye,” Scotty said. “Several museums have been raided, and copies of the artifacts were stolen. But they were only copies—the museum in First City had the originals. I suspect Historian Vanov gave them to me just so they would be safe.”

Carol said, “So there are groups or factions that don’t want Stratos landed and explored? Are these cultural mandates or religious beliefs?”

“A little of both,” Scotty said. “I saw a good bit of protesting, especially when the High Advisor hinted we might try and bring Stratos down. Most protestors were tourist venues—those that make their money off of Stratos’s position. Vanov said there are two main factions—the ups and the downs.” He smiled. “Or that’s what I called them. The side that wants the city down so it can be excavated and explored, and the side that wants it destroyed because of what it represents. No one’s even listening to the business people who want it left right where it is.”

“Sounds familiar,” Carol said. “Some see it as an opportunity for advancement, and then there’s the yin to the yang with those who fear it.”

Bart nodded. “So where do we stand? What we’re doing?”

“The Edison didn’t encounter any real threats—other than anything set by the Disruptors. But then at that point we were still in talks to just keep it in the air. It wasn’t until we discovered we didn’t know how to keep it up that the idea of bringing it down manually came about.”

“So we should perhaps do our work out of sight?” Gold said. “Beam directly to Stratos?”

“That’s my suggestion. For now. The High Advisor has put a hold on things until he can calm the general fears of the parliament.”

“What if that’s decided for us? As in we can’t get it down, we can’t keep it up, and the tractor beam fails.”

“That’s what they’re going to vote on this afternoon. Vanov will contact me when he knows. But until then, they don’t want any of the S.C.E. in Stratos.”

Carol pointed to the artifacts. “So why would anyone try and take these?”

Lense stood at that moment. She moved slowly toward Carol and took the padd from her. Her pregnancy was as obvious as pregnancies can get and Bart felt for her in this condition.

Gold said, “I think I know why.”

Lense smiled at him. “Those boxes you see on the table were once known as carns. Earth had its own definitions of carns: doorways to other worlds. The opening of a hole between dimensions—like Portlyn’s tesseract.”

She pointed at the screen. The bustling street disappeared and became an image of a green and blue transparent octopus. Bart frowned. Actually it looked more like a wolf spider with thinner, longer legs.

Lense looked at the assembled group. “This is what lived in those carns.”

“The parasite,” Gold said.

With a nod Lense pointed at the screen. More of them appeared, moving back and forth, only these had thinner, longer legs. “From what Nancy and Tev found, each of these carns is protected by a bio-magnetic field—a mini-stasis chamber—which allows the parasite to live for an indefinite amount of time.”

She moved to the table and picked up the cylinder. “This was the only one still active. And Mr. Stevens somehow tripped the magnetic field on it—whether it was his presence or by touching it, I don’t know. What I do know is Fabian now has this parasite”—she gestured to the monitor with the cylinder—“burying its way and multiplying inside his cerebral cortex.”

“He’s got those wee beasties inside his brain?” Scott placed his left hand flat on the table as he moved his head around to see the monitor. “What are they doing to him, lass?”

Lense put the cylinder back down on the table. “Let me try and put this plainly. The parasite is causing Fabian to experience what we know as synesthesias—the melding of two or more sensory inputs so a signal stimulus results in a double sensation. For example—and this one fits with what Fabian’s experiencing—” She clicked at the monitor and a tone sounded in the room. The monitor turned blue. “There are some people who hear music and see colors.”

Corsi moved forward. “You mean that’s why he saw indigo when I talked to him?”

Sarjenka spoke up as Lense nodded. “And why he saw yellow when I spoke.”

“He’s seeing colors when he hears voices?” Gold said.

“Evidently everything he hears is emitting some sort of tonal color. It comes and goes, and he’s experienced several waves—dizzy spells where he says the room moves in a rainbow.”

“Elizabeth,” Gomez said, her tone cautious. “What exactly is it doing to him? Making him into one of these Sentinels?”

“Well, since I don’t really know what a Sentinel is, I can only guess the parasite’s doing what it was made to do.”

Bart spoke up. “Which is enhance creative abilities.”

“So much so that Fabian’s already fixed the replicator in my office because he said it sounded wrong.”

Scotty narrowed his eyes. “Pardon me, lass, but did you just say he said itsounded wrong?”

Lense nodded.

“That’s impossible,” Tev said. “He can hear the replicator’s...systems?”

Pattie spoke up. “Well it would make sense, wouldn’t it? Fabian’s creative instincts are in engineering. He loves solving problems—like all of us do. So the parasite is somehow enhancing his ability to find the problem and solve it.”

Bart looked at Gold. The captain looked less than pleased. “Lense, what exactly is it doing? I mean in here.” He pointed to his head. “Is Stevens in danger?”

“According to what Bart and Carol found, the Sentinels lived for decades with the parasites in place. What I can tell you is the way they grow makes it hard to treat them.” She pointed to the monitor and the spiders elongated, their limbs now needle-like and wispy.

With a wince she moved toward the table and Scotty immediately stood and offered her his chair. She took it with an appreciative smile. “My feet were getting tired. Now—” She turned back to the monitor. “Once inside the parasites split up and migrated to the posterior inferior temporal cortex and the parieto-occipital junction. These two regions are responsible for color and sound. Once there they settled in and used the concentration of neurochemicals in those regions to facilitate growth of its dendrites that have extended deep into these areas. These dendrites act as wires that allow for crosstalk between these regions—instant synesthesia.”

Bart understood most of it—in the short form these things were burying themselves deep into his roommate’s brain. Changing him.

“So how do we get them out?” Gold said.

Lense turned and looked at him. “We don’t.” She shrugged. “I don’t know how. They’ve already worked their way deep into those areas.”

“Are they spreading?” Gomez asked.

“No—they seem to be limiting themselves to just those two regions.”

“Will it hurt him?” Corsi asked. “Other than the headaches?”

“The headaches are caused because of increased hormone output. Appears to be a side-effect of the neurochemical ingestions.” Lense looked back to Gold. “He’s fine—in excellent physical shape. Only he can see sound now.” She sighed. “In color.”

“There’s one thing nobody here has mentioned,” Pattie said.

Soloman nodded. “She’s right. If Mr. Stevens now possesses the parasite we’ve just learned about, is it possible that he can use it to operate Stratos?”

No one spoke.

“How?” Tev asked. “He knows as much as we do about those engines, which is apparently nothing.”

“Well.” Scotty turned to face Gold. “I say we ask him if he’d like to try. Once we get the okay from Vanov.”

Gold gave him a withering look. “Time’s running out, Scotty. They’ve already wasted a day.” He looked at Lense. “Have you told Stevens what’s happened?”

She nodded. “He seemed more fascinated than upset. When Sarjenka and I left sickbay, he was asking Nurse Wetzel to sing.”

Sarjenka gave a soft laugh, as did Gomez.

“I didn’t know Sandy could sing,” Carol said.

Lense gave her a sour look. “She can’t. He just liked looking at the wacky colors. His words”—she put up her hand—“not mine.”

Chapter

3

“Sortof a green—Vulcan blood green actually.” Fabian noticed T’Nel arch a dark eyebrow. “No offense.”

“What about me?” Nemeckova asked. “What colors do you see when I talk?”

Fabian was in engineering, leaning back comfortably against the main console in front of the warp core. Sandy had told him he could leave sickbay—in fact she’d all but pushed him out. Muttered something about needing peace and quiet.

But hey, who knew his own voice carried a sort of gold hue to it? And so he’d set about making sentences. “Hi, my name’s Fabian. Fabe is my name. I am an engineer.”

But he was sure she’d only sent him on his way because he’d made fun of the colors her singing caused to dance about the room. He might have heard her voice as off-key, but the colors they made—weird.

He put a finger under his chin. “Blue—a soft powder blue.”

“And how about me?” Maxwell Hammett asked as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Fabian narrowed his eyes. “Red. Definitely red.”

“I thought you said I was red,” Rennan Konya from security said.

“You are.” Fabian frowned. “Why can’t more than one person be red?”

“Fabe.” Rizz spoke up from where he stood in front of the deflector array panel. “What about my voice? What color do you see?”

Fabian narrowed his eyes at the Bolian, then narrowed them harder. He tilted his head to the right, then the left. “Rizz, I’m not sure that color exists.”

Several people snickered.

A sharp sound, much like fingernails on a bare hull, cut through the others’ voices. He closed his eyes and pressed the palm of his right hand to his forehead, almost doubling over at the waist.

“Fabian?” Nemeckova asked, her soft blue tone easing the stinging in his brain. “What’s wrong?”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. Just after she’d stopped speaking the blue of her voice had shifted and formed into a half circle. “I’m—I hear something—”

Again the sound of nails screamed into one ear and impacted inside his head. “Ow—” He held his head in his hands. Where was that sound coming from?

“Max,” Rizz said and the world behind Fabian’s eyes shifted into the indescribable color of the Bolian’s voice. “We need to get the shield harmonics calibrated before Conlon comes back—we’ve wasted enough time.”

Keeping his eyes closed, Fabian formed a shadowy picture in his mind of Rizz, standing in front of the panel. He touched the surface. Again the sound ran through Fabian’s mind like a speeding shuttle. He saw interweaving reds, silvers, bright blues, and whites, all coalescing into the panel in front of him.

Opening his eyes he saw Rizz. “Do that again.”

“Do what again?”

“What you just did—to the harmonic frequency.”

Rizz reached down and touched the panel, though he kept his gaze fixed on Fabian.

Again the colors coalesced into a single ball of light, and turned completely white.

White—what did that mean? He moved to the panel and touched the surface. Colors jumped out of the circuitry and swirled around him, filling him, taking him inside. . . .

“What’s he doing?” came a whisper behind him.

“His eyes are closed.”

He was concentrating on the colors, watching the white ball bristle like ignited magnesium along a path. It stopped in a single spot along a three dimensional plane of color. When he looked closer he saw no color.

White.

“White is the absence of color,” he said aloud and his voice carried in a stream of golden thread that

wrapped around the ball of bristling white. He saw numbers in his mind. . . .

“Rizz,” Fabian said, his eyes still closed. “Adjust the harmonics in grid 002 by 665.”

There was a pause and he could see Rizz in his mind calling up the grid on his tricorder. “But that’s not where the fluctuation is happening. The disruption is in grid 0100.”

“No.” Fabian smiled. “It’s there—in 002—but it’s resonating loudest to 0100, which is why the tricorder is picking up that grid. Just adjust the harmonic, but make sure it’s negative 665.”

He knew Rizz had done what he’d asked when the sound in his ears ceased. The plane of light moved back and forth, ebbing and flowing through the circuitry. He opened his eyes and lifted his hands from the panel’s surface, unaware he’d actually placed both of them there.

Rizz moved behind him, touched a panel on the wall. “That’s it.” He looked over at Fabian who had turned to check. “You did it. No more anomaly.”

The doors to engineering opened. Nancy stepped through, along with Gomez and Captain Scott. When Nancy saw everyone standing around Fabian, and saw the look on Rizz’s face, she looked at Hammett. “What’s happened?”

“He did it.” Hammett nodded to Fabian. “He got rid of that pesky anomaly near the rear deflector shield. The one we spent hours chasing yesterday.”

Nancy frowned at Fabian. “How did you find it?”

He swallowed. His throat was dry, as were his lips. When was the last time he’d had water—or any beverage for that matter? “I saw it—Well, I mean I heard it. Both. It was like this little ball of sparkly light, like a tribble on fire—”

Scotty moved through the gathered engineers. “Lad, you saw and heard the shield’s harmonic frequencies?”

Gomez moved through the crowd of people to stand beside Rizz and started checking the controls.

Fabian replayed what had happened inside his head. He smiled. “I guess I did. I mean, I heard it—this terrible noise in my head—and then I followed it to—”

But Nancy was already moving past them to the console. She touched several panels and then turned to the controls behind her on the wall next to Gomez. After a few seconds she turned to Gomez, and then to Captain Scott. “Rizz is right. The reason I kept delaying the test was because I didn’t trust the readings on the shield harmonics. The anomaly is gone—we can proceed with the test.”

Fabian smiled, and then put his hands back on the panel. No colors or sounds came to him. In fact, his head was pounding between his ears as if he’d just tried standing on his head.

“Lad.” Scotty touched his right arm. “Are you okay?”

“I’m a little light-headed, and very thirsty.”

Gomez moved to stand on his left. “When was the last time you ate?”

Fabian looked at her, and when she didn't look away he smiled. "Eat—" That smile became a frown. "Uh, I'm not sure. Yesterday? I sort of forgot."

"Since when have you ever forgotten to eat?" Gomez asked.

Nancy made a rude noise. "Never."

"Gold to Scott."

Scotty tapped his badge. "Scott here."

"Vanov is asking for you. We'll take this in my ready room."

"I'm on my way." He turned to Nancy. "If that's the call I'm hoping for, I'll need you to get ready for a test run—just to see how badly the hold taxes the engines." He turned to Gomez. "I'd suggest getting that boy back to sickbay—and feed him."

With that the burly man hurried out of engineering.

Gomez watched as Nancy gave her crew orders.

"I don't bite," Fabian said, still leaning heavily on the panel. It wasn't that he felt bad, he was just afraid that if someone moved the panel he'd fall on his face. His legs felt like rubber.

She looked at him. A few seconds passed without a word. Then, "Fabe..."

But he shook his head. This wasn't the time to discuss what had happened. He wasn't sure there would ever be a time, though it had been sitting like an open wound between the two of them for months now. "Look, I'll be fine. You don't have to walk me to sickbay—I can find my way."

With that he straightened up. His knees gave beneath him and he started to lean forward on the panel again. Gomez grabbed his left arm and pulled it up, then nestled her right shoulder beneath his left. "You probably can find your way, but I'm not sure you can actually get there." She straightened up. "Put your weight on me."

He didn't want to stumble in front of her, but something wasn't right. His legs felt like lead one minute and then were fine the next. With a sigh he leaned on her and the two of them made their way to the door.

It opened and Corsi stood in the center.

Her eyes widened as she looked at Gomez, and then looked at Fabian.

Fabian felt Gomez tense next to him and he thought for a second she might drop him in her haste to distance herself from him.

"Domenica, I—" Gomez stammered.

"What did you do?" Corsi took a step toward Fabian.

Fabian figured he should intervene before Gomez completely fell apart with embarrassment. “I fixed something, and now the commander is helping me back to sickbay.”

Corsi looked again at Gomez. “Are you all right? You’ve gone awfully pale.”

Gomez swallowed. “I’m fine. Really. Captain Scott ordered me to take him to sickbay.” She started to pull away. “But if you’d like to escort him there—”

But Corsi held up her hand. “That’s not necessary. He’s in good hands.” She touched Fabian’s shoulder. “You feel okay?”

Fabian twisted his mouth in a thoughtful expression. “Remember that time on Merangue when I drank the green stuff and was supposed to drink the blue stuff?”

Corsi’s eyes widened. “Definitely go to sickbay.” She smiled at Gomez, though her gaze shifted back to Fabian, and then back to Sonya. “Either of you seen Konya? The computer said he was down here.”

Fabian nodded backward. “In there.”

Corsi patted his shoulder and moved past them.

After a few seconds passed, he nudged Gomez. “We can go now.”

She blinked and then moved them forward, out of engineering and toward the turbolift.

“Corsi’s not going to eat you.”

“You never told her.”

Fabian shook his head. “No—didn’t see what that would really accomplish. It was an honest—” He meandered in his head for a second, trying to come up with the appropriate word. There wasn’t one. “Thing.”

Gomez didn’t say anything else until they were in the lift. Fabian disentangled himself from her and leaned on the wall. He was still light-headed, and a bit shaky. This is from not eating —low blood sugar.

But why hadn’t I even thought of food?

“Fabian.” Gomez looked at the floor. “I do apologize, and I hope you didn’t—and don’t—think less of me.” She ended the statement with a look up at him.

“Oh, Commander.” He grinned. “I really don’t think anything of you.”

He knew he’d stuck his foot in it the second it was out of his mouth. Her expression softened before it hardened.

“Oh, wait.” Fabian put out his hand. “That’s not what I meant. Not like that—”

“Oh, that’s okay. It’s nothing that I’ve felt like a real heel all this time, kissing a friend’s boyfriend and then lacking the courage to tell her.”

“Well, don’t do that. Really. It was innocent. And harmless.” He tried to smile at her, to reassure her.

Then he felt his knees give on him as he fell head-first onto the turbolift floor.

* * *

Bart sat beside Fabian’s bed in sickbay, his padd in his lap, his eyes aching from reviewing the Ardanan history files. He was amazed that a people could say so much—and not make a damn bit of sense.

Blah, blah, blah, blah...

With a glance at the door, Bart pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. He’d received it in a special delivery package at the same time they received the goodies from Ardana.

It was only one page.

But it was enough.

It was from Anthony Mark.

After so many letters. So many unanswered messages, his lover and closest friend had answered him. He’d been afraid to open it—the very fact it was on paper instead of in the form of an electronic message was enough to make him nervous.

A simple Dear John letter?

That was what he’d been afraid of.

But, no—

Again he slowly opened the outer envelope. With ceremony he pulled the neatly folded piece of paper out. With a deep breath, Bart opened the top by pulling it up, and then unfolded the bottom.

In beautiful, block-like handwriting, Anthony had given Bart hope for the two of them.

My dearest Bart,

I must say, I was a little upset by the sudden absence of letters from you. At first I thought you were busy, saving the universe one messed-up piece at a time.

But when the months passed and I heard of Dr. Lense’s pregnancy from other friends, and not from you, I started to worry. You work with her, and you didn’t share this wonderful piece of information with me?

I started thinking of life without you, fearing you’d gone on. I knew I’d somehow pressured you at the wedding. I suppose suggesting marriage was a bit...forward of me.

After a bit of reflection, and a small vacation on Risa, I’m a little more aware of what kind of decision that would be. For both of us. We need to see each other, Bart.

I have to talk to you.

I have to show you everything.

I have to know if you love him.

Orme.

Bart closed the letter and slid it back into the envelope. Love him or who? Jolen? Bart had explained what had happened with Jolen in great detail in his last letter—the last one he'd sent—that nothing had happened.

A chaste kiss.

Okay, well, maybe it was more than a kiss.

Bart sighed and set the letter back down.

Great. How can I be honest with Anthony when I can't even be honest with myself?

Sarjenka came by for the fifty-third time in the last six minutes and touched Fabian's arm. The man didn't stir. Didn't budge.

Bart leaned forward over his roommate and caught her attention. "Sarjenka, he's got a full stomach. He's not going to wake up."

She nodded. "Well, he might. It's been two hours—"

"Worried?"

She nodded and looked down at the sleeping man. Bart touched her arm. "Don't worry about him—I'll be here for a while. I found I couldn't read without him nearby snoring."

"He's not snoring."

"Rude of him, isn't it?"

She saw the note. "What's that?"

"Oh, a note from someone very special."

She smiled at him. "From your partner, isn't it?"

He returned the smile. "Oh, you've heard of Anthony Mark?"

A frown darkened her face. "Anthony? I thought Fabian said his name was Jolen."

Bart shot his roommate with a stare of daggers. He didn't care how sick the boy got—once he was better the engineer was in for a new round of verbal abuse.

"Ah, no, Sarjenka. Jolen and I—"

The doors to sickbay opened. Captains Gold and Scott stepped in, along with Gomez. Lense came out of her office. Gold gestured for Bart to join them.

“The Ardanans have given the go-ahead. Vanov and a few of his engineers are going to meet the team on Stratos. Will Stevens be ready?” That last question was at Lense.

She looked doubtful.

“What is it, lass?” Scotty asked. “I know that look on a doctor’s face can’t be all good.”

“Well, it’s not all bad either. Follow me.” She led them into the lab attached to sickbay. On two monitors Bart could see the same little spider squids he’d seen before—only there was something different about them.

Ah—they’ve got longer legs. Bart leaned in close and narrowed his eyes. And more of them .

“I took another scan of Fabian’s brain.” Lense moved to the chair in front of the workstation and sat down. “After he fell in the turbolift.”

“What caused that?” Gold asked.

“Well, that’s what I’m going to show you.” She called up a side, wire-framed image of a human’s brain. “This is the hypothalamus, here. It’s the master gland of the body. It regulates certain functions, one of them being how much food you eat and when.”

She looked at each of them. Bart nodded to let her know he understood.

“Now, it’s also responsive to light and smell and other influences. Because the parasites’ dendrites are snaking their way into the two regions governing light and sound, they’re interfering with the hypothalamus.”

“In what way?”

“Well, namely, Fabian keeps forgetting to eat. Or drink. I think the last time he ate anything was yesterday morning, before he and Shabalala pulled that double shift on repairing the shields.” She looked at Gold. “Which I understand he fixed earlier today.”

Scotty nodded. “Aye—he did a fine job. And with no tricorder. Not one device to tell him where or what. It was incredible.”

“Doctor, you’re telling us Fabian didn’t eat or drink for nearly twenty-four hours?” Bart frowned.

Lense nodded. “Odd, isn’t it?”

Bart gave her a half smile. “It’s a sin. Fabian never misses a meal—and still manages to keep that girlish figure.”

She frowned at him, then smiled before looking back to Gold. “If you look here”—she pointed to the monitor—“the dendrites have extended their reach—not yet past the two regions they seem to have taken residence in.”

Gold tilted his head to his left shoulder as he folded his arms over his chest. “Why? I thought you said they were stable.”

“I believed they were. But something happened from the time I last examined him to when he came back. Now, the only thing I know of was what happened in engineering. Sarjenka believes it’s the stimulus.”

“Stimulus?”

“From the inputs to the hypothalamus.” She shrugged. “I don’t know for sure. This thing has me stumped.”

Bart glanced back at Sarjenka. She was still standing beside Fabian’s bed and it appeared he was awake and talking.

Gold spoke up. “Lense, what happens if they do move past those two regions?”

“That’s what has me a little worried. Because these dendrites are working as cross-talking agents, I suspect if they begin branching out into other regions they will begin to rewire his brain functions.” She looked directly at Gold. “I just don’t know if what happened in engineering is what stimulated the dendrites or if they did this on their own.”

Gold looked up through the glass of the lab. “I need to know if he’s fit to beam down to Stratos with us.”

Lense shrugged. “I can release him. I only kept him here because I wanted to keep an eye on him.”

Gold, Scott, Bart, and Lense left the lab and went back to Fabian, who was awake and sitting up. He smiled at the others and then gave Bart a wince. “What is it with you always hanging about?”

“Because I’m the prettiest,” Bart said with a wink. “Corsi was here for a while. Held your hand. Whispered sweet nothings.”

“No, she didn’t,” Fabian said.

“Stevens,” Gold said, “we have the go-ahead and we’re beaming down to Stratos at sixteen hundred hours. I know the doctor’s explained to you what’s happening in your head, and Faulwell and Abramowitz have gone over what the use of a Sentinel was for—”

“I’d love to go, Captain.” He beamed. “Wouldn’t miss this opportunity.”

“Good.” Captain Gold glanced at each of them. “Meet in the transporter room then. Oh, and dress warm.” He and Scott left sickbay.

Fabian looked around the room. “How much time do I have before we go?”

Bart checked the chronometer. “About half an hour.”

Pulling the sheets from his legs Fabian bounded out of bed—and stopped.

Bart looked at him. “Yes—?”

“Wow. I feel good. Full stomach. Rested.”

“Seeing colors?”

Fabian shook his head. “No, but I do need my slippers.” He sat back down and pushed his bare feet into the slippers by the bed.

Sarjenka smiled. Fabian turned to look at her. “You coming, Sarj?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been assigned to keep an eye on you if you decided to go. Which means I need to get ready.” She leaned forward and gave Fabian a quick kiss on his forehead. With a smile to Bart she hurried out of sickbay.

There was a brief silence. Then. “She kissed me.”

“Yeah—I noticed she waited until Corsi was gone, too.”

“She kissed me.” Fabian turned a stricken face at him as he stood. He snatched up his discarded uniform from the neighboring bed and stalked toward the door. “Why are they doing that? I don’t get it. What is up with kissing me? Am I shaving too close? Do I have a sign on me that says ‘Kiss me—I want Dom to kick me out an airlock’?”

The doors opened and shut.

Bart stared after his roommate. They?

Chapter

4

Gomez’s team assembled in the transporter room: Bart and Carol, Corsi and her four-person team of Makk Vinx, Rennan Konya, Lauoc Soan, and Ellec Krotine. Pattie would be joining them, as well as Tev. Fabian and Sarjenka made up the back end.

Captain Scott had beamed down earlier.

First impressions aside, Fabian shivered twice after transporting onto a high, blue marble-floored dais. He’d never been a real fan of heights, and the abrupt view of the planet below from the less-than-protected railing nearly set him into a fit of vertigo.

Scotty, also bundled up in a thick Starfleet parka, welcomed them. A tall, thin man in noticeably thinner clothing stood dutifully beside Scotty. He had long, full, thick hair pulled back in an intricate plait. This guy had to be an Ardanan. Fabian rubbed his chin. Huh. . . maybe Ardanans have a higher tolerance to cold?

“Welcome to Stratos,” Scott said as he held his arms out. “I’d like to introduce Historian Vanov.”

Gomez approached the Ardanan first and shook his hand. “Commander Sonya Gomez. It’s very nice to meet you, Historian Vanov.”

“Just Vanov is fine. The only one that has any meaningful title is the High Advisor.”

Fabian glanced at Bart. Had he noticed the odd catch in Vanov’s voice when he mentioned the Advisor? Or was he imagining things?

As the others introduced themselves, Fabian tilted his head back and listened. Whispers. It sounded like a dance in another room—or in a neighboring house.

“I must say I am most impressed with meeting you, Specialist Blue,” Vanov said. “I regret not many Nasats visit our world.”

The rhythm wasn’t as steady as he’d first thought. It skipped. Paused. Started again. And then it was lost. It came back again. All like fleeting ghosts in his mind.

“And this,” Scott said as he lead Vanov to where Fabian had remained rooted beside the stairs. “Is Mr. Fabian Stevens?”

Fabian opened his eyes.

Vanov’s eyes widened. He held out his hands and Fabian offered him his right one. The Historian held it—actually cradled it—in his hands. “Captain Scott has told me what happened—we’ve heard so many stories of the Sentinels of Stratos—and now you possess their power.”

Gomez moved closer to Fabian, her attention centered on Vanov.

Fabian grew a tad uncomfortable. “Power?”

“Why, yes—when the aristocrats of Stratos no longer welcomed the parasite into their own bodies and kept it only for the Sentinels, they were the ones who protected the city. They were the keepers of the City Dwellers. Such power...they could shut the city down, move it, or raise it.”

“They could?”

Vanov nodded. “Or so the legends go.”

From several meters away, Pattie said, “Vanov, I have a question.”

Vanov bowed, released Fabian’s hand, and moved away.

Captain Scott approached Fabian as he wiped his hand against his jacket. Fabian asked, “What is up with that guy?”

Captain Scott looked more than worried—to Fabian he looked guilty. “Lad, worry not about it. Vanov is something of a closet zealot. He’s one of those in favor of preserving Stratos, whether on the ground or in the air. His ancestors were the ones that took the artifacts from Stratos.” He glanced back at Vanov talking to Pattie. He leaned in close. Gomez and Fabian leaned in as well. “I did notice after I told him about what happened to poor Fabian here, he and the other engineers have been more than...quiet.”

“I wonder why,” Gomez said as she straightened up. She pulled at her lower lip on thought.

Scott nodded to Fabian. “Have you heard anything? Or sensed anything?”

“Something—but it’s distant. Sort of weak. Almost like one of those old mill wheels—the kind with the water turning it? Only there isn’t much water left.”

“Keep listening, and the moment you see something or hear something, let me know.”

Scotty moved away toward Vanov.

Abruptly Fabian and Sonya were alone. Together. Again.

Fabian watched Sonya—until she noticed him watching her. Until that moment she’d been deep in thought. Now her eyes widened and she started to turn away.

“Please.” He reached out and touched her shoulder. “Sonya, stop running.”

That made her pause, and she turned a sharp expression to him. “I’m not running.”

He laughed. “Well, you’re doing a great impression of someone running while they’re not running.” He gave her a thumbs-up.

“I’m sorry. I guess it’s been tough. But things are looking up. After that nonsense with Portlyn last month, I went to dinner with Brilson.”

Fabian grinned. “Lodine? From the outpost?”

Gomez nodded. “He’s nice—his taste in entertainment is a little unfortunate, though. He has this huge collection of holographic remasterings of really awful twenty-first-century films.” She sighed. “I don’t know if it’ll go anywhere, but the dinner was nice.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

She smiled at him. “Thanks, Fabe.”

“No problem.” He looked over her head. “Well, the others are walking off. Shall we join them?”

She nodded. He pulled his parka closer to him and they went to catch up.

The walls were smooth, whipped clean by the winds, as were the floors. If there had been any bodies left in this open veranda after the final battle of Stratos, they had long ago been taken by the elements.

Walls moved and sloped, bent and dipped outward from the dais. Pattie’s tricorder gave a faint hum as she scurried from place to place, her legs making whispering noises against the marble.

“The structure of this place is incredible,” she said as she went about her work. “Commander Gomez, I am picking up several slight variations in structural thickness along the north and west wings of the city—the same places I detected weakening foundations from my scans on board the *Vinci*.”

Gomez nodded as she stopped in the center of the first open area. “Those are the pressure points Nancy was worried about. As for the city itself, it’s beautiful. All of it.”

Vanov nodded as he moved to stand beside her. “Stratos was said to have been the home to thousands of priceless works of art—a collection to rival any in the galaxy.” He sighed. “Once we were an artistic race.”

“But you still are,” Pattie said as he scurried close.

“No, we’ve lost so much since the Disruption. Even certain arts in the building.” He pointed to the blue marbled wall in front of them. “This wall is fashioned entirely of blue gastion,” Vanov said as he pointed to the ceiling. “Its molecular weight has an astounding binding property when introduced to higher altitudes.”

Pattie moved closer and touched it with several of her front legs. “It’s warm!”

“It’s getting warmer,” Scotty said as he moved closer. “The city senses when certain areas are occupied, so it’s sending power to the walls and floor to heat the cold. Since it was empty for nearly a day most of the city has cooled back down—except for the engine room. As well as the central control.”

As they neared the front of the building Scott turned to face them. “Here is where we’re going to split up. Since we don’t have an accurate map of the city itself, we’re going to have to make it up as we go along. We don’t have a cartographer, so pay attention. Keep your tricorders on record to remember which way you turned. I’ve already downloaded what maps we have made during the Edison’s stay here into your tricorders and padds. Other than the engine room, Captain Gold and I have a strong suspicion what we’re looking for is in the vault where Alverson was attacked.”

Everyone nodded. Fabian especially. That was a good location to avoid.

Scott turned to Gomez. Even though Scotty was the ranking officer here, Gomez was in charge of the S.C.E. team, and he deferred to her for command of the mission.

“I’ll take Bart, Carol, and Vanov to the vault. According to the reports, more Disruptor traps have been found and dismantled, but we’ll be on the lookout for more. Tev, Pattie, Fabian, and Sarj will go with Captain Scott to engineering. Domenica, I’ll let you split your people as you see fit.”

Corsi moved to stand in front of the group. “Lauoc and Krotine go with Captain Scott’s group. Vinx, Konya, you’re with me and Commander Gomez.”

The security people took their places.

Gomez said, “Soloman’s standing by on the da Vinci waiting for a signal if we find any computer systems or something remotely resembling one, and Laura has locks on all our combadges in case of trouble.”

Scotty rubbed his hands together. “Like Vanov said about the heated walls and floor, the lights will come on—if they’re still active—in whatever section you move into.”

Gomez nodded. “Let’s make regular check-ins. Okay, head out.”

Fabian closed his eyes. The whispering noise was a little stronger now, and a slight twinge of pain behind his eyes took his attention away. He felt a presence beside him and opened his eyes to see Corsi standing there, as well as Sarjenka.

“You okay?” the security chief asked. Concern showed behind her beautiful eyes. “Or are you feeling

guilty for whatever it was you did to Sonya?”

Fabian slumped his shoulders and lowered his head. “Okay. Yes. It’s guilt. I made her laugh.” He reached out and took her jacket in his hands. “Please...forgive me!”

Gomez cleared her throat from across the room. Their party was gathered at the main entrance waiting on Corsi. Scotty waited a few feet beyond them for Fabian and Sarjenka.

Fabian put a hand on Corsi’s shoulder. “I’m fine—and I haven’t done anything asinine to Commander Gomez.”

She didn’t say anything, but turned and walked away.

“I didn’t do anything...”

Chapter

5

“Well.” Bart looked up at the fourteen-foot door. It was a nice door. All big and huge and impressive. Dark wood, buffed and polished. No oil residue. No sign of age either—none that he could see. Or any tell-tale evidence of weathering.

But then again, they were several floors below what Carol referred to as “cloud level.” They’d huddled down a series of streets lined by what Bart could only call brownstones of a sort—the kind he remembered seeing on Earth, in Manhattan. These were nicer—not made of brick, but what looked like shining marble. Very impressive.

The path Alverson and company had taken led them to a large house down a one-way street. Bart hadn’t seen any sort of vehicles—not even a bus. How had these people gotten from place to place? Walked?

Either way, it was hard to believe they were actually on a platform in the air. Except for the wind—how had they dealt with all this wind?

The street ended at an impressive-looking building. All squared with no windows. Not a single one, which differed somehow from the other buildings they’d passed. Even the shops had open fronts.

This thing looked sealed up tight.

Vanov understood the opening mechanism for the front and opened it, though Corsi had insisted on her, Vinx, and Konya entering first.

Vanov had pointed to a series of familiar letters on the door. Soske Busk, the son of the city’s creator. There were many buildings named after him and his wife.

Just inside was where Alverson had set off the trap. There were scraps of medical supplies everywhere—and was that blood on the floor?

Vanov led them down three flights of stairs. The longer they were inside the warmer it became. Just as Scott said it would. By the time the group moved out into a hallway, several removed their jackets.

It was down this hallway the group had found the door, and stopped.

Vanov remained in front of them, his hands on his face. He looked as if he'd just seen the face of his god.

And what was that smell? It reminded Bart of old, unwashed shoes. "That's a door."

"And it doesn't appear to have any visible door handles either." Carol frowned at Bart. "Isn't that odd?"

He shrugged. "Maybe it's like an Aladdin door? Open sesame and all that?"

Carol sighed.

Bart grinned and held out his hands. "Mellon!"

Carol gave him a lopsided grin. "You really are nervous."

"Scared out of my wits," Bart said as he peeled off his jacket. "I'm not in the habit of looking for traps." He couldn't help but be reminded of the trap that killed his parents when he was young, the same one that had killed the first real love of his life.

Yes. He was nervous all right.

"I'm afraid I don't know the reference," Vanov said and approached the door in reverence, much the way he'd bowed to Fabian.

Which Bart found just too odd.

Sonya moved up to stand beside the Historian. "Vanov, what exactly is the fight about below? About Stratos?"

Vanov turned to her, his expression resigned. "Stratos has always been in the sky, for as long as I can remember. Much of the history after the Disruption is more muddled up—there are several groups who believe it's been forgotten or hidden on purpose."

"The history of Stratos?"

"The technology," Vanov said. "When you don't know the answers to the past you make up wild stories about it. No one today can build such a structure, much less make it hover in the sky. We build shuttles, simple propulsion engines, and smaller anti-gravity devices." He held his hands out and looked up. "But nothing like this."

"You mean some of your people believe the technology was hidden to prevent another Stratos?"

Vanov nodded. "Still others—those in the majority—believe the city should be kept in the heavens but studied, and its technologies brought back to her people." He held up a finger. "That is where the real division exists."

Bart had been listening and now moved closer, as did Carol.

“Division as to who owns the technology?” Carol frowned.

“Not so much like that,” Vanov said. “But a division of fear. Those who fear the technology will be used only for a select few, and those who believe the technology will destroy what we’ve rebuilt.” He shook his head. “I’m afraid those who wish the city destroyed have been growing in increasing numbers through the past decade. Their prophets and seers have foretold the falling of Stratos for decades.”

Well, that could be bad. Bart scratched at his stubbled chin. “That’s what’s happening now—with what the High Advisor is dealing with.”

“Those who want it destroyed,” Vanov said, “verses those who want it preserved—only with control.” He smiled at Sonya. “Did you know that until the Edison arrived we didn’t have the transmat technologies? Their engineers fixed it for us—made us two new transmat pads.”

With a glance at Carol, Bart rubbed at his face. Oh, yeah—he could see this train wreck coming a mile away.

Vanov studied the door a few seconds more, then reached out to it and began feeling around the wood. “If it’s a vault of some sort, it should have a hidden panel about shoulder to eye level. Pressure on the door should open it.”

“And then?”

“And then...” His lips curled into a large smile. “Found it.” He pushed in.

The panel receded into the wood, revealing two levers.

“Wait.” Bart held up his hands. “Booby traps. You mentioned those. We need to be careful.”

“Surely no one ever came down here to set them. The Disruptors usually left their mark where it could be seen.” Vanov shrugged. “I wouldn’t worry.”

“All the same.” Corsi took a step forward. “I’d feel much safer if you’d let me open it.”

“Nonsense,” Vanov said and put his hand into the recessed panel.

Bart waited for the boom.

* * *

Stratos’s main engineering sprawled over three levels, tiered out much like seating in a theater, but with each descending tier triple the size of the one above it. The group entered on the uppermost tier, descended to the second, or middle, tier where three podiums faced the final tier.

All of this projected out over an open pit in the shape of a teardrop, visible from tier one. Air moved up in a continuous stream from the pit surrounding them, but to Fabian’s surprise, it didn’t create a deafening howl.

Three Ardanan engineers moved up and down the tiers, checking readouts on their own form of pads

and bowed to the da Vinci crew as they walked down the center stairway, mouths open in shock.

“I can honestly say...” Fabian said as he stepped onto the third tier and looked up...and up...at the tall cylindrical obelisk standing in front of them at the platform’s edge. “That I have no idea how to make it go.”

Pattie asked, “So what exactly are we looking at?”

Engineer Dreena, a tall brunette woman whose physique and height could rival Corsi’s, smiled. “This is the handiwork of the great Busk. The Engineer of Stratos. He called it Soske.”

Of course he did. Fabian pursed his lips. So which came first —the cylinder or the kid?

“We identified the general components of the engine room,” Captain Scott said as he moved to stand in front of the monolith. “Imagine this as the warp core...”

“Ah,” Tev said, quickly comprehending. “Deflector station over there, graviton generators over there.”

“I can detect a faint purring sound,” Pattie said as she scanned.

The others looked at one another and shook their heads. All but Fabian. He could hear...something. A buzzing between his ears, though with a cadence. He’d heard it since they walked into the cavernous room and the pain behind his eyes had intensified.

He put his hand to his head.

“It looks like a silo,” Pattie said.

Fabian nodded inward. Yeah, a big, black scary silo.

Dreena said, “We suspected the cylinder in front of you has something to do with the city’s main thrusters—moving it from place to place. It’s maintained this fixed position for some time, but it once glided on air.”

Fabian looked around as well, his own tricorder out and running scans, though none of the information he received made sense. It was as if the tiny scanner’s probes were being bounced back to it.

By looking up he guessed the ceiling had to be around a third of a kilometer high. The cylinder stood in the center of the room framed by a spherical wall. “If that theory holds true, then the thing’s got to have a steering wheel.”

“Aye,” Scotty said. “We need to find out why the RPMs needed to maintain the right flow of anti-gravitons has fallen off.”

Tev said, “Assuming that that is the reason why the city is falling, we shall need a schematic. It would be unfortunate if we proceeded blindly and accidentally shut the generators off completely.”

“Yeah,” Fabian said, “that would be bad. I vote we don’t do that.” He looked at Scotty while nodding to the second tier. “Captain, what are those podiums for?”

“I don’t know, lad. As far as we can tell, they’re observation posts.”

Fabian was already moving up the steps to the center podium. He saw words along the upper left side of the flat, blank surface. They were raised from the material itself. The podium stood as high as his waist.

He tapped his combadge. “Stevens to Faulwell.”

“Faulwell here. I don’t hear us moving yet. Did you break something?”

“No, but what are these?” He scanned the relief into the tricorder and sent it to Bart’s padd.

“Ardanan letters.” He paused. “This is weird. It’s —oh, for the love of—”

“What?”

“Engineering kiosk system, orientation station.”

Fabian nodded slowly. “Orientation station...”

“Did that help you?”

“Yes—yes it did. Or at least I think it did.”

“Okay, I’ve got exploring to do. Faulwell out.”

Fabian considered what Bart and Carol had said about the Sentinels, as well as what Dr. Lense told him about the parasites. Orientation station sounded like a focal point—a main consol. Vanov said the Sentinels controlled the city’s functions.

He didn’t hear anything, nor did he see anything other than the flat, glossy surface. No dials. No switch. Not even a monitor. In fact, the entire podium reminded him of the artifacts in color, shape, and makeup.

Sarjenka came up the stairs, her expression quizzical. “Did you find something?”

“Dunno.” He looked at his hands and remembered what had happened in engineering when he’d touched the console there. “We’ll see.”

She touched his left arm. “Look.”

He looked where Sarjenka gestured. All of the Ardanan engineers were turned, facing the podium, their hands clasped together in front of them. “What are they staring at?”

“You.” She glanced at the podium. “I guess they’re waiting to see if you’re really a Sentinel.”

“Won’t know if I don’t try.”

“Fabe, remember the theory I had, about stimulus making the parasites grow?”

He was looking at the podium, studying its sides. “Um-hm.”

“I know Dr. Lense doesn’t believe it’s a possibility, but I do. I’m not sure you should try and attempt anything.”

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her. “Sarj, I’m here because I want to be. Because if the city isn’t halted, or moved, or destroyed, people will die below. I’m an engineer.” He shrugged. “Fixing things is what I do.”

With a smirk he placed both his hands, palms down, on the surface of the podium.

Nothing happened.

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. How many Ardanan engineers have already touched these panels?” Sarjenka said.

A light flashed in the center of the panel. Fabian stared at it. His hands grew warm as the light moved around the black surface, outlining his fingers. Once the light completed what Fabian suspected was a scan, the surface lit up in a mosaic masterpiece of color and light.

The light traveled up into the air several inches before shifting away from Fabian. It spread itself up flat in the air in front of him before transforming itself into a colorful wire-framed grid. A holographic control center!

Sarjenka gasped.

Fabian looked at her. “You can see this?”

She nodded, her eyes wide.

Neat.

“Lad!”

Fabian saw Scotty moving as quickly up the stairs as his frame would allow him. He was followed by Pattie, Lauoc, Krotine, and Tev. Dreena followed at a slower pace. The other Ardanan engineers were huddled in a tight circle below.

“I think I turned it on.” He refocused on the image in front of him. “And—it looks like a blueprint.”

The group spread out around him, Pattie moving to the podium on the right. “This one’s operating as well.”

Tev strode to the left podium. “So is this one. Good work, Specialist.”

Fabian grinned. A gratuitous compliment from His Royal Tevness. Will wonders never cease.

The Tellarite touched the surface. Several images flashed up on the holographic screen in front of Fabian.

Images of the city. Building exteriors mostly.

“It’s a map!” Scotty said.

Music, soft and playful, teased at the corners of Fabian’s hearing. He cocked his head to listen.

“Shhh...” There it was. Echoing from somewhere in the city. “Pattie, touch the panel again. Let’s keep scrolling through.”

Pattie touched the panel slowly as different images moved from right to left in front of them. Dreena approached and stood behind Fabian. “There,” she said and pointed to a building with no windows. “That is where your people are.”

With a nod from Fabian she touched the screen several more times until they saw an image of the engine room—from above. Everyone looked up as if to see the camera.

What caught Fabian’s attention was the layout of the tiers when seen from above. It looked like the ending of a peacock feather. It also looked like a button.

Fabian lifted his right hand—the images and grid remained in front of him. Hesitantly he reached out and touched the building’s façade.

The music’s volume increased with a crescendo as soft lights like rainbow fireflies moved around Fabian’s hands. Again he could see the plane before him, and recognized it now—the lines of a piece of sheet music!

He had memories of his mother’s notebooks, full of music she’d inherited from her mother, and her grandmother. Lines and dots danced in front of him, spun and sang in his ears.

It was loud. Too loud.

He closed his eyes and the sheet music vanished, replaced by the image of a symphony orchestra. A thousand players, each reading the same music, working perfectly together. A smooth running engine.

Except for one—one player in the middle. Everyone else’s colors synched perfectly, but not his. His color was red and the notes that played along the lines of music were staccato, mis-numbered, turning dark and angry.

Abruptly that player rose in the air, as if the ship’s inertial dampeners were—

He opened his eyes. “I know what’s wrong with the engine.” He turned to look at Captain Scott. “I know what the RPMs are—and I know how to fix it!”

Chapter

6

It was like nothing Bart had ever seen before.

Vanov had called this an archive. No. More like a museum.

Most of the art hung on the walls, sat on pedestals, while others rested on individual dais like the one they had transported in on.

What caught the group’s attention were the pieces obviously not part of the display. Sculptures,

paintings, musical instruments, and books rested on the floor in a less than orderly fashion, propped against the walls or slung against one another.

As if they'd been piled inside with haste.

Vanov moved in the center of the path, not allowing his robes to brush any of the displayed pieces. He stopped a few feet ahead of them, his face expressionless.

"It looks like they just threw some of this stuff in here," Carol said as she and Gomez joined them.

Corsi stood a few feet away, looking at a long, rectangular piece of art in a black frame. "I'm thinking they were in a hurry. Might have believed this museum was the safest place."

"Oh, this is definitely a display hall of some sort," Carol said and she pointed to the walls and the artwork. "Or it belonged to a private collector. Whether it was owned by the city's ruler or the richest man living in it—maybe even this Soske person—doesn't matter. It does look like it was used to safely stow precious things."

Bart tried to think of what these people must have been thinking or feeling to have put what looked like family heirlooms in here. Thinking to come back to them someday.

It looked as if no one ever returned.

"It's like old ghosts," Gomez said from where she stood. Bart stood, wincing at his creaking knees, and ambled over to her.

"Interesting description."

"Things like this also tell you about the sort of people they were." Gomez pointed to the painting Corsi was looking at. It was mostly blue, with a black background, with hundreds of straight lines moving at ninety-degree angles. "Like this. I'd call this a practice in line making. Doesn't really evoke any emotion."

"Might not mean to," Carol said. "Looks like it's part of something else too."

Bart nodded as he examined it. He believed Carol was right. It did look like it was more of a puzzle piece than a whole. And to add a bit more to the mystery, the name of Soske was printed in the lower right corner. Along with another word.

Bart pulled out his padd and tapped in the word to his translator.

It came back asSo below .

Interesting.

"Hey, where's Vanov?" Corsi nearly growled.

Everyone looked around. But there was no sign of the Historian.

"Great. Let's find him before he trips one of these traps I keep hearing about."

"She's right," Bart said as the group started to follow her. "Art is where the Disruptors usually struck.

As a way to get back at the City Dwellers.”

They stopped where the hallway branched in opposite directions. Corsi called out for the Ardanan, but there was no answer, only the echo of her voice. “I don’t like this.”

Bart looked down each of the corridors, both filled with displayed as well as scattered pieces. “This is a fine mess we’ve gotten ourselves into.”

“Well,” Carol said, “common sense would suggest there would either be another door leading out, or these hallways merge into one, forming a sort of loop.”

“How far back does it go?” Gomez asked.

Carol shook her head. “I really don’t have a way of knowing. The tricorder’s range is limited. One of us could go back outside and keep trying until we hit the end of it.”

Bart half smiled. “Do we follow the yellow brick road through the cornfield, or mayhaps into the haunted forest?”

“Bart…” Carol nudged him.

“Maybe we should split up,” Gomez said. “Corsi, you, Rennan, and Bart take the left. Carol, Makk, and I will try right. Common sense suggests these two would meet in the middle.”

Carol beamed.

Corsi took the right hallway and Bart followed, Konya behind both of them. Bart kept his tricorder out and ready. Corsi already had her phaser out—he hoped set on stun.

Looking down at the tricorder, Bart noticed he could pick up signatures inside of the vault but not outside. He could detect Corsi just ahead of him, and—

“Commander,” Konya said, “Ardanan ahead of us by thirty meters.”

She nodded and kept her position in a sort of “ready” crouch. You know, just in case the art-loving Ardanans decided to bean us with a valuable piece of statuary.

“Took you mooks long enough,” came Makk Vinx’s distinctive Iotian tones as the three of them rounded a corner.

“So here’s the party,” Bart said. It was just as Carol had suspected—the hallways led back to a central room. Vanov was oohing and ahing over a series of rectangular paintings that appeared to move around the entire room. Two mounted on each of the entrance walls, and three on the opposing walls.

“Your hallway was longer,” Gomez said. She nodded to Vanov. “Apparently this is definitely a private collection and we’re standing in the showroom.”

“Showroom?” Corsi shrugged her shoulders. “There’s just this weird collection of odd-colored pictures. Why show these? They look like that one at the entrance.”

Corsi moved away from them toward a series of lights along the right wall. Bart had noticed them

too—odd circles cut into the wall. He'd assumed they were accent lights as they lined up along with the paintings on the opposite wall.

But now as he looked at their spacing, he realized they lined up with only the paintings with titles.

“Corsi—” he started.

At that instant she stood between two of the holes and touched one of the paintings as if to brace herself.

He heard it before it launched—the thud of a trigger mechanism releasing.

Without thinking Bart flung his padd away and lunged at Gomez, Carol, and Vanov, tackling them all to the ground just as something whizzed past.

“Bart!” Gomez yelled out.

Carol shoved him away as did Vanov. Bart moved back but continued to stare at something, his eyes wide at what he saw.

“What is wrong with you?” Carol said. “What did you—”

But Gomez had turned to see what Bart stared at and reached out with a shaking hand to touch her shoulder. “Carol.” She pointed.

Carol turned and slapped her hands to her mouth.

Sticking out of the middle painting was a shiny, steel pole.

“Bart just saved your life,” Corsi said in the ensuing silence. “Looks like we found a Disruptor trap.”

* * *

Fabian stared at Scotty for a moment before answering his question. “No, sir. I’m not sure why I see the images I do, or hear what I do. Maybe it’s the parasite taking what’s there and translating it into a way so that I can read the diagnostic controls.”

“Are you sure, lad?” Scotty looked less than convinced.

So did everyone else—well, except for Tev, who was too busy studying the schematics they now had to be concerned about something so inconsequential as the health of mere enlisted personnel. Sarjenka made up for Tev, though; her medical tricorder was out and trained on him like a phaser.

What put him off a little was the attitude of the Ardanans. The local engineers had moved slowly up the tiers to stand to the side. Not one of them had tried to help, much less touch one of the podiums. Except for Dreena—but what she did was stay close, always watching him.

“It’s simple.” He put his hands in the air as a gesture. The holographic schematic remained in place, hovering above the podium. “The way this system is set up...” He turned and started touching illuminated panels. The image before them changed, shifting down to the engine room. A side-layout of the cylinder as well as the tiers appeared. He pointed at the two areas beside the cylinder. “It’s the dampening system—it’s harmonically out of sync due to years of neglect.”

Pattie nodded slowly. “That should be easy to fix. That is, if we knew where to fix them. Or how.”

Fabian looked back at the schematic. How do I fix this?

And the answer came to him. He stood directly in front of the podium. The images changed. He could set the sequence to recalibrate, but it would mean taking them offline for one point seven seconds before rebooting them.

But without the dampeners to govern up or down, the city could do a somersault, lose momentum and crash.

He looked at Scott and Tev. “I have an idea.” He tapped his combadge. “Stevens to Conlon.”

“Go ahead.”

“Ready with that tractor beam?”

There was a pause. “Everything’s set, but I have to warn you —with the preliminary tests we just completed, calculating for the city’s structural integrity as well as overall weight—I’d say I could hold the city in the air for maybe one point six seconds.”

Point-one second off.

But it would have to work.

“What is it you intend, Specialist?” Tev asked.

“Reset the inertial dampeners—it’s the only way to resync up the harmonics.”

“You’re sure this’ll work, lad?” Scotty’s voice sounded concerned, and Fabian couldn’t entirely blame him.

“Yes,” Fabian lied. No point in mentioning that point-one second. That was the sort of thing that would get Tev’s bowels in an uproar, and Scotty probably wouldn’t be too thrilled, either.

Tev and Scotty exchanged glances, then Tev tapped his combadge. “Tev to Conlon.”

“Go ahead.”

“Prepare to engage the tractor beam on Specialist Stevens’s mark.”

“You got it.”

Fabian looked at everyone. “I’d grab hold of something—this might be a bumpy ride.”

Everyone did as he suggested.

Except for Dreena, who watched him with narrowed eyes.

He tapped his combadge. “Nancy—mark.”

* * *

“Did you feel that?” Carol whispered at Bart as the two of them stood in front of three of the series paintings. The pole remained in the wall to their left.

He looked up from his padd. “You mean the atmospheric shift combined with the abrupt drop of the floor causing me to rise about a fifth of a centimeter in the air?”

She nodded. “Yeah, that.”

Bart shook his head and looked back at his padd. “Nope. Didn’t feel a thing.”

Carol smiled at him. “You always manage to make me laugh—even when I’m scared out of my wits.”

“Why so?”

“Bart, we’re on a flying city.”

“Well, technically Stratos doesn’t really fly. It floats.”

“Bart, I know you’re being silly because we just had a bad scare. But something’s just happened.”

“Gomez to Captain Scott.” Gomez moved away from Vanov and stared at the floor.

“Scott here,” came the familiar brogue. “Everyone all right?”

“Yes—I think. But is the city okay? That abrupt drop was a bit unnerving.”

“Aye. Conlon put a tow line on us for a bit while Fabian restarted the inertial dampeners.”

“He did what?” Gomez looked at Corsi who came nearer, her face unreadable as always. “Is Fabian okay?”

“He’s a bit disoriented—Sarjenka says the dendrites are growing larger, and longer. They’re apparently moving into other regions of the brain.”

Gomez continued to look at Corsi. “What’s happened? Why haven’t you transported Fabian to sickbay?”

“Well,” Captain Scott said in a tired-sounding voice. “Lass, we can’t beam out, and no one can beam in.”

“What? How—?”

“The reset activated a city-wide shield that prevents any matter transportation in and out of the city. We can contact the *Vinci*, which I’ve already done, but we can’t get to her.”

“How do we shut the shield off?”

“That is the question, lass,” Captain Scott said. “Tev and I are working on it.”

Corsi tapped her badge. “Captain Scott, did it work? Is the city still falling?”

“Aye, we’re still falling—it looks like the dampeners are now working fine—but he wasn’t able to finish the RPM recalibration.”

Bart and Carol frowned at each other. Gomez narrowed her eyes. “What does that mean?”

“It means we no longer have two days before Stratos falls. We have less than four hours. We need Mr. Stevens. Sarjenka’s trying to revive him. Keep looking for something that could help us—I’ll let you know if something changes.”

“I’m heading your way,” Corsi said and started to move around Gomez. Bart felt for her—she was concerned for Fabian. They all were.

“No, Domenica,” Gomez said. “You stay here—make sure we don’t trip another Disruptor trap. Let Captain Scott and Tev keep working on getting the shield down.”

“We’ll have it ready in a jiffy, Commander, worry not. Scott out.”

Carol moved to stand in front of two of the odd pictures hanging on the wall where she and Gomez came in. Bart sighed and looked at the pieces to see what was so fascinating. It occurred to him that those—including the other eight positioned in exactly the height between the floor and ceiling—bore a strange resemblance to the one he’d noticed near the entrance. Just as Corsi had said.

He turned to his left to look at the three behind him. The left painting was a brilliant red, the middle one green, and the right one blue. Looking to his right where Carol stood, the two pictures were light blue and a pinkish sort of red.

“Carol?” Gomez strode across the room to where the cultural specialist stood.

He turned back to the original three behind him and visualized them on the floor like a great puzzle piece. Only five of the ten pieces had any sort of title. He typed them into his padd. They all translated into phrasal definitions—much the way Japanese or Andorii did.

Where He has been. Where He shall travel. As above. In station be.

Bart grunted.

The one at the front of the museum had said So below .

He swallowed as he took a closer look at the farthest painting—the one to the right of the pole. It said As above .

No. It couldn’t be.

Not the same translation found in China on Earth centuries ago?

As above, so below. The second line was, As within, so without.

The others were merely directions. Forward, back, and still.

Could it be that easy? That the key to moving Stratos was within. Within the innermost museum? The city's central core?

That the schematics to the city propulsion—the plans, the blueprints—all hidden within the paintings themselves?

Hidden in plain sight—and the Stratos Dwellers always believed the Troglytes were too slow and stupid to figure things out. They could read blueprints—simple enough.

But what if what they needed was actually a part of the artwork?

“Commander, I think I might have found something.” He turned and smiled at her. “The city plans”—he pointed to the walls—“They're in the paintings!”

Chapter

7

Goldentered sickbay, his irritation building with each passing second. “All right, Lense, I'm here. What's so damned important?”

Lense motioned him to her. “We need to get Fabian out of there.”

“Right now, I can't beam anyone in or out of Stratos. The whole city's sealed up tight—not even the Ardanan transmat devices are working.”

“What kind of defense is that?” Lense asked.

“Scotty says it's the work of a madman,” Gold said. “He believes it was installed by Plasus during the verbal war with the Federation. Because Kirk had Scotty beam Plasus to the surface, Plasus installed a safeguard against that. What we don't know is if the restart of the dampeners keyed it, or if it was the tractor beam Conlon threw around the city.”

“Can't you just somehow grab the city again and put it on the ground?”

“Not according to Conlon. That one second of power the da Vinci used to hold Stratos in midair caused a sufficient drain on our own power. By more than forty percent. She and her team are working on building the power back up, but we can't try that again soon. And the Bataan is still too far out of range.”

Lense absently rubbed at her belly as she drew her lips into a thin line. “Sarjenka sent me up the latest scans on the parasite dendrites.” She leaned her head to the left. “They're spreading. And as much as I hate to admit it, she was right as to the cause. It's the stimulation. Every time he stimulates the dendrites, they get excited and grow.”

“Are you saying they're dangerous now? You told us Sentinels lived with these things in their brains for years.”

“Well, that's true.” She held out her hands. “These things were genetically engineered for the Ardanan

brain, which I've been studying. The human brain is different on many levels—mainly in the areas of neurochemicals.”

“Lense. . .plain English.”

“Sorry. The relevant neurochemicals that these things feed on aren't relegated to discrete areas of the brain in a human, but all over the place. So what's happening is similar to the strangler-ivy effect. The old Earth cancer equivalent. These things are starting to spread, making connections to other regions they were never meant to connect, going first to adjacent areas, advancing like ivy you can't control.”

Gold frowned at her. “You mean like kudzu.”

She shook her head, her expression showing her unfamiliarity with the strangling southern weed. “I'm assuming that's like ivy. . .”

He moved his head from shoulder to shoulder. “More or less, but I get the point.”

“It's started moving all over the cerebral cortex, not just in those previous areas. If it continues it will interfere with all sorts of centers—having different regions of the brain talking to each other that were never meant to at all, including the reticular activating system of the brainstem.”

He frowned. “Lense, what are you telling me?”

“It's going to interfere with his RAS, Captain. The RAS is responsible for breathing, temperature regulation—without it, he'll die.”

“Gevalt. Is there any way to stop it?”

“The only thing we've come up with is to slow the stimulation. But that thing's programmed to integrate with that city. Sarjenka said he managed to reset the dampeners before he became disoriented. His temperature's up. Captain, it's going to happen faster and faster unless she sedates him, cuts him off from the city itself.”

He rubbed at his chin. “I can't authorize that. Stevens is the only one who can get this city stabilized—we're running out of time. He's already corrected the dampeners—as of ten minutes ago he was able to adjust the generators and the city's showing signs of slowing. Faulwell's found something in a series of paintings in a lower vault—we think they might be able to show Stevens how to move the city, maybe even land it.”

She looked up at him, her gaze shifting across his face. “Captain—”

“I know, I know. We'll watch out for him, but the fate of millions rests in his hands. I can't let them down.”

“Just—” She took in a deep breath. “Just remember what I said when we bury another good man.” With that she put her hand to her face, turned, and moved as quickly as she could into her office.

* * *

Fabian shifted the generators again—achieving another jump in the RPMs. It was getting easier as well as harder to manipulate the Ardanan controls. Most of it was conceptual—images drawn from his own

mind and used to lead him to the right course of action.

Only he'd found nothing in the system about a shield to prevent transmat and beaming technologies. It didn't exist.

Tev called out from the right podium where he was manipulating the holographic controls. "There—that's done it. The city has stabilized." He frowned at the images moving in front of him then nodded. "We're lifting. The city should reach previous altitude in less than thirty minutes."

From next to Tev, Scott turned to Fabian and smiled. "Don't want to suddenly jump altitudes—might be damaging to the city's structure."

Fabian nodded before lowering his head. He removed his hands from the podium and spread his fingers over his face. The holographic images faded from all three centers, though the team was certain the last instructions would be carried out.

Sarjenka ran her tricorder over him again. He was starting to hate that little machine. "Your temperature's up another half degree."

That much he knew. He felt flushed, his skin warm to the touch. But he was also cold and had put his own jacket back on when everyone else discarded theirs.

"And your heart rate keeps fluctuating." She closed the tricorder.

He kept his eyes closed. It would be so easy to just lay down on the floor and take a nice long siesta. But he couldn't. Not yet. "They've grown again, haven't they?"

He didn't need to look at her to know she nodded.

Scott said, "Lad, you've done good. Take a rest. The city's no longer in danger of falling—the generators are happy as pigs in mud."

"But the shield..." Fabian shivered.

"There's an idea I had..." Pattie spoke up.

Opening his eyes he turned to his left. "Shoot."

"Do what we did before when you reset the dampeners. There was a one second or so window there where the power was shut down. Why not do it again and have Poynter beam us back to the Vinci?"

It was feasible, but not what he wanted to do. He wanted to turn the shield off completely. What good was a floating city when no one could get in or out? Taking a shuttle in was highly dangerous because of the winds—Stratos had no docking ports at all.

Completely self-contained.

Fabian looked at Scott and Tev. The latter spoke. "That would only be acceptable as a last resort. The power required to hold the city in place was taxing on the Vinci's engines, which are currently only at seventy percent efficiency."

Pattie made a bell-like noise that Fabian knew meant she was crestfallen.

Fabian put a hand on her carapace. “I think it’s a sound idea—as an alternative if something goes wrong.” He smiled. “So let’s hope nothing goes wrong.”

“Faulwell to Scott.”

“Go ahead.”

“We’re still waiting on those tools.”

Fabian laughed. Just as his roommate had called in that he’d found something of interest, Fabian connected again with the engine’s map and found out how and where to increase and reset the generator speed.

Bart had wanted some cutting tools—apparently what he needed had to be taken down. “I need to see the whole picture,” he’d said.

Fabian tapped his own combadge. “I’ll be right there, Bart.”

“You still alive?”

“Yeah. Hold tight.” He stood and moved slowly away from the podium to the satchel of tools they’d brought with them.

“Lad, maybe someone else should go. You look like death warmed over.”

Fabian made a lopsided grin. That pretty much described how he felt. “No—I need to see what it is he’s found, in case these buggies in my head can tell me something about them. If there is a way to move the city, I’d feel much better about it. In case the Band-Aid doesn’t hold and it comes down anyway.”

“But that’s exactly what you need to avoid,” Sarjenka said. “More stimulus. You need to rest.”

“I will as soon as we get that shield down.”

Sarjenka tucked her tricorder into the medical pouch over her shoulder. “Then I’m coming with you.”

“Fine.” He looked at Scott, who now stood at the transmat platform. They’d discovered the technology still worked within the city. “Just get us to Bart’s location.”

“All right, lad.” He turned to the podium and activated the start-up sequence.

Fabian frowned, his peripheral vision noticing the still-hovering Ardanan engineers. Not one of them had lifted a finger to help—they just stood there and watched.

The four of them made Fabian uncomfortable, especially since it looked as if they were always staring at him.

* * *

Gold kept his expression neutral as he listened to the yammering of Council Spokesman Yaffie,

Ardana's voice of the New Future movement—the faction that wanted Stratos destroyed. Since announcing that the descent of Stratos had been halted, and its anti-gravity engines fixed, his voice had been the loudest. According to Elected High Advisor Nelois, Yaffie had quite a following.

He, Nelois, and Gold were discussing a new timetable for the S.C.E.'s estimated completion—and for getting the shield shut off.

Yaffie, of course, wanted the city destroyed now.

Nelois wanted them to transmit the new Sentinel to the planet so he could be thrown a party (not that Gold thought Fabian would ever miss a party).

And Gold—Gold just wanted them both to shut up.

The two of them appeared now together on the front viewer of the *Vinci*. Gold leaned to the right in his chair. Susan Haznedl, promoted to lieutenant junior grade, sat at ops, her finger poised on the mute button.

“...ridiculous idea that our people want any ties to the atrocities committed against the Troglytes by the City Dwellers,” Yaffie said. He was a medium-sized man—broad shoulders with a shaved head, white goatee, and mustaches. His dark eyebrows gave a stark contrast to his pale skin.

“But that is our history up there,” Nelois insisted. “How can you want to destroy something that is still a part of us? There are descendants here, of those who once dwelled in the city. They renounced what their forefathers did, but there could be pieces to their families locked away.”

“All the more reason to blow it out of the sky,” Yaffie said.

“Gentlemen.” Gold sat forward and waited until he had their attention. “As it stands now, Stratos is stable. My people are working diligently on getting the shield that's keeping them there removed.”

“How do we know your people are truly held there by this...shield? How do we know you're not secretly working with the High Advisor to land the city as he so wishes to do?”

Gold fixed the Ardanan with the coldest stare he could muster. “Spokesman, I have a man on that station who is dying—literally—from a parasite your forefathers created. That parasite and his engineering ability saved that city. I want him off of Stratos. But I can't get to him until that shield is down. Once my people are clear, it's up to you and your government to decide what to do with it.”

Yaffie blanched white. “You—you found one of the cars?”

Gold glanced at Nelois, who looked everywhere but back at him. “Well, yes. One of my crew was infected with the parasite.” Why does my stomach suddenly feel very uneasy?

Yaffie looked to his left to where Gold supposed Nelois's image was displayed. “You—you created a Sentinel? How could you have done this?”

Nelois finally looked at Gold. “Because we didn't know that's what the artifacts were.”

“Poppycock!”

Gold glanced at Haznedl—was that really what the universal translators heard?

“Your people have been studying the old text for years.” Yaffie turned to look at Gold. “You have one half hour to remove your people from the city before we start firing on Stratos.”

Yaffie disconnected.

Gold looked at Nelois. “You care to tell me why you neglected to let him know about the parasites?”

“Need you ask?” The High Advisor of Ardana held up his hand before Gold could retort. “You have my thanks, Captain Gold. Do not worry about Yaffie’s threats—he does not have the weapons or manpower to blow anything out of the sky.”

The viewer went blank.

“Well,” Gold said to no one in particular, “that didn’t make me feel at all better.”

Chapter

8

“A half hour,” Fabian said. He stood beside Bart in the center of what Bart now referred to as the map room. “So what are we supposed to do if we don’t get that shield shut off? Find parachutes and hope they open?”

Bart suppressed a smile. His roommate’s agitation was well-founded—having just learned that the people they had come to help had decided to blow them out of the sky.

But that didn’t lessen what they were doing. Bart nodded at Sonya. “We understand.”

Sarjenka had her tricorder out again. “Fabian, stop doing this. Your temperature’s up again.”

Gomez stepped closer to her. “What’s happening?”

“His core temperature is rising, and he’s exhibiting instances of labored breathing. Those things in his head are messing with his RAS.”

“What’s his core temperature?”

“One hundred and two Fahrenheit.”

But Fabian was staring at the paintings.

Bart came up beside him. “You still don’t see it, do you?”

“Bart, I’ve been standing here for ten minutes and I just can’t see—” But he did see something—vivid colors that moved and glowed in front of him. And each time he concentrated on a particular painting he heard a tone in his head.

Carol joined them. “Oh, stop making the poor man think. Can’t you see he’s got a headache?” She looked at Fabian. “There are eleven paintings like this, total. There were eleven gifts Soske gave his wife Miso upon their wedding day, including a hand model of Stratos. His father’s dream.”

Fabian nodded. “And there are eleven tones in my head.”

“What?” Gomez said.

Corsi looked from Fabian to the paintings. “You hear music when you look at them?”

Fabian nodded. “Yeah, like when I hear your voice I see indigo, and when I see indigo over there”—he pointed to purplish painting—“I hear a tone.”

Bart crossed his arms over his chest. “So we don’t need to cut them down?”

Fabian shook his head. “I just have to remember them—” He looked around, turning where he stood. “And figure out in what order or melody.”

“So what do you think this is?” Corsi said.

Shaking his head, he looked at the paintings, stared at the lines that were different shades and hues of the primary colors of each painting. And as he did an entire piece of music came to him in his head. It was different than the rest. Much like the artwork itself. It was like twenty-first century paintings hanging alongside a Leonardo da Vinci piece in a museum, completely out of sync with—

He gave a small laugh. “That’s it!”

Bart gave Carol a sour look. “I hate it when he does that.”

“No, Bart. I see it. Those lines—” He pointed at the left painting. “What is that one?”

He pronounce the word in Ardanan, then translated: “Where he has been.”

Fabian repeated the sounds of the word aloud and the colors of the painting flared.

Everyone in the room stopped when the painting’s surface shifted, illuminated, and revealed a patchwork of shapes.

“You can all see that?” Fabian asked. “Neat.”

Gomez moved to stand directly in front of it. “Is that…” She turned and smiled at them. “Is that what I think it is?”

“It’s environmental control,” Bart said with a smile. “It’s like I suspected. Each of the paintings is a piece of the workings of the city. As a whole they represent the entire blueprint. But Fabe, didn’t you find a blueprint or a schematic in the engine room?”

“For diagnostics, yeah.” Fabian stared at the painting. “But not like this. This is an actual schematic of the wiring.” He smiled at Bart. “A real schematic in the true meaning of the word.”

“So you think this can lower the shields?”

Fabian snapped his fingers. “Oh, wait. No. I already figured that one out. What this is”—he gestured to the paintings—“this might give us a way to land the city! You were right about what this is for, what the paintings mean. Meaning within meaning!”

Bart looked at Carol. “Yippie?”

Fabian nodded to the damaged painting with the pole sticking out of it. “What was that one?”

“Luckily, that’s not one with a title. Probably a decoy.”

Carol pointed to the one on the far right of the pole. “That one is called, As above. ”

Fabian moved to it. “Bart, what’s the Ardanan word?”

Bart took two steps toward the painting before he heard it.

That sound.

But it couldn’t be—they hadn’t been anywhere near the triggering mechanism. He turned to see Vanov move away from the back wall, his hard gaze locked on Fabian.

“Fabian! Move!”

Bart ran to his roommate and pushed him out of the way. Something with the force of a charging bull struck him in the chest, lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the wall. His head struck the hard surface simultaneously. Stars clouded his vision as he fought to understand what had just happened. He could hear voices screaming at him from far away.

And something—something hurt really...bad.

Bart looked down and stared.

The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was an eight-centimeter pole protruding from his stomach.

Oh, damn...

Chapter

9

Everything happened so fast.

Sarjenka had been standing by the back wall when the pole shot from one of the holes camouflaged to resemble an accent light and impaled Bart Faulwell.

Carol and Gomez screamed Bart’s name. Fabian stumbled after them, the company of the entire room sprinting for the man pinned to one of the paneled paintings.

Sarjenka ran forward.

Corsi reached out to pull the pole from Bart's stomach.

"Don't do that!" Sarjenka yelled out.

Corsi turned a furious face toward her that made Sarjenka stop. "Why the hell not?"

Calm down, calm down. . . . You've got to take your own pulse first before you can calm others. Taking in a breath, she approached the scene, her eyes focused on Corsi's brilliant blue ones. "Because if that pole has hit major arteries it might actually be acting as a kind of stopper, a thumb in a dike. I need to assess what's been damaged before I can go any further—" She looked at Bart, his head forward, hiding his face. "The wisest thing to do is beam him out with the pole still intact—or snip it off at the margins. Leave that thing in there."

Fabian moved up beside her, between she and Corsi. His labored breathing caught her attention and she turned to look up at him. He was staring at Bart. "But we can't beam him out. The shield's still up."

Corsi spun on him. "You just said you knew how to get those shields down."

He looked at her, his breathing labored. "But I—" He started to wheeze harder and Sarjenka put a hand on his arm. The dendrites must have reached farther around his cerebral cortex.

"No." He pushed her hand away and took a step back. "I—I'll get back to engineering and shut those shields down."

"Fabian—" Sarjenka shook her head. "You can't stimulate those dendrites anymore. It will kill you."

"And if you don't get over to Bart"—he nodded to his roommate, whose face was twisted in anguish—"he'll die." He put a hand on her arm. "Save Bart."

Corsi was already punching her combadge and calling for Lense.

"I'll go with him," Vanov said, coming out of the woodwork. "I'll make sure he gets back to engineering and lowers the shield."

Fabian, still wheezing, nodded.

"Sarjenka, get over there. Now. I'm going with Fabian," Gomez said. "Corsi, you, Carol, Makk, and Rennan help Sarjenka in any way she needs. Sarj, talk to Lense. You're going to need help—she's the best for this."

Bart was pinned in an upright position, his feet a mere few inches from the floor. She ordered Corsi and the others to start setting things beneath him to relieve stress on his organs. She didn't want the muscles to tear and rip a hole out of his side.

With her tricorder open she scanned for vitals.

"Sarjenka—talk to me! What are the vitals?"

She slapped her badge. “His airway is clear—the pole’s hit the aorta. The blood is bright red and pulsatile.”

“How did the pole go in?”

“Inferior to the left costal margin, medial to the umbilicus, but not parallel to the iliac crest.” Sarjenka moved in closer, the smell of blood overwhelming.

“You’re right—it’s clipped the aorta. But I’m also thinking the pole itself is compressing and stanching what could be much worse. Heart rate?”

“One hundred forty beats per minute and rising, and his blood pressure’s dropping fast. He’s bleeding out—”

“Stop yelling,” Lense said. “He’s got tachycardia. If the pressure’s dropping that rapidly it’s definitely the renal artery or aorta or both. Dammit to hell. Is his belly distended?”

Sarjenka moved closer and sat on the pile of blood-soaked display podiums and silks. “No, not that I can see.”

“It might still be filling with blood in his pelvis. That alone can hold a couple quarts. Sarjenka, you’re going to have to clamp off the main bleeders to buy time.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” She looked around at the faces looking up at her. “You’re talking about cutting him open!”

“Well, of course. How else are you going to do it?”

“Cut him open with what?”

“With something sharp, you idiot!” There was a pause. “I’m sorry. Sorry. Is there not something there you can use?”

“I have it.” Corsi turned. “Carol, hand me that tool kit by the door—the one Fabe brought in.”

Carol did so and Corsi pulled out the portable laser. She handed it to Sarjenka. “Use this.”

Sarjenka, her hand crimson with Bart’s blood, took the cutter. “Use this? Doctor, she’s handed me a portable laser. I can’t use this. There’s no way to know how far I’ve cut. I could do more damage than just slicing him open.”

“Sarjenka, just do it. As it stands now he’s not going to survive if somebody over there doesn’t get that shield down!”

Corsi moved in closer, actually pushing her sleeves up to her elbows. She glanced at Vinx, and then Konya.

“I ain’t no doc.” Vinx held up his hands.

“Well, you’d better pretend, Vinx.” Corsi looked back to Sarjenka. “Tell us what to do.”

* * *

Fabian, Sonya, and Vanov transmatted into the engine room. Scott, Tev, and the others approached them immediately. News of Bart's accident had already reached them.

"Will he be all right?" Tev asked. "Does Dr. Sarjenka need help?"

"She's fine," Sonya said. "Carol, Domenica, and her people are helping. Right now, the best way we can help Bart is to lower the shield so we can beam him to sickbay."

Fabian put out his hands. He was shaking and very aware of the dull aching behind his eyes. He was feverish and didn't even want to guess at his temperature. He moved past all of them toward the center podium.

But Scott stepped in front of him. "Lad, what are you thinking?"

"I know how to lower the shields," he said. "The reason I can't find anything about them is because they were installed after the city was built. Soske Busk and his father never considered Stratos would need a defense grid of any kind, so when Plasus built one he built it over the existing technology." He held out his hands. "Think of modern electronics being fused with vacuum tube technology."

Scott tilted his head to the side. "But can you shut it off without touching that podium?"

Fabian shook his head. "No. He still built it using Busk's original tonal array—harmonics—using a sequence of colors and tones. They were in the vault along with a blueprint on how to move this city and land it." He frowned. "Only I never got the last note about landing it because that's when Bart was hit."

"But if you keep using the parasite"—Gomez moved to the podium and touched it—"you could die."

"Yeah." He let his exhaustion come through in his tone. He was tired—tired of everyone asking him if he was okay, telling him not to stimulate himself, telling him he'll die. Dammit, he knew that! "So I've been told. But if I don't Bart will die. He's got an eight-centimeter pole sticking out of his stomach!"

Her eyes widened.

Scotty put a hand on Fabian's arm but he pulled away and moved past the S.C.E. supervisor to the podium. He looked at Sonya and was instantly ashamed at himself for yelling. He never meant to hurt her.

She was his best friend's fiancée—or would have been.

He cared about her, just as Duff had.

"I'm sorry," he said, and put his hands out to touch the podium—

—just as the city shook with a violent lurch.

* * *

Sarjenka made the first incision, above and below the perpendicular to the point of entry; the idea was to pull the wound apart from side to side. She hesitated for a second, reorienting herself on where the internal organs of a human were. Is the spleen on the left or the right? Is the heart up the right flank like a

Vulcan's?

The wall and ground shook beneath them.

Corsi swore under her breath and touched a bloodied hand to her badge. "Corsi to Gomez. What the hell is going on?"

"We're being fired at from below."

Fired at? Sarjenka looked at Corsi.

Lense's voice came through loud and clear. "Sarjenka, I know about the fire from the planet but you've got to concentrate. Ignore it."

Sarjenka started to cut again, then pulled back. "This is insane—there's no sterile field. No precision instruments. This is a mechanic's tool."

"This is real medicine, Sarjenka."

Scotty spoke this time. "Apparently we've passed the opposing faction's deadline and they're going to blow us out of the sky. Luckily the same shield that's keeping us here is also protecting the city."

Corsi answered. "So what does that mean? We're going to sit here and wait for them to get bored while Bart dies?"

"Corsi." Gomez's voice came through loud and clear. And angry. "Zip it."

Sarjenka took a deep breath and began her cuts, timid at first, being easy so that she didn't cut clean through into a vital organ. She thought about her long hours in ERs all over the Alpha Quadrant during her field year. The chaos had been all around her, though frankly she'd never worked in any emergency situation where the facility was under attack.

"I made the first cut," she said and took a deep breath.

"Is the fatty tissue bloody?"

Sarjenka frowned. "Not really. It's only pink."

"Not sure I like that. It means the peripheral blood supply is responding to the drop in pressure. The body's clamping off arterioles and capillaries to conserve blood for the head, heart, and lungs."

She nodded. She knew all this. Studied it. Watched the recordings. But to see it on someone she knew... someone she liked.

She cut again, in short upward strokes with the laser. A yellow layer of subcu appeared and then she hit muscle. Breathing slowly and deliberately she started cutting the muscle, but at this point cutting wasn't going to move what she needed moved. She turned the laser off and reached in to pull the two sides apart.

Blood spilled over her hands and onto the floor. She couldn't identify the organs that shifted and moved forward.

Corsi came up beside her and pressed her own bare hands into the mix. A glance at the security chief showed her lips were drawn into a thin line, her expression focused.

Sarjenka grabbed the viscera before it fell forward and expertly held it back, gesturing for Corsi to take control of it.

“Hold it all in,” she said to Corsi.

“He’s still bleeding,” Konya said as he came to Corsi’s right and put his own hands into the bloody mess.

Lense answered. “And he’ll keep bleeding until you find whatever’s bleeding and clamp it. Now get moving! This is as good as it’s gonna get.”

Once the viscera and incision opening were pushed and held to the sides by Konya and Corsi, Sarjenka gave Lense the okay.

“Now stop the bleeder.”

Sarjenka squinted as she pushed her left hand in and moved the other organs out of the way. “It looks like it missed the stomach, the pancreas is history. It’s pretty much a bloody pulp. The pole missed the superior mesenteric artery.”

“Uh-oh—is the pancreases auto-digesting? The thing’s just a bag of enzymes.”

Sarkjena looked again at the bubbling, pulpy mass. “Yes.”

“Well, if it’s gone, then the spleen’s history too. Remember, in humans the spleen is an emergency blood reservoir. That’s probably where you’re getting a lot of this blood.”

The city shook again, vibrating the walls. A few pieces of art fell from their perches and crashed to the ground.

Pushing the oozing pancreas out of the way, Sarjenka reached in under it and flopped the omen-tum onto Bart’s chest so she could see. This exposed the ruptured spleen, hugging the underside of the left diaphragm and protected by the left rib cage. The whole thing looked like bloody mush.

Pushing her hand under and then up, unable to see with her eyes but concentrating with her fingers, Sarjenka felt a bulge of blood in a meaty sac. She felt the hump of the kidney, and then the aorta. It pulsed against her fingers. “I found a sac of blood.”

“That’s okay. Find the tear.”

She couldn’t see; she could only feel. Her heart raced against her chest and she closed her eyes as her long fingers felt the way.

She felt the pole and followed it until she found where it pierced the retro peritoneum. She probed gingerly around the rip—it reminded her of fleshy lips. “I found the tear in the retro peritoneum.”

“Okay, now listen carefully. You’re going to have to enlarge that rip in order to get to the aorta and

clamp it off.”

Sarjenka’s heart skipped a beat. “But what if I rip or tear the aorta and not the retro peritoneum?”

“Girl, listen to me. You can do this. Just concentrate. Listen to me, and concentrate. There’s a big difference between a rubber hose and a membrane. Try this: visualize the aorta as a big pulsatile tube.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Sarjenka eased her fingers into the rip and then slowly, gently spread her index finger and second fingers apart like scissors. She felt a gentle rip and it wasn’t the aorta.

She felt more blood move past her hand and it streamed down her arm onto her uniform and dripped from the elbow. “I found the cut—vertical.”

“Pinch it off just above and below.”

“Pinch it off with what?” Sarjenka looked at Corsi.

“Your fingers. Corsi’s fingers. Konya’s. I don’t care. Just pinch it off. You’ve got to stop the bleeding.”

Corsi was already sliding her hand in beside Sarjenka’s, following her long fingers and mimicking the pinch above. “Feels like al dente pasta,” she remarked.

Konya blanched. “I’ll never eat spaghetti again.”

“Now you know why I’m not fond of Italian,” Lense said over the badges.

Corsi then placed her other hand inside and pinched the aorta below the cut. Sarjenka left her hand just below Corsi’s to make sure the blood flow there was stopped. When she no longer felt the pulse of blood move past her fingers, she pulled them out, wiped them on her already soaked uniform, and grabbed up the tricorder.

“Is his pressure creeping up?”

“Yes...but he’s lost a lot of blood, and he’s not getting any blood flow to the kidneys on the right.”

Konya shifted his position. “The blood’s starting to clot.”

Corsi nodded. “Fabian once said it looked like clotted grape jelly.” She looked down at her uniform. “I don’t think I’m going to be eating much grape jelly in my future.”

“Just keep that aorta clamped. He’s got about half an hour maximum—I’ll let Captain Gold know.”

“Doctor!” Sarjenka blurted out before she meant to.

“What is it? He isn’t regaining consciousness is he?”

“No—I hope he doesn’t.” Sarjenka finally looked up at Bart’s pasty white face. His eyes were sunken. Dark circles surrounded them. She checked again to make sure he was breathing fine. A long shock of salt-and-pepper hair hung over his eyes. “I just—Could you—” She swallowed. “Could you keep your channel open?”

There was a long pause.

“Yes, Sarjenka. I’ll be here.” Another pause and she thought she heard Dr. Lense sniff.

The city shook violently beneath their feet as Sarjenka lost her footing on the blood-soaked floor.

Chapter

10

“Captain—High Advisor Nelois is hailing us.”

Oh, boy. Gold had been sitting in his chair, feeling useless as ever. His right foot bounced up and down in a nervous twitch even Rachael couldn’t endure. “Put him on screen.”

Larin Nelois appeared. His expression was less than cordial and his lips were drawn in a thin line. “Captain Gold, I must apologize for the Yaffie’s actions —”

“High Advisor,” Gold interrupted. “Tell those people to stop firing on Stratos or so help me I’ll fire on them.”

Nelois looked as if Gold had just punched him in the stomach. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“I will dare, and I will get my people out of there. Relay that message to Yaffie now. Gold out.” He slapped at the comm on his command chair’s left arm. He turned to Haznedl. “Any word from Stratos’s engine room?”

“None sir.” She turned to him. “Dr. Lense is still online with Sarjenka, but neither Commander Gomez nor Captain Scott are answering our hails. I can’t tell if their signal’s being jammed or if they’re unable to answer.”

“Keep trying. And if by any chance that shield goes down, I want Faulwell beamed immediately to sickbay.”

“Yes, sir.”

He sat back in his chair, his hands balled into tight fists. What was happening down there? Why didn’t they answer?

* * *

The reason no one answered from engineering was that at that moment Gomez, Tev, Scott, Stevens, Lauoc, Krotine, and Blue were being held at gunpoint—by Historian Vanov on one side, and the Ardanan engineering quartet on the other.

Fabian didn’t know where the Ardanans had pulled the guns from, nor did he recognize their make. Knowing if they fired energy or slugs was of great importance to him. Energy burned or disintegrated flesh, and slugs tore and burrowed, as he remembered all too well from their mission to Teneb last year. And with the thoughts running about in his feverish head, that could be the deciding factor in what he was about to do.

Vanov wanted Fabian to lower the shield—but not to save Bart. He wanted the shields lowered so his people—the ones firing at them—could get a good shot. In essence, he wanted Fabian to lower the shields so they could all get blown up.

The engineers wanted Fabian to stay away from the podium because they wanted Stratos preserved. They didn't care one smidgeon about the man dying in a vault somewhere.

And Fabian knew he was dying. He could feel it inside—he felt something twisting and tightening in his head. He felt wrong. Distant.

Fabian's first instinct was to run to the podium and activate it, tossing the tune in his head into the system so the shields could lower. He knew he'd get shot in the process, but at least Bart would be saved. He felt sure Captain Gold wasn't going to waste any time getting him back to the ship.

That was his plan—until Dreena pushed her gun into the left temple of Sonya Gomez.

Then all bets were off.

As the blasts ricocheted off the shields outside the city, the group stood by the podium, everyone staring at one another.

Dreena held out her free hand—the one not threatening to kill Sonya. “Please, Mr. Stevens. I promise we will release the commander if you come with us. We must make sure the city lasts until the bombing ceases.”

“And what if it doesn't?” Vanov asked. He held his gun trained on Fabian. “What if my people don't stop?”

“Then I am certain if the High Advisor does not stop them, Captain Gold of the da Vinci will. The truth of the situation is that unless you stop your intent upon destruction, the shields cannot be lowered.”

Fabian decided at that moment that he did not like Dreena. He focused on Sonya until her gaze locked with his. He smiled, glanced at the podium.

She frowned, indicating what?

He glanced at the podium again. Again she frowned.

He glanced again.

And again she frowned at him.

“Are you dense, woman? Duck behind the podium!”

The sudden outburst caught everyone off guard, especially Dreena. She wasn't ready for Sonya to abruptly duck down and dive at the podium.

Dreena fired in reaction. The slug moved through the air where Sonya had been and impacted into the arm of Historian Vanov. He reacted as well—his hand squeezing the trigger just as Fabian lunged for Sonya.

The bullet exploded into the left podium. Sparks popped outward and the city dropped a few centimeters beneath their feet.

Lauoc and Krotine moved into action, their own phasers out as they corralled the engineers into a huddle and relieved them of their guns.

Fabian pulled himself as well as Sonya into a standing position in front of the podium. A claxon sounded from somewhere above them. “You okay?” He had both hands on her shoulders.

She touched his hands. “Yes, I’m fine. He didn’t shoot you, did he?”

“Nah.” He smiled at her. “I’m quicker than that. Even while possessed by evil kudzu.”

She frowned.

“Never mind.”

Her hands touched his. “Fabian, your hands are so warm.”

“Yeah.” He pulled his hands from hers and touched the podium without warning.

Tev was at the podium also. “There is a twenty-one percent drop in stability. It would appear that these misguided zealots damaged the dampening system.”

Fabian looked at the left podium, which remained dark. “Yeah. Looks like we’re going to go down whether we want to or not.”

Scotty moved to the right podium and began touching the images. “Incoming!”

The city shook again.

Fabian glanced at Scotty. “I’ve been timing those little shakes. They’re about six minutes apart. I’m gonna lower the shields while they get Bart out of here. Then I’m going to try to raise them again.”

“Can you do that?”

Fabian shrugged. He wished he knew a way to turn that bell sound off. He had to shout to be heard. “I won’t know till I try. Either way, if I can’t get the dampeners back online, it won’t matter. Seems to be a safety feature—if they fail then the city comes down instead of flipping over.”

Sonya put her hand on his right shoulder. “What about those paintings in the vault with Bart? Was there anything in there that might have helped?”

He grinned at her. “Yes, there is. I need you to get down there and tell me what colors you see on the one Bart was pinned too. I have to know that final sequence. Scan it into your tricorder if you have to.”

She nodded.

“Hey, Sonya.” He lowered his voice.

She turned back to him.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?”

Her dark eyes searched his own. “Mad at you? For the dense crack? No, but I’m going to have to demand a drink in payment later.”

Even though his thoughts centered around there being no more later for himself, he smiled. “Sure. But, mad at me because”—he looked down before he said what he’d been thinking out loud—“because I didn’t kiss you back.”

Her eyes widened. They were huddled together, speaking in low voices. Sonya frowned. “Fabe, I wouldn’t expect you to return the kiss. I took you by surprise. I mean—if you kissed me back, I’d have to question your loyalty to Corsi. I know you care about her.”

“Yes... I do.”

“Then get this done so we can go home.” She moved away from him to the transmat pad on the lowest level. “I’ll go find the painting.”

He nodded. It wasn’t the answer he wanted, but it was the truth. They were friends and she respected how he felt about Corsi. Though at that moment he finally realized what had been nagging at him ever since that night.

Ever since it happened.

The fact he couldn’t forget it.

The city shook. He looked over at Scott as a keyboard appeared in front of him. With a determined expression, he picked out the notes of the song in his mind.

* * *

“Shabalala, target the southern region, lock on to the initiation point for the bombs hurled at my people.” Gold didn’t realize he’d stood up from his chair, his fists clenched, his jaw set hard.

Yaffie looked as if someone had taken away his favorite pony. He shook his head. “Captain, there must be something you can do —”

“I am doing it. I’m stopping this insanity. Shabalala—”

“Captain!” Haznedl called out. “The shield’s down!”

“Good.” He had an open channel to the transporter room. “Poynter, send everyone in that vault to sickbay—including the pole, ten centimeters front and back. Energize!”

“Energizing.”

Gold sat back down, put Yaffie on mute, and opened a channel to sickbay. “Lense, he’s on his way!”

* * *

“Faulwell’s on board the da Vinci,” Scotty said to his right. “Pattie, engage the tactical you found earlier.”

A large, holographic, wire-framed schematic appeared in the air in front of the cylinder. Fabian stared at it, amazed at the different patterns, the eddies and flows of the colors as they moved around the city like lights.

He’d been unable to raise Plasus’s shield again. The only way he knew how was to cut power again, but Conlon had already said the da Vinci wasn’t up for that right at that moment. Another hour maybe.

They didn’t have another hour. The city was slowly starting to fall straight down.

“We’re going to take another hit in about three minutes,” Pattie said. “Without shields.”

He concentrated on the dampeners, but nothing was working. The graviton engines were losing RPMs and the city was listing to one side.

“I need to move it,” Fabian said out loud. A fire raged behind his eyes and in his skin. He was shaking but never moved from the podium. “The city’s coming down—that much I know. But we have to move it.”

“Gomez to Stevens.”

“Stevens here. What do you see?”

“Blood. Lots of it. And I’m afraid there isn’t much left of the painting, Fabe. Looks like they beamed up most of it with Bart.”

Lots of blood.

No end note.

“Incoming!” Pattie warned them.

Fabian braced for the impact—this one would be bad without shields.

Just as he feared the impact was a thousand times greater than what had hit them before. The city shuddered around them and he could hear pieces of architecture cracking throughout the city. He didn’t know if that was because of his link with the network or because it was just darned loud.

“Sonya, are you all right?”

“Yes—nearly got flattened by a statue. I’m on my way back to you.”

Scott picked himself off the ground and brushed his jacket off with his hands. “I don’t think the city is going to survive too many more like that.”

“No, it won’t.”

Sonya rematerialized on the transmat platform and immediately asked, “Fabian, you have any more hare-brained ideas?”

“I think so.”

“Okay, then. Gomez to Poynter. Laura, beam the security detail and any Ardanans left down here back to the da Vinci.” Looking at Lauoc, she said, “Put them all in the brig; we’ll sort it out later.”

The diminutive Bajoran nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

While Lauoc, Krotine, Vanov, and the engineers all transported away, Fabian imagined a color chart and one appeared in front of him. He recalled the pictures in order around the room as they’d been placed. Each color rang out a tone in his head.

The images changed and shifted and he nearly fell back with the speed he traveled to the very center of the cylinder in front of them.

The cylinder.

That’s it! He blinked several times and turned to the others. “The cylinder. It’s the navigational control.”

Even as he spoke the huge silo on the lower floor began to spin.

“Are you sure?” Tev asked.

Fabian’s legs became unstable beneath him. “I know that it’s going to match the RPMs of the graviton generators.” He pursed his lips. “Only I don’t know how to make it go.”

“Say again?” Scott asked.

“I don’t have the last color or tone. I can’t finish the command. I don’t know how we can move forward. If we can just move this damned city away from the one below it we can just land—”

Pattie said, “You don’t need the city’s engines to make the city move.”

“Tractor beam,” Sonya said, and tapped her combadge. “Gomez to Conlon.”

“Go ahead.”

“We need a nudge.”

“Excuse me?”

“We need to nudge the city. I need you to reverse the polarity on the tractor beam to—”

She hesitated. Tev instantly said, “Nine point eight two.”

“Best make it six, lad,” Scotty added.

“To six,” Sonya said before Tev could protest. “That should give us just enough of a gentle push to propel the city forward.”

Fabian grinned. “Perfect. Then I can stabilize the graviton generators enough to lower the city somewhat

gently to the ground.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Probably, but do it anyhow.”

Gold’s voice came over the combadge. “Gomez, you get one chance. If I see the city falling I’m beaming you all out of there.”

“Just keep them from firing on us, sir.”

“Deal. Get back here in one piece—all of you.”

Fabian had to ask: “Captain...about Bart...”

“Lense and Sarjenka are working on him. You worry about you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay Commander,” Nancy said in a less than enthusiastic voice. “One nudge, coming up. Brace yourself.”

Fabian grabbed the podium harder.

The others, save Pattie, did likewise just as the city lurched forward. The force was greater than Fabian anticipated and he lost his grip on the podium. His feet gave beneath him and he fell backward. The noise that cut through his brain brought his hands to his ears as he rolled onto his side.

But he felt the city moving.

Felt the dampeners compensating for the forward momentum; felt the navigation system increase its spin.

Sonya was beside him, pulling at his hands. “Fabian, what is it?”

He gritted his teeth. “It’s the dampeners—the strain is stripping the harmonics.” He blinked at Sonya. “We’re going to lose altitude. I have to adjust the graviton engines.”

Sonya moved back.

But something was wrong. Fabian lay back on the floor, no longer shivering but perspiring heavily. He struggled out of his jacket and tried to get up.

“I—I can’t stand.”

“What?” Sonya helped him remove his jacket. “Is it the parasites?”

He nodded. “Elizabeth told me this might happen. Seems they’ve finally started mucking about with the worst parts. You’re going to have to prop me up.”

Sonya did as Fabian asked, grunting as she lifted Fabian up and then pushed his own shoulder beneath the engineer’s right one. Fabian reached out and took hold of the podium, forcing his legs beneath him.

“Tev, keep an eye on the RPMs.”

“Very well.” If Tev was annoyed at being given an order by a subordinate, he didn’t show it.

Fabian touched the flat surface again, his palms wet with perspiration. With a deep breath he closed his eyes and saw the graviton engines again. He thought of a shuttlecraft—one of his parents’ fastest—and stretched out his arms along the podium, careful not to fall.

“Speed. And if you’re measuring in machs that’s too fast.”

“I’m aware of that, Specialist. It’s 43.448 knots.”

Shaking his head, Fabian said, “Still too fast. What did that woman do? Whack us like a baseball?”

Tev snuffled. “Had she adjusted the tractor beam to my specifications—”

Fabian interrupted Tev before he could castigate a living legend. “I’m not going to be able to slow it down—I don’t know how. But I think I can sort of land it the way humans used to land their space shuttles.”

“You mean like a runway?” Scott asked.

“In that fashion, yeah. That way the sudden stop can prevent us from crashing.” He grinned. “Scotty, can you scan ahead for any sort of smooth area? Preferably something the length of a space station?”

Scotty activated the grids in front of him. “Luckily there’s just an area ahead of us. And as long as we don’t get fired on again, we should make it there in less than three minutes.”

“Then let’s get this city at a lower altitude.”

Tev read out the knots as Fabian slowed the RPMs. The city shuddered as the atmospheric pressure decreased.

Fabian’s ears popped several times.

“For the love of—” Scotty began. “We’ve got an incoming.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Fabian lowered the city again, hoping the whatever-it-was they were lobbing at Stratos missed them.

It didn’t.

He was so close. Only twenty kilometers from the surface when the blast hit them. Fabian was thrown away from the podium and slammed into the wall behind him. He fell forward onto his knees, which gave beneath him as he felt the city shatter to pieces around him. . . .

Chapter

Two days later...

Sarjenkastood outside the sterile room, looking through the glass at Bart Faulwell. He lay on a stasis table, his aging slowed, his life on hold. Lense moved in her scrubs, masked, protective eyewear over her face.

She checked his vitals as a machine encased his body, keeping it in a sterile field. His feet and legs were covered in light sheets.

Someone came to stand by her. A glance to her left. Captain Scott.

“How’s Dr. Faulwell?”

She sighed. “He’s alive. Barely. Dr. Lense worked a miracle on that table. She already knew he was allergic to Retnox 5, so she didn’t even go that route. She knew before we’d left Stratos and contacted Starfleet medical for a Retnox patient. The organs are waiting on Starbase 375. It was faster than couriering them to us.” Sarjenka turned a surprised face to Captain Scott. “Did you know she actually took an old scan of Bart’s pattern and used the EMH program to project a kidney, pancreas, and spleen into his body? That’s what’s keeping him alive.”

He smiled at her. “I guess the doctor’s her own miracle worker, eh?”

Sarjenka turned back to the window and watched Lense. “Yeah. I couldn’t have done that—he wouldn’t have survived if she hadn’t have thought so fast.”

“But it was you who took charge, Sarjenka. You stopped Corsi from removing that pole; you risked that cutter and opened him up. You saved a life.”

“But will I ever think that quick on my feet?” She looked at him.

“Experience, lass. I have very little to do with the da Vinci’s crew, Sarjenka. But I have to admit, David did right by hiring you. You’re going to make a fine surgeon.”

She beamed up at him. “I hope so.”

Gold entered sickbay then as the pregnant CMO stepped out of the sterile ICU. “Lense, everything’s ready for you.”

Lense removed her mask and glasses. “Good,” she said. “As long as the CMO there doesn’t get in my way. I want complete control over his care—no messing this one up.” She looked directly at Gold. “He’ll live, Captain. Bart should be okay. But—” Her attention turned to his right.

Sarjenka knew what Lense meant.

Fabian Stevens.

Lense led the three of them out of the sterile area and into the lab. They’d removed several workbenches and rolled a gurney inside, complete with a bed monitor.

Fabian lay in the center of the bed, his eyes open. He blinked randomly, staring straight ahead.

Lense picked up a tricorder and ran a scan. “The dendrites have a choke hold on his entire brain—including his spinal cord. He’s paralyzed. The only thing he can do is blink. I think he can see me when I lean over him because his heart rate increases. But as for any other communication...” She shook her head. “Nothing.”

Scott rubbed at his neck. Sarjenka had treated him herself when the away team was beamed into sickbay as Stratos crashed. At first, she thought that Fabian was dead.

In many ways, he was worse than dead. He was living dead. Something her people couldn’t tolerate. A mind trapped in an unresponsive body.

“Corsi’s been in here every second she’s not on shift. She sits with him. Never says a word. Just sits and holds his hand.” Lense put her hands to her face. “I told you this could happen. I told you.”

But Gold didn’t move. He only stood at the side of Stevens’s bed.

What Lense didn’t say was that Fabian had had another visitor. Commander Gomez had been in and out as well. Only instead of sitting she’d helped Sarjenka bathe him, as well as change his feeding tube. She read to him softly from a favorite book of hers—a collection of work by a human author named Richard Brautigan. The captain had given her this copy after the last one was lost at Galvan VI.

Sarjenka thought maybe she would borrow it sometime.

“I’m not going to give up, Lense. There’s got to be a way to stop the parasite. Look what you did with Faulwell.”

“Bart’s not out of the woods yet, Captain.” She snatched a tissue from a nearby container. “They’re polar opposites. Time is going to heal Bart—but time is going to kill Fabian.”

Sarjenka looked over at the tissue box, and then at the dead flower in the slim glass vase beside it. Nancy Conlon had brought it in that first evening after the cleanup on Ardana was underway.

It had been a beautiful Earth flower called a spider mum—long, skinny petals with a hidden center. It sort of reminded her of a spider now, with its withered pedals and browning stalk.

The poor thing didn’t get any fresh water—much less any good light—so it had dried up and withered.

Sarjenka stood up straight, nearly knocking over a nearby chair. “I think I know something to try.” She looked at Lense.

Lense blew into the tissue. “I’m listening.”

“From the beginning I thought the dendrites were thriving on the neurochemicals created by Fabian’s brain by the stimulus it received. What if that’s not it? Because he’s been still and quiet and the dendrites are still thriving.” She held up a long finger. “What if it’s the stimulus itself?”

Gold frowned. “I don’t follow. That’s the same thing.”

But Lense was shaking her head slowly. Sarjenka thought for an instant the doctor was going to dismiss her idea until Lense said, “It’s still getting stimulus.”

Scott snapped his fingers. “The light, the sounds, the monitors, people in and out.”

“Exactly,” Sarjenka said. She was excited now because she had an idea—a plan that might save Fabian’s life. “What if we deprived Fabian of all stimulus? We put him in a totally dark room, put him into a coma and let him hang like that for few days. In theory the parasite will be denied the relevant input and the dendrites should wither away and eventually be chewed up by his own body’s defenses.”

Lense looked past Sarjenka, her mind buzzing forward. “We block out the light with curtains and I can bring the life-support monitors in here. You could monitor Fabian while I kept an eye on Bart. The EMH can handle any smaller injury that comes in.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Gold said. “You’re going to put Stevens into a coma—on purpose?”

“It’s the only way to lower the brain activity to an almost nil reading,” Lense said. “Oh, we’ll need a dampener to block out sound. I’ll have Pattie whip something up.”

“Is this wise?”

“Captain.” Sarjenka moved to him. “As he is now, he could die at any moment or second. The parasite could prolong his life in this state for days, weeks, months, or years. If we don’t try this, we’ll condemn him to Ra’el Sha—the living death to my people.”

Gold looked from Lense to Sarjenka. “Do it.” He left sickbay without a word or a backward glance.

“Why is he so angry?” Sarjenka asked as she started clearing away room for the life-support machine. “We’re trying to help Fabian.”

“He blames himself, Sarjenka. I tried to warn him, but he insisted Fabian continue to exploit the parasite.” She glanced at her friend motionless in the bed beside her. “And now it’s come to this.”

Sarjenka took a few steps closer. “Why didn’t you tell the captain that Commander Gomez had been in here too?”

“Sarj,” Lense said, using the nickname for the first time.

She stared wide-eyed at her mentor and superior officer. Lense looked tired at that moment—mentally worn thin. “When Fabian’s stable and we’ve set you up a monitor, I’d like to sit you down and tell you about a friendship between two men—and the woman that one of them loved.”

Epilogue

He heard a sound in the dark. The clink of glass against metal. His lids stirred and he opened his eyes. It was still dark.

Someone moved beside him, brushed his left arm. He was cold. “Hello?”

“Fabian?”

He recognized the voice. Sonya.

A tiny light came on to his left. He winced at the brightness and blinked several times. There wasn't any pain.

Reality struck him in that instant. He could talk! And move!

"Whu... whut happened?" His voice sounded awful. He had strange dreams of being chased by men in white robes, all of them wanting to turn him into a motorcycle.

Weird.

"Elizabeth says the dendrites are gone—or at least they're drying up. We'll be at Starbase 375 in about three hours. She's getting Bart ready for transport."

He looked at her in the soft light. Her hair was down, framing her face. Sonya's skin was pale, ghostly in the dark surrounding her. Dark half moons hung beneath her eyes and they were red rimmed. "You okay? You look—You okay?"

He was parched and wanted water, but he also needed to know what happened. But that could wait.

"I'm—" She swallowed and looked up. Her eyes filled with tears and she wiped irritably at them. "You've been in this room for four days in a coma. It was the only way to kill off the parasites. No one could see you or touch you for four days."

Fabian tried wrapping his brain around that one. I was in a coma?

"Is... Why are you crying?"

She looked at him. Really looked at him. And Fabian felt something stir inside his chest. She used to look at Duff like that when she was mad at him. "You could have died."

Was that it? "Hey, I'm sorry. I needed to do something, Sonya. I can't just sit around." He cleared his throat. "Sit around and do nothing."

"But you could have died."

"Bart could have too." He licked his lips. They were dry and cracked. "But he didn't. And I didn't. I still have no idea why I didn't. Did Stratos crash?"

"Yes. It's in several big pieces."

"Good. I hope it broke all their toys."

But she wasn't laughing.

"Sonya..."

"You don't get it, do you? I could have lost you. Like I lost Kieran. Like I lost Keith and Kara and Diego and Jil and..." She sniffed. "I need you to stay here. I need Bart to stay here."

"We are. We're both still kicking." He took stock of his body and thought of that one again. "Okay, not

kicking. But I'm sure I could throw something hard."

She still didn't smile. "And, yes, I was a little mad at you."

Fabian frowned. "For what?"

"For not kissing me back."

"But how could I—Sonya, I'm—"

She put a hand over his lips and then moved them away. "I know. You're seeing Domenica. And I love her as much as I love you. I would never hurt her."

"No, that's not what I was going to say."

"What?" She frowned.

He licked his lips. His eyes were growing tired and he wanted to close them, but he felt he needed to be honest. He needed to tell her the truth. "The reason I didn't kiss you is because... you're Duff's girl."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Fabian, as you like to point out to me, Kieran is dead."

"I know that. But from the start, even before you two got back together, I knew you were his girl. That was always forefront in my mind. You were his woman." He wanted to lift his hand and make compartmental gestures—but maybe tomorrow. "I could never kiss my best friend's girl."

She took his hand in hers and held it up to her cheek. She rubbed her soft skin against his knuckles. "You miss him too."

"All the time, Sonya. But I'm the friend. And as long as I see you still holding on to him, I'll always see you as his." He yawned then. "I'm sorry, Sonya—I'm just so tired."

She kept his hand in hers. "That's okay, Fabian. Sleep." And she lay down over his chest, bent at her waist from the chair she sat in. He wanted to tell her that was a very uncomfortable position to sleep in, but she was warm against his chest. And her hair smelled like some of those perfumed papers Bart kept in their shared cabin.

He was comfortable with the weight against him and he nuzzled his nose against her head and kissed it. It was only after several minutes of twilight, the moments before sleep claimed him, that he felt Sonya's rhythmic breathing. He heard something akin to a sigh in the dark and opened his eyes. Someone turned out the light at that moment, but not before he caught the glimpse of indigo in the fading light.

Acknowledgments

The first and most heartfelt thank you must be given to Keith R.A. DeCandido for allowing me to be a part of such a rich and incredible series. Ever since pushing my own boundaries with *Blackout*, I've wanted to come back to the *Vinci* and take on another character—and another adventure. I only hope I never disappoint—or give him *agita* again.

I would also love to put in an affectionate thank you to Dr. Ilsa J. Bick, one of my closest friends, for

without her input parts of this story could never have been realized. Also added in this list is Herbert Beas III, a friend, writer, and fellow Star Trek fan, whose love of the graviton engine was mine to mine.

A thanks to my daughter, for knowing Mommy has to sit at her desk most weekends and nights, and to my parents—especially my dad—who introduced all of his children to the wonderful and inspiring world of Gene Rodenberry.

About the Author

PHAEDRA M. WELDON has been a fan of Star Trek since her dad introduced her to the series when she was twelve. Her professional writing career began with stories selected for two of Pocket Books's Star Trek: Strange New Worlds anthologies—"The Lights in the Sky" in Volume 1 and "Who Cries for Prometheus?" in Volume 5. She is also the author of many original fiction short stories for DAW anthologies, and is excited about her first original published novel, *Wraith*, to be released from Ace in June 2007. Her other work with Star Trek includes *S.C.E. #59: Blackout* and *The Oppressor's Wrong*, Book 2 in the upcoming Star Trek: The Next Generation six-eBook series, *Slings and Arrows*.

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